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INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

Uttarakhand Open University
Haldwani

SEMESTER VI BAEL(N)-302

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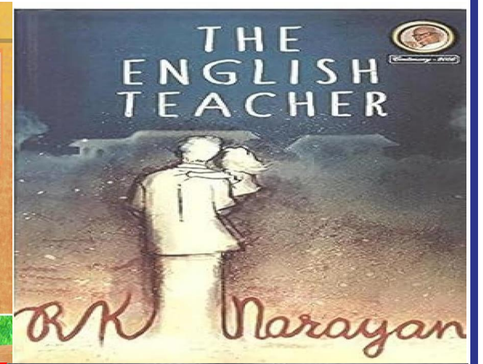
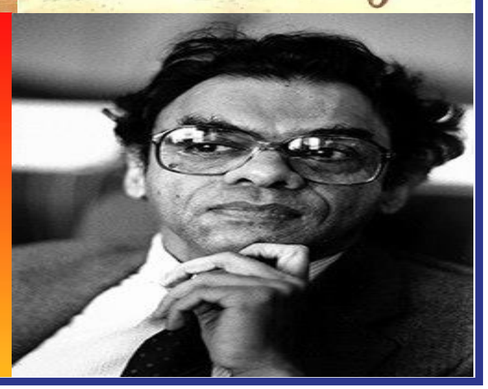
INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH





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Semester VI

INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

UTTARAKHAND OPEN UNIVERSITY

Department of English and Foreign Languages

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UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH—I

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Most of us who have cultivated a taste for literature derive more pleasure, or *rasa*, from reading literary compositions in our mother tongue—which for us is generally Hindi—rather than in a foreign language, which in this context is English. This makes the subject of Indian Writing in English a little complex, because it is both Indian and English. Such a complexity has also resulted in two very different and pronounced camps of writers and critics: while one leans more towards the ancient roots of Indian literature, the other, by predilection, is more English, Westernised, and Modern. And yes, there are quite a few who sit in the middle, enjoying the best of both worlds. Once you understand this half-political-half-cultural divide, you will not get confused by the polemics of warring camps, and will not be perplexed whether to consider Iyengar's *Indian Writing in English* authentic or the bunch of Protestant critics in Mehrotra's *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English.*

At the root of this imbroglio are the differing natures of Indian and Western literatures, which are distinctly at variance in both their ontology and epistemology. Indian literature does not begin with the Hindi literature of Sur, Kabir, and Tulsi; more ancient than any other, it dates back to the age of "the Veda and the Upanishads, the mighty structures of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti and Bhartrihari and Jayadeva and the other rich creations of classical Indian drama and poetry and romance, the Dhammapada and the Jatakas, the Panchatantra, Tulsidas, Vidyapati, and Chandidas and Ramprasad, Ramdas, and Tukaram, Tiruvalluvar and Kamban, and the songs of Nanak and Kabir and Mirabai and the southern Shaiva saints and the Alwars." Speaking of it, Sri Aurobindo says,

Its first character is a constant sense of the infinite, the cosmic, and of things as seen in or affected by the cosmic vision, set in or against the amplitude of the one and infinite….The spiritual, the infinite is near and real, and the gods are real, and the worlds beyond not so much beyond as immanent in our own existence. That which to the Western mind is myth and imagination is here an actuality and a strand of the life of our inner being, what is there beautiful poetic idea and philosophic speculation is here a thing constantly realised and present to the experience. (Renaissance, 315, 327)

Western literature, generally speaking, puts a greater emphasis on the social and psychological aspects of human life—a rational, logical, materialistic exegesis of existential

issues. Any concern for the beyond is limited to interpretations in terms of Christian theological symbols—Dante, Blake, Tolstoy, and Eliot, for example.

How does Indian writing in English stand against such a backdrop? How much does it retain its Indian roots, and how much has it assimilated the English and Western values and outlook on life? To understand it, we need to understand what it means to write in English, and also what the nature of language is. Sanskrit is not just a language; it embodies a culture and civilisation. Similarly, Greek and Latin and modern European languages, including English, too carry the burden of their own culture and civilisation. One cannot imbibe a language without imbibing, to whatever extent, its values and culture.

So, we need to explore how the English language arrived in India, and with what intent and agenda.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

- To understand the evolution of Indian English literature from the nineteenth century to the modern period in relation to nationalism, spirituality, and cultural identity.
- To critically assess the emergence of modernism in Indian English poetry and fiction, including themes of alienation, identity, and cultural conflict.
- Understand the historical shift of Indian English literature from a reformist-nationalist impulse in the nineteenth century to artistic and philosophical maturity in the twentieth century.

1.3 INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH—THE CONUNDRUM OF NOMENCLATURE

Scholars have long debated the nomenclature of this branch of Indian literature without ever arriving at a consensus. Even today, the three most celebrated histories of this literature in our time do not agree on a common nomenclature: the oldest of the three, by K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, bears the same title as our course—"*Indian Writing in English*" (1962); the next one, published in 1982 by Sahitya Akademi (India's "National Academy of Letters") and authored by M. K. Naik, is titled "*A History of Indian English Literature*"; the third and the latest

(2008), edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, is named "*A Concise History of Indian Literature in English*".

The story of chronicling this branch of literature goes as far back as 1916, when *The Cambridge History of English Literature* decided to bring under its umbrella, in volume 14, a diverse body of literature written in the English language in various parts of the world. It devoted a chapter each on Anglo-Irish Literature, Anglo-Indian Literature, English-Canadian Literature, The Literature of Australia and New Zealand, and South African Poetry. The essay on Anglo-Indian Literature was written by E. F. Oaten, Professor of History at the Presidency College, Calcutta. Defining its limits, Oaten opines that it is predominantly the "literature written by Englishmen and Englishwomen who have devoted their lives to the service of India." His comment that "Bankim, undoubtedly, was the first creative genius who sprang from the Indian Renaissance brought about in the nineteenth century by the introduction of English education" reveals the role of the English language in the modernization of India. Also, while praising how talented Toru Dutt was, he very politely suggests "that our [English] language is essentially unsuited to the riot of imagery and ornament which form part of the natural texture of the oriental mind." Well, this has strongly been refuted by, among others, Raja Rao, but we will have occasion to discuss it later.

In 1968, when R. C. Churchill revised and expanded George Sampson's *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature,* the chapter was renamed "Anglo-Indian Literature and the English Literature of India, Pakistan, and South-East Asia". Obviously, during the half a century since 1916, a vast body of literature had been produced by Indians writing in English. Churchill therefore concludes that "Anglo-Indian literature in the old British sense naturally disappeared with the transfer of power in 1947…. The most interesting work, however, has been in the field, not of Anglo-Indian literature, but of what may be termed Indo-Anglian or Indo-British literature…that is, the literature in the English language produced since 1947 by Indians." Mention is made of Sarojini Naidu, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, and Kushwant Singh, among others. "Indian poetry, since independence," he finds, "has not on the whole been so impressive as Indian fiction." Among the literary histories, he mentions Bhupal Singh's *Survey of Anglo-Indian Fiction* (1934) and Iyengar's *Indian Writing in English* (1962).

Iyengar's first book on the subject appeared as a P.E.N. (Poets, Essayists, Novelists (PEN): A global association of writers, now including playwrights, editors, and others,

promoting literature and freedom of expression (PEN International)) monograph in 1943, and was named, in the Cambridge tradition, *Indo-Anglian Literature*. In his Preface to the second edition of *Indian Writing in English* (1972), Iyengar quotes Dr. Mulk Raj Anand as saying, "Indian-English literature has come to stay as part of world literature." He might have taken a clue from Dr. Anand in devising a new nomenclature for this body of literature, although he continues using liberally in his Preface and Introduction, the older appellative, Indo-Anglian! In fact, he asserts that "'Indo-Anglian' is reasonably handy and descriptive, and serves our purpose well enough."

The problem with this literature is that it is in part both Indian and English, and also neither wholly Indian nor English. Let us see, at some length, how Professor Iyengar half-humourously describes this phenomenon:

Indo-Anglian literature, then, is both an Indian literature and a variation of English literature. It has an appeal to Indians, and it should have an appeal to Englishmen as well. Yet alas! this double base, this potential double appeal, becomes really a matter of falling between the proverbial two stools. The Indian is apt to think that Indo-Anglian literature is not—and could never be—as good as Bengali or Marathi or Tamil literature. …it must be admitted that the average Englishman has his legitimate excuses. Indian writing in English comes to him as a curiosity, as an uncouth if exotic thing, often misty in the name of mysticism, funereal in trying to be solemn and serious, fantastically absurd in the attempt to accomplish Oriental exuberance. "Matthew Arnold in a *sari*"—so Gordon Bottomley is said to have described typical Indo-Anglian poetry; and who can stand so incongruous an apparition!

M.K. Naik quotes Alphonso-Karkala to point out that a major flaw in the term 'Indo-Anglian' is that it would suggest "relation between two countries (India and England) rather than a country and a language." Naik concludes that it "is thus hardly an accurate term to designate this literature." On the other hand, both 'Indian Writing in English' and 'Indo-English literature' have also been used for Indian translations from other Indian languages into English. Therefore, the Sahitya Akademi has officially accepted the term 'Indian English Literature' for literature written originally in English by Indian authors. But there are people who would not be very happy with this expression either, because it suggests that this branch of Indian literature still lives under the shadow of 'English' literature. A.K. Mehrotra would therefore prefer the term 'Indian Literature in English', for it gives prominence to Indian

creative genius over the language in which it is written. But alas! for this very reason, this term too remains open to the inclusion of English translations of Indian literature.

1.4 THE ARRIVAL OF ENGLISH IN INDIA

While one must not forget the brutalities and economic exploitation of the British Raj, one should have at the same time an open mind to acknowledge the immense good brought to our shores and the great contribution made in the modernisation of our nation by the English language and the introduction of English education in India. Written in 1917, Sri Aurobindo's comment is quite an eye-opener and still very relevant today:

The English language and literature is practically the only window the Indian mind, with the narrow and meagre and yet burdensome education given to it, possesses into the world of European thought and culture; but at least as possessed at present, it is a painfully small and insufficient opening.

Three events, one following the other, laid the foundations of the British Raj in India: the Battle of Plassey (1757), the Battle of Buxar (1764), and the Treaty of Allahabad (1765) between Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II and Robert Clive, granting *diwani* rights of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa provinces to the East India Company.

The coming of English education and the introduction of the English language as the medium of instruction was a hotly debated and gradual affair. With the East India Company assuming administrative responsibilities, there arose the need for qualified Maulavis and Pundits as mediators and interpreters for administering justice on the lines of prevailing judicial systems. Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of India, established the Calcutta Madarasa for teaching Persian and Arabic in 1781, and the Sanskrit College at Benaras was founded by Jonathan Duncan in 1792. A number of scholar-administrators, famously known as 'Orientalists', busied themselves with a sincere and in-depth exploration of Indian texts and traditions—most notable among these were Sir William Jones, who founded the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784; Nathaniel Halhed, who wrote the first Bengali grammar for Europeans; and Sir Charles Wilkins, the co-founder of the Asiatic Society, who is remembered as the first translator of the Bhagvad Gita into English.

In the meantime, the missionaries who had come to India to spread the word of Christ had brought with them the printing press and had opened the earliest of English schools in

Madras (1717), Bombay (1718), and Calcutta (1720). Once the East India Company took over the revenue administration in 1765, they needed a large number of junior clerks and support staff who could also act as a link between the rulers and the general population. In 1817, Raja Rammohan Roy, with the support of his friends David Hare, a Scottish watchmaker and philanthropist, and Sir Edward Hyde East, then Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Fort William, founded the Hindu College for providing the best of English education to Indian students. Roy wanted this education to be made available on a pan-India basis, which could only be made possible by a direct intervention of the Company administration. His letter to Lord Amherst in this regard has been quoted by both Iyengar and Naik:

If it had been intended to keep the British nation in ignorance of real knowledge, the Baconian philosophy would not have been allowed to displace the system of the schoolmen, which was the best calculated to perpetuate ignorance. In the same manner, the Sanskrit system of education would be the best calculated to keep this country in darkness, if such had been the policy of the British legislators. But as the improvement of the native population is the object of the Government, it will consequently promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy, with other useful sciences, which may be accomplished with the sums proposed by employing a few gentlemen of talent and learning educated in Europe and providing a College furnished with necessary books, instruments, and other apparatus.

Roy seems to have been fighting a stiff battle against the Orientalists and conservatives. Two instances will suffice to make this point. H. H. Wilson argued: “It is not by the English language that we can enlighten the people of India. It can be effected only through forms of speech which they already understand and use…. The project of importing English literature along with English cotton into India and bringing it into universal use must at once be felt by every reasonable mind as chimerical and ridiculous.” In 1792, a director of the East India Company asserted: “We [have] just lost America from our folly, in having allowed the establishment of schools and colleges…. It would not do for us to repeat the same act of folly in regard to India.”

To resolve this ongoing conflict between the two camps, Macaulay arrived in India in 1834 as the President of the General Committee of Public Instruction. His Minute finally tilted the balance in favour of the Anglicist-Reformists. But, as many historians have rightly

noted, it was "the earnest desire and repeated representations of Indians" that made possible the introduction of English education in India.

1.5 MACAULAY'S MINUTE

As a student of literature, you need to look critically at the much-maligned Macaulay's Minute and Macaulayian education. First of all, Macaulay was not the progenitor of English education in India. As noted earlier, English schools had already been flourishing, and Hindoo College had acquired a great reputation for excellence. Macaulay's Minute amply confirms it by stating, "In India, English is the language spoken by the ruling class. It is spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of Government."

Secondly, it is true that Macaulay's statement on Indian literature shows his abysmal ignorance of Indian culture and civilisation, is thoroughly biased, and smacks of white man's racial chauvinism. But he candidly admits that "I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic." His opinion that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" comes in fact from his interactions, "both here and at home, with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues."

Thirdly, it must be noted that his whole argument was against the misinterpretation of the Charter of 1813 by the 'orientalists' who had used the grant of one lakh rupees for financing the Madrassa and Sanskrit college and for printing tons of books in these languages for which there were no takers. The students, after spending 12 years learning Sanskrit, found that they were totally unemployable and their knowledge of no use whatsoever. Macaulay is quick to point out the irony— "we are forced to pay our Arabic and Sanskrit students while those who learn English are willing to pay us." He further furnishes evidence for it:

A petition was presented last year to the committee by several ex-students of the Sanskrit College. The petitioners stated that they had studied in the college ten or twelve years, that they had made themselves acquainted with Hindoo literature and science, that they had received certificates of proficiency. And what is the fruit of all this? "Notwithstanding such testimonials," they say, "we have but little prospect of bettering our condition without the kind assistance of your honorable committee, the indifference with which we are generally looked upon by our countrymen leaving no hope of encouragement and assistance from them." … They have wasted the best years of life in learning what procures for them neither bread nor respect.

The objective of the 1813 Charter was "the revival and promotion of literature," and "the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of the sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories." And this could be achieved, Macaulay argued, only through the medium of English and not vernacular languages. He further points out how earlier the introduction of European languages had been instrumental in transforming the Russian civilisation. Something similar with regard to the Indian subcontinent could be achieved by English education.

When we quote Macaulay saying that his project was to create "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect," we should remember that he also emphatically said, "the natives are desirous to be taught English, and are not desirous to be taught Sanscrit or Arabic… [and] it is possible to make natives of this country thoroughly good English scholars, and that to this end our efforts ought to be directed."

Finally, the funds thus saved by discontinuing support to Sanskrit and Arabic education "would enable us to give larger encouragement to the Hindoo College at Calcutta."

1.6 THE EARLY IMPACT OF ENGLISH EDUCATION

Have you observed that most of your thoughts come from what you have read or the films and shows you have watched? Something similar was happening to young minds in India who had recently been exposed to English literature and other writings. They had become so overwhelmed by the new world that had suddenly been opened before them. They not only saw life and reality through an English lens but also went ahead with propagating their newly acquired vision and values to their less fortunate brethren who had not received this godsend gift.

The Travels of Dean Mahomet (1794) is the first book ever written and published by an Indian in English. It is in the form of letters written to an imaginary friend. The influence of Richardson's epistolary novels *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1749) is only too obvious. There were other influences too—the author, Din Muhammad, had become Dean Mahomed; he also migrated to Ireland, married an Irish girl, and converted from Islam to Christianity.

An equally illustrative example is that of Krishna Mohan Banerjee (1813-1885), an ardent follower of Henry Derozio. At the age of eighteen, Banerjee wrote the first original

English-language drama by an Indian, *The Persecuted: or, Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta* (1831). It was well-received by English reviewers at the time for exposing the hypocrisies of Kolkata's Brahmin orthodoxy and for its author's use of the English language. A year later, Banerjee converted to Christianity. In 1852, Krishna Mohan was appointed a professor of Oriental Studies in 1852, was elected to be a member of the Royal Asiatic Society along with Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, and in 1876 the University of Calcutta honoured him with an honorary doctorate degree. How much his laurels were rewards for his embracing Christian faith remains an open question.

William Dalrymple in *The Golden Road* (2024) has only such a race of Anglophiles in mind when he shows how India had become a part of the 'Anglosphere' during the colonial period: "Indians who wished to get ahead had to abandon, or at least sublimate, much of their own culture, becoming instead English-speaking 'Brown Sahibs', or what V. S. Naipaul called 'Mimic Men'."

These mimic men also started doling out this imitative counterfeit culture in Indian languages as part of a larger civilisational project. In the Preface to his long poem in Bangla, *Padmini Upakhyan* (1858), Rangalal Banerjee wrote: "Firstly, many Bengalis who do not know the English language think there is no superior poetry in that language, and it is important that they be rid of such delusion." Defending his own writings, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, another convert to Christianity, whose fame rests mostly on his Bangla poems, wrote: "I am writing for that portion of my countrymen, who think as I think, whose minds have been more or less imbued with Western ideas and *modes of thinking*, and that it is my intention to throw off the fetters forged for us by a survile admiration for everything Sanskrit." In the Introduction to *Karan Ghelo* (1866), the Gujarati novelist Nandshankar Mehta writes: "The former education inspector of our State, Mr Russell, has expressed to me his desire to see Gujarati books written along the lines of English novels and Romances. I have written this novel according to that plan."

Take a look at the contemporary writings in your language, and make an assessment of how and to what extent this branch of literature is still under the influence of English and European literatures.

1.7 EARLY PROSE WRITINGS AND RENAISSANCE IN INDIA

The nineteenth century saw the spread of English education in India, and with it came a wave of social reformers, educationists, thinkers, and a variety of journals devoted to cultural, political, and religious issues, all championing the cause of a resurgent India. Here was a generation that had newly been exposed to the Western hemisphere of knowledge and enlightenment, and they wanted to bring it in for effecting radical changes in society, culture, and religious and political thought. This was the rise of the Renaissance in India.

Leading the brigade, Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) was the most towering figure among the makers of modern India. We have seen that more than Macaulay, it was he who was instrumental in ushering English education in India. He was painfully aware of all that kept the Hindu society and the growth of the Indian mind arrested in a marshland of superstition and backwardness. He was a social reformer with the zeal of a warrior who fought a long, drawn battle to end the plight of Indian women and improve their position. He brought to an end the obnoxious practice of Sati, promoted the widow-remarriage of Hindu women, and worked for the equal inheritance rights of women. Finding the Hindu society divided into so many sects and religious belief systems, Roy, together with Dwarkanath Tagore, founded the monotheistic Brahmo Samaj in 1828 on the cardinal principle of Indian philosophical systems that Brahman alone was the sole Supreme Reality.

In a wider sense, Roy was a self-taught polyglot who was not only the master of the oriental languages—Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Bangla, and Hindustani— but was equally well-versed in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and English. In fact, his command over the English language, which he had only mastered while serving under British officer Digby in the East India Company, was so exceptionally great that Jeremy Bentham thought it could be ascribed "to the pen of a superiorly educated and instructed Englishman." Perhaps even Macaulay had Roy in mind when he remarked in his Minute: "Indeed, it is unusual to find, even in the literary circles of the Continent, any foreigner who can express himself in English with so much facility and correctness as we find in many Hindoos."

Roy's essay "A Defence of Hindu Theism" has been called the first significant work in Indian English Literature, and his English writings alone have come out in six volumes. Apart from editing the English periodical *Brahummunical Magazine*, Roy wrote a large number of 'Petitions' to the British government on political, administrative, social, and educational issues; and also many others on Muslim, Hindu, and Christian religions. M. K. Naik aptly sums up the achievement of Roy as an Indian English writer:

…clear thinking, soundness of judgement, comprehensiveness of views, forceful and logical argumentation, and moderation and dignity in refuting the criticism of his adversaries are the outstanding features of Ram Mohan Roy's prose style, which indubitably makes him the first of a long line of Indian masters of English prose. The father of Bengali prose-writing, he is also the first 'begetter' of Indian prose in English.

The Renaissance in India happened simultaneously in all three Presidencies of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. Some of the more prominent stalwarts of this movement were—Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884) in Calcutta; Kashinath Trimbak Telang (1850-1893), Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901), and Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917) in Bombay; and Cavelly Venkata Boriah (1776-1803) and Gazulu Lakshmi Narsu Chetty (1806-1868) in Madras.

Keshub Chunder Sen, a member of the Brahmo Samaj, was a gifted orator, and his words made a deep impression on his audience both in India and England. Max Muller saw him as a sort of Martin Luther King and noted that after Sen's visit to Britain, his name had become a household word in England. Coming under the influence of Sri Ramakrishna, Sen moved away from the Brahmo Samaj and founded a new sect, Navavidhan, advocating a wider faith and practice that combined the best of every religion. During his last lecture on 'Asia's Message to Europe' given in 1833, Sen made an impassioned speech on the plight of his country:

Behold, the sweet angel of the East, into whose beauty the very colours of heaven seem to have been woven—the fair East in 'russet mantle clad' lies prostrate, a bleeding prisoner!… The desperate onslaughts of Europe's haughty civilisation, she says, have brought sorrow into her heart, ignominy on her fair name, and death to her cherished institutions… Alas! before the formidable artillery of Europe's aggressive civilisation, the scriptures and prophets, the language and literature of the East, nay her customs and manners, her social and domestic institutions, and her very industries have undergone a cruel slaughter. (quoted in Iyengar)

Kashinath Telang was well-read in both Sanskrit and English languages and had translated the Bhagvad Gita for the Sacred Books of the East series. A judge of the High Court, he also served as the Vice Chancellor of the Bombay University. "His speeches and writings on legal, literary, educational, social, religious, and political problems," says Iyengar, "were marked by simplicity and lucidity, a flair for cogent reasoning, and an absence of mere rhetoric or bombast." Mahadev Ranade, hailed by some as the 'Father of Modern

India', was a great scholar, economist, and jurist. His classic *Rise of the Maratha Power* was originally written in English. Ranade's disciple Gopal Krishna Gokhale wrote about his master: "His one aspiration through life was that India should be roused from the lethargy of centuries, so that she might become a great and living nation, responsive to truth, justice, and self-respect, responsive to all the claims of man's higher nature…." Dadabhai Naoroji taught at Elphinstone College, became a member of the British Parliament in 1892, and presided twice over the Indian National Congress. His book *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1902) is still considered a classic.

Gazulu Lakshmi Narsu Chetty, a nationalist businessman, founded the Madras Native Association in 1844 and started a newspaper, *The Crescent,* for 'the amelioration of the condition of the Hindoos.' Cavelly Venkata Boriah's long, erudite article "Account of the Jains" appeared in *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. IX (London, 1809). His elder brother, Cavelly Venkata Ramaswami, produced the first literary biography in Indian English literature, *Biographical Sketches of the Dekkan Poets,* in 1829.

Undoubtedly, the introduction of the English language and English education was centrally important in the birth and spread of the Renaissance in India. But there is another school which suggests that it was Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) who was at the epicentre of the Indian Renaissance. While many argued and debated the tenets of various religions, here was someone who was the Truth incarnate. The intellectuals and seekers of Truth flocked around him and drew their sustenance from his mere presence. We have already noted how Keshub Sen had come under his influence, but it was Sri Ramakrishna's fiery disciple, Vivekananda (1863-1902), who took the world by storm and awakened the sleeping spiritual giant that was India.

Vivekananda stands as the glorious peak and culmination of the nineteenth-century Renaissance in India. He had received a proper English education and had found spiritual attainments, beyond debate and speculation, sitting at the feet of his master, Sri Ramakrishna. During a three-day-long meditation at Kanyakumari, the vision appeared to him of his mission and destiny—that he had to take the message of Vedanta to the West and had to work for the upliftment of his motherland. His 1893 address at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago was a historical moment in awakening the world to a new light. It was the dawn of a New Age in the Earth's consciousness. He travelled far and wide through Europe and America to spread his word and message. Back home, he exhorted the youth of his country

to arise from centuries-old slumber and rediscover their true, resplendent selves. He repeatedly admonished: "Arise, awake, and sleep not till the goal is reached." We have seen how from Macaulay to Gazulu Chetty, the word 'Hindoo' was used synonymously for India. Vivekananda urged that we must make it "the highest word any language can invent." "Once more the world must be conquered by India. This is the dream of my life." He advocated a system of education that was ennobling and practical at the same time: "We want the education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one's own feet…. A nation is advanced in proportion to education and intelligence spread among the masses."

Such was the greatness of this spiritual genius that Sri Aurobindo is said to have received, while incarcerated in the Alipore jail, the clue to his highest discovery, the Supramental, from Vivekananda's subtle presence. There is no one like him in Indian history who single-handedly effected such a momentous first awakening of a sleeping nation. His prose writings are so vibrant with a living force that even after more than a century, the younger generation of Indians still flock to him for inspiration and guidance.

1.8 THE FIRST FLOWERING OF POETRY IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) was the most prominent among the first generation of Indian poets writing in English. A teacher at Hindu College, he was an inspiring legend for a whole generation. An Anglo-Indian by birth, he considered India as his homeland and lent his voice to the reformist movement of the time. His narrative poem *The Fakir of Jungheera* (1828), denouncing the practice of *sati,* reads like a Byronic romance. Kashiprosad Ghose (1809-73) was one of the first Indians to publish a volume of poems in English; his collection *The Shair and Other Poems* (1830) is only of historical importance. Michael Madhusudan Dutt's (1827-1873) fame rests mainly on his Bengali epic *Meghnad Badha*; his long poem *The Captive Ladie* (1849) shows, like Derozio's, a discernible Byronic influence.

In the earlier section on the Renaissance in India, we saw how so many young men who received English education not only imbibed Western values and culture, which they so eloquently expressed in their miscellaneous prose writings, but some of them with equal eagerness also converted to Christianity. Such was also the case with the Dutts, who were an

important part of Calcutta's intellectual circles in the nineteenth century. Govin Chunder Dutt (1828-1884) was a cultured, well-to-do man with literary leanings. In 1862, he decided, together with some members of his family, to convert from Hindu religion to Christianity. His three children, Abju, Aru, and Toru, were too young to express their choice, but his wife did resist initially this conversion of faith. Perhaps to get away for a while from an ensuing atmosphere of social opprobrium, which always follows in the wake of such a decision, Govin, along with his family, left for Europe in 1869. They reached France, where the two girls attended school at Nice and made their acquaintance with French literature. Soon after, they shifted to London, and Govin brought out *The Dutt Family Album* (Longmans, 1870) to showcase his literary ambitions. The other contributors to the volume were his brothers Har Chunder and Greece Chunder, and their cousin Omesh Chunder. In 1871, the Dutts moved to Cambridge, where Aru and Toru attended 'Higher Lectures for Women', and finally, in 1873, they returned to Calcutta.

This four-year sojourn in Europe, where so many literary happenings touched their lives, made a deep impact on Toru's impressionable sensibilities and brought out the poet in her. Two years after returning home, Toru Dutt (1856-1877) published her book of translations from French poets, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1875). At the end of the volume, Toru included an original sonnet of her own, "À Mon Père", in which she so beautifully touches upon the nuances of translation:

The flowers look loveliest in their native soil
Amid their kindred branches; plucked, they fade,
And lose the colours Nature on them laid,
Though bound in garlands with assiduous toil.

As a child, Toru had heard from her mother so many tales of legendary gods and heroes from Hindu epics and scriptures. This inspired her to rediscover her roots and make her own direct acquaintance with the original Sanskrit texts. After reading the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, Vishnu Purana, and Kalidas, she embarked on a new project, this time a sheaf gleaned from Sanskrit fields. This was published posthumously in 1882 as *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* and carried an introduction by Edmund Gosse. These are original poems and not translations; the poet has picked up themes from Sanskrit classics but rendered them in her own voice. The imagery, insight, and capturing of emotions are all her own. The selection of stories makes her, albeit unselfconsciously, the first feminist writer in Indian English

literature. The book opens with Savitri and ends with Sita, and then there is the legend of "Jogadhya Uma", which has a richly evocative and exquisitely phrased description of the Goddess and is told in the vein of a Romantic supernatural poem like "Kubla Khan":

Not weak she seemed, nor delicate,
Strong was each limb of flexile grace,
….. the face
Framed in its cloud of floating hair,
No painter's hand might hope to trace
The beauty and the glory there!
….
For though her eyes were soft, a ray
Lit them at times, which kings who saw
Would never dare to disobey.

One of the most anthologised of Toru's poems, "Our Casuarina Tree," has drawn high critical praise from Iyengar: "In the organisation of the poem as a whole and in the finish of the individual stanzas, in its mastery of phrase and rhythm, in its music of sound and ideas, 'Our Casuarina Tree 'is a superb piece of writing." While M. K. Naik's considered opinion is that "It was with Toru Dutt that Indian English poetry really graduated from imitation to authenticity," H. A. L. Fisher is of the view that Toru Dutt "has by sheer force of native genius earned for herself the right to be enrolled in the great fellowship of English poets."

Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848-1909), an elder cousin of Toru Dutt, was also in England preparing for the ICS when the Dutt family was there and seems to have derived his literary ambitions from the stock of his larger family. Taking an early retirement from the ICS, he devoted himself to scholarly and literary pursuits. While he chose the medium of the Bengali language for his creative expression—he wrote five novels, two of which he translated into English—it was to the English language he turned for his scholarly pursuits. His works on Indian history include *A History of Civilisation in Ancient India*, and *The Economic History of British India*. But his place in Indian English literature is that of a poet-translator. His *Lays of Ancient India* (1894) comprises verse translations from the Rig Veda, the Upanishads, Buddhist literature, and two Sanskrit classics—Kalidasa's *Kumarsambhava* and Bharavi's *Kiratarjuniya*. His translations of the selections from the *Mahabharata* (1895) and the *Ramayana* (1899) are cast in the mould of English epic. Limiting his scope, he decided to

reduce the 48,000 lines of the *Ramayana* and 200,000 lines of the *Mahabharata* to a meagre 4,000 lines each. Following the English epic convention, he also divided them into twelve books each, disregarding the division of seven *kandas* and eighteen *Parvas* of the original texts. Although these translations introduced these great epics for the first time to the English-speaking world, many Indian critics, who know the Sanskrit texts only too well, find the translations quite flawed in many ways. One, the 'Locksley Hall' metre, which Ramesh Chunder Dutta employs, is not at all adequate to represent the simple severity and pithiness of the *anushtup* metre of the Sanskrit originals. "The final verdict," according to Naik, is the same as "that well-known assessment of Pope's *Homer:* 'A pretty poem… but not Homer'."

There are a few minor voices who tried their hands on writing English verse, but without any worthwhile success. Those who must be mentioned in passing include Behramji Merwanji Malabari (1853-1912), who was a far more sophisticated observer of men and manners and a fine writer of prose, but whose poems are as pedestrian and ridiculous as the title of his collection *The Indian Muse in English Garb* (1878); Cowasji Nowrosi Vesuvala (*Courting the Muse*, 1879); M. M. Kunte (*The Rishi*, 1879); and Nagesh Wishwanath Pai (*The Angel of Misfortune: A Fairy Tale*, 1904).

Fiction

Unlike poetry, which has a niche readership of minds with cultivated and refined aesthetic sensibility, and prose tracts that appeal to people with a critical, 'intellectual' predeliction and social, political, and economic concerns, fiction has always had a much wider audience. The secret of this wider appeal lies in the fact that each one of us is constitutionally a creator of fiction. We are all the time constructing and refining our own self, which in the end, if truth be told, remains an unending fictional and imaginative construct. We are also at the same time born listeners of tales, and of this, the popularity of television shows is an index. We begin by listening to grandma's tales and grow by getting educated in gossip gatherings of our immediate surroundings.

Thus, every man who can read is always a potential reader of fiction. The primary challenge, therefore, for the Indian fiction writer in English in those early days was in defining the nature of his potential audience. The Indians who could read English were very few and far between, and Englishmen serving in India could not care much about reading sloppy imitations of Scott by Indians, and of course there was hardly any chance of finding

any readership in England. Faced with such a scenario, the Indian fiction in English in this period was more often than not quite obsequious in tone and content, trying to please in every way the colonial masters, whether in India or abroad.

We have seen how the introduction of English education in India introduced a new light of perception and critical thought to many young Indians who started to dream of a resurgent India and a more egalitarian society. It was the first sprouting of a nationalistic ardour. The earliest of the first two full-length novels—*A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945* (1835) by Kylas Chunder Dutt and *The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the Twentieth Century* (1845) by Shoshee Chunder Dutt—are fantastical projections into the future of India's struggle for and attainment of political freedom. Shoshee Chunder's major novel, *The Young Zamindar* (1883), continues the story of India's resistance but succumbs to an acceptance of failure and ends with the comment, "English rule, with all its drawbacks, is still better than what the Mahomedan rule was."

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay chose to write his first novel, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), in English. Eschewing any overt political tone, the novel is about the stark social conditions of Indian women in an East Bengal village. Later, Bankim shifted to his native Bengali for his subsequent fourteen novels, all masterpieces that have won him an immortal status in Indian literature. Perhaps he was only too aware of the burden of writing in English with its inherent demand of pleasing the ears of a colonial or anglicised Indian audience. It is said that he was also instrumental in persuading Romesh Chunder Dutt to shift to Bengali for creative writings. Lal Behari Day's *Govinda Samanta, or the History of a Bengali Raiyat* (1874), coming ten years later, has a much wider canvas. "Through the fortunes of the Samanta family from 1820—when the last sati was performed in the region—to 1870, the year of the great famine," writes Meenakshi Mukherjee, "the novel documents in vivid detail the rural Bengal in the nineteenth century."

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, we find a number of women novelists taking to writing in English about their struggles and experiences in a rather autobiographical vein. Raj Lakshmi Devi's *The Hindu Wife, or The Enchanted Fruit,* appeared in 1876. Coming next in chronological order is Toru Dutt's unfinished novel *Bianca, or The Young Spanish Maiden* (1878), which reads like an autobiographical projection. It is the story of two sisters, Bianca and Inez, their sisterly love and bereavement, and a maiden's experience of falling in love. When Bianca receives the first kiss from her lover, she feels "as if she had

drunk of the heavenly hydromel of the poets." Krupabai Satthianadhan (1862-94), a woman of Christian faith, wrote two novels—*Kamala, A Story of Hindu Life* (1894) and *Saguna, A Story of Native Christian Life* (1895). Kamala, a sanyasi's daughter, is brought up in her father's hermitage and later married into a traditional Hindu home, where family intrigue thwarts her ambitions for learning. After her husband's untimely death, she receives a proposal to remarry from one of her father's disciples who is willing to give up his robe and vows. But Kamala declines and instead chooses to devote her life to the upliftment of others in society. *Kamala* therefore is a bold statement for the cause of widow remarriage. *Saguna*, an autobiographical *Bildungsroman* novel, narrates how the daughter of a Christian convert fights her way to get medical education and become a qualified doctor. Krupabai Satthianadhan died in Madras in 1894, and a scholarship for women was set up in her memory at the Madras Medical College. Shevantibai Nikambe's *Ratanbai: A Sketch of a Bombay High Caste Hindu Young Wife* (1895) is again a strong plea for women's education. It portrays the successful efforts of a young girl married at the age of nine to secure education despite the dogged opposition of her in-laws.

The nineteenth-century Indian English literature documents the enthusiastic reception of English education in India and the subsequent changes in the lives of those who were the early initiates into the British manners and thought-system. Many of them travelled to England for higher education or simply to make a direct acquaintance with English life and society. Some of them were so enthusiastic of the new dispensation that they converted to Christianity, finding Hindu religion nothing but a night of darkness and superstition. Others, getting alarmed at this tendency, decided to work for the reformation and regeneration of Hindu religion. The new education also brought about a keen awareness of the ills and unethical exploitation of the British Raj and prompted a whole generation to aspire for India's political freedom. Women, in particular, saw a sea-change in society—the practice of sati was banned, widow-remarriage was encouraged, their rights of inheritance changed, and they could very well now aspire for higher education. All this found expression in the form of poetry, fiction, and prose tracts, not only in English but also in vernacular languages.

1.8 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Raja Rammohan Roy's contribution to the introduction of English education in India.

2. Why is Raja Rammohan Roy regarded as a pioneer of Indian English prose?

3. Macaulay's Minute primarily argued for the promotion of education through:

   a. Sanskrit

   b. Arabic

   c. Vernacular languages

   d. English

4. According to Macaulay, students trained in Sanskrit and Arabic:

   a. Found prestigious employment

   b. Were preferred in government service

   c. Remained largely unemployable

   d. Became teachers of vernacular languages

5. The Travels of Dean Mahomet (1794) is significant because it is:

   a. The first Indian novel in English

   b. The first book written by an Indian in English

   c. The first English translation of an Indian text

   d. A political tract on colonialism

Answers to Self -Assessment Questions:

1. Refer to 1.6
2. Refer to 1.6
3. (d)
4. (c)
5. (b)

1.9 REFERENCES

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1.10 MODEL AND TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Trace the historical circumstances that led to the introduction of English in India.
2. Discuss the significance of Macaulay's Minute of 1835 in shaping the future of Indian Writing in English.
3. Write short notes on any two minor poets of the first flowering of Indian English poetry.
4. Why has the nomenclature of Indian English literature remained a contested issue?
5. What were the main objectives of the Charter Act of 1813?

UNIT-2 INTRODUCTION TO INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH—2

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Dear learners,

In this unit, you will examine the major developments in Indian English literature during the twentieth century, with particular emphasis on prose, modernist poetry, and fiction. You will study the contributions of influential prose writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, whose writings shaped national, spiritual, and philosophical thought. The unit will also introduce you to the rise of modernism in Indian English poetry, its themes of alienation, experimentation, and linguistic debate, as well as the major poets associated with this movement. Further, you will explore the evolution of Indian English fiction beyond the early masters, including modern and post-Independence novelists, while engaging with critical perspectives on canon formation, cultural authenticity, and the continuing dialogue between Indian tradition and the English language.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

- To understand the evolution of Indian Writing in English as a medium of social reform, national consciousness, and cultural self-definition.
- To critically examine the major poetic and fictional voices of the twentieth century and their contribution to Indian literary and philosophical thought.
- To examine the major prose writers and modernist poets of Indian English literature in relation to nationalism, spirituality, and cultural identity.
- To critically assess the impact of modernism on Indian English poetry and fiction, including debates on language, alienation, tradition, and Western influence.

2.3 THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The thrust of Indian English literature in the nineteenth century was more than ‘literary’; the prime mover for it was reimagining a new nation and society and persuading more and more young minds, newly awakened by the introduction of English education, to work

methodically and in all ways possible for achieving this goal. It was more of a vehicle of change than anything near 'the art for art's sake'. There were a few major voices, like Raja Rammohan Roy and Romesh Chunder Dutt, and the medium, obviously, for their arguments was prose. Toru Dutt was the lone major poetic voice. Novel as a literary genre was yet to find its feet; most of the fictional writers imitated the popular British fiction or shared their personal experiences with a strong message for social change.

The twentieth century saw the maturing of literary sensibility, the widening of vision, and a deeper exploration of cultural roots in Indian writing in English. There are also many more major voices in every genre—prose, poetry, drama, fiction, and literary criticism. Within the given limits of this unit, it is not possible to touch upon all of them. What follows is a selection of the greatest of major voices, who not only gave a new direction to the contemporary literary pursuits but also provided a philosophical leadership to national aspirations and thought.

2.3.1 Poetry

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the only Indian to have won the Nobel Prize for Literature, the writer of our national anthem, and deemed by many a modern Rishi, is a cultural icon and a 'national' poet. But whether he can be treated as an Indian English poet has been open to debate. Tagore was fifty, and the whole of Bengal had paid homage to him as their greatest poet on his golden jubilee. When, almost casually to escape from the exhaustion of this overwhelming adulation, he took up translating or rather transcreating some of his lyrics into English, and added some more while on a voyage to England. By the time he arrived in London on 16 June 1912, the manuscript of *Gitanjali,* comprising 103 poems, was ready. When English literati, including Professor Rothenstein, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, May Sinclair, C. F. Andrews, and Henri Nevinson, were swept off their feet. They had never seen anything like this before. It was an ethereal vision—simple, direct, magical, a Romance opening into the beyond. Next year, in 1913, Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. After the phenomenal success of *Gitanjali*, the English publishers Macmillan wanted more translations from Tagore. As a result, *The Gardener* and *The Crescent Moon* came out in 1913; *Fruit Gathering* and *Stray Birds* in 1916; *Lover's Gift and Crossing* in 1918; and *Fireflies* in 1928. *The Child*, Tagore's only long poem originally written in English, appeared in 1930.

That Tagore had no pretensions about his felicity with the English language or his translations is borne out by his admission in a letter he wrote to his niece, Indira Devi:

You have alluded to the English translation of the *Gitanjali*. I cannot imagine to this day how people came to like it so much. That I cannot write English is such a patent fact that I never had even the vanity to feel ashamed of it.….I simply felt an urge to recapture through the medium of another language the feelings and sentiments which had created such a feast of joy within me in the days gone by.

After the initial enthusiasm with which Tagore was received in England—see Yeats's Introduction to *Gitanjali*—came the disillusionment and depreciation of Tagore, again from no other than Yeats in 1935:

Damn Tagore. We got out three good books... and then, because he thought it more important to see and know English than to be a great poet, he brought out sentimental rubbish and wrecked his reputation. Tagore does not know English, no Indian knows English. Nobody can write with music and style in a language not learned in childhood and ever since the language of his thought.

It was more of an indictment of Indian writing in English than of Tagore alone, and the tone is that of a supercilious colonial overlord. Three years later, in 1938, advocating an Indian variety of English, these charges were strongly refuted by Raja Rao in his Foreword to *Kanthapura*: "We cannot write like the English. We should not." The other detractors of Tagore's translations are those who have read his works in Bengali originals. A critic like Sisirkumar Ghose, who taught English at Santiniketan, does not mince his words: "The problem, hard to avoid, is that the Englished Tagore is not the same as the Bengali Rabindranath. The English *Gitanjali* is not the Bengali book with the same title." Amid this confusion of bilingualism and transcreation comes the rather sane voice of M. K. Naik: "Tagore's English verse must be evaluated solely on the strength of the English text before us, both as regards content and form, and every other consideration must be held irrelevant."

Gitanjali, as a collection of lyric songs in the Vaishnava bhakti tradition, is unique; there are no parallels to it in Indian English literature. If it shocked and surprised the English critics, it is because the Western mind has never known the melodious surges of bhakti. If Gitanjali occasionally falters on its English steps, the fault lies with the English language: the

English word 'devotion' is not the same as bhakti, the tradition that dates back to Dhruva and Prahlad. It is a song of surrender of the finite human self to its Lord, the One, the Real.

When thou commandest me to sing, it seems that my heart would break with pride; and I look to thy face, and tears come to my eyes. (II)

Ah, thou hast made my heart captive in the endless meshes of thy music, my master! (III)

Leave all thy burdens on his hands who can bear all, and never look behind in regret. (IX)

Tagore, at the same time, is also a reformist and an iconoclast, like his favourite Kabir:

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!
He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground…
Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found? Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation; he is bound with us all for ever. (XI)

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight. (LXXIII)

Tagore "is perhaps closer to the Romantic poets than to people nearer home," writes Sisirkumar Ghose, "His rapport with the Sufi, vaishnav Bauls was more romantic than real." There is more of Keatsian doubt 'Fled is the music:—do I wake or sleep?' than the Upanishadic certitude '*vedahmetam purusham mahantam*—I KNOW him!' He therefore remains a poet of *viraha* (separation), longing, and aspiration:

The song that I came to sing remains unsung to this day….
I have not seen his face, nor have I listened to his voice; only I have heard his gentle footsteps from the road before my house.…
I live in the hope of meeting with him; but this meeting is not yet. (XIII)

I am only waiting for love to give myself up at last into his hands. (XVII)

Iyengar is true to the point when he says that "Next only to *Gitanjali* perhaps, *The Gardener* is the richest of the collections that have appeared in English." It is a collection of 85 "lyrics of love and life… written much earlier than… *Gitanjali,*" tells Tagore. It is a celebration of love unheard of before. Here love comes down to earth with all its mysteries and heavenly

splendour and dances among the men and women who wear our very own face. Divine of course, but not remote and hidden in some seventh sky. Love is utterly a ravishing sensuous experience, making all the senses ablaze in its passion of the moonlit dark Real. The poet is a singer of this mystery too, and not only of *Vaikunth* and Beyond.

"Ah, poet, the evening draws near; your hair is turning grey. Do you in your lonely musing hear the message of the hereafter?"….

"I watch if young straying hearts meet together, and two pairs of eager eyes beg for music to break their silence and speak for them. Who is there to weave their passionate songs, if I sit on the shore of life and contemplate death and the beyond?…" (2)

But the Beyond is real and so is the call of the Beyond. So the poet must first make the statement of his predicament:

I am restless. I am athirst for far-away things…
O Great Beyond, O the keen call of thy flute! I forget, I ever forget, that I have no wings to fly, that I am bound in this spot evermore. (5)

In the next poem, to illustrate this predicament, he rewrites the Upanishadic parable of two birds:

The tame bird was in a cage, the free bird was in the forest…
Their love is intense with longing, but they never can fly wing to wing…
The free bird cries, "It cannot be, I fear the closed doors of the cage."
The cage bird whispers, "Alas, my wings are powerless and dead." (6)

But who is this lover with his strange call to the beloved?

If you would be busy and fill your pitcher, come, O come to my lake…
Your thoughts will stray out of your dark eyes like birds from their nests.
Your veil will drop to your feet.
Come, O come to my lake if you must sit idle…
If you must be mad and leap to your death, come, O come to my lake.
It is cool and fathomlessly deep. It is dark like a sleep that is dreamless.
There in its depths nights and days are one, and songs are silence.

The Crescent Moon captures the romance of childhood, seen from both the adult's and the child's eyes. *Stray Birds* is a collection of gem-like epigrams, like the Japanese *haiku*—"The world puts off its mask of vastness to its lover. It becomes small as one song, as one kiss of the eternal" (3). Two other poems deserve special mention—'Urvashi' from *The Fugitive*: "Neither mother nor daughter are you, nor bride, Urvashi. Woman you are, to ravish the soul of Paradise"; and *The Child* (1930), Tagore's lone English poem, which combines Christ's 'passion' and an uncanny premonition of Gandhi's martyrdom.

In an altogether different league from Tagore, **Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950)** is the greatest of Indian English poets for all time. Didn't Tagore himself sing of him as early as 1907:

Rabindranath, O Aurobindo, bows to thee!
O friend, my country's friend, O voice incarnate, free,
Of India's soul!

Born on 15 August 1872 in Calcutta, he was sent at five to Loretto Convent in Darjeeling and then at seven to England, where he attended St Paul's School, London (the same where Milton had studied earlier), before moving to King's College, Cambridge, where he secured a First in Classical Tripos, passed the ICS examination in 1890, securing the eleventh place, and scoring record marks in Greek and Latin. If Yeats insisted that "Nobody can write with music and style in a language not learned in childhood and ever since the language of his thought," then Sri Aurobindo was amply qualified to write in English!

Having got himself deliberately disqualified in the compulsory horse-riding test for the ICS, Sri Aurobindo secured a place in the Baroda State Service and returned to India in 1893, after having spent fourteen long formative years in England. Soon after his arrival in Baroda, he started publishing fiery and thought-provoking articles for the nationalist paper *Indu Prakash*, learned Bengali and mastered Sanskrit, began methodical yogic sadhana, and plunged wholeheartedly into the nationalist revolutionary movement for freedom when the partition of Bengal became an accomplished fact in 1905. Resigning from Baroda College, in 1906, he became the founder-principal of the Bengal National College, Calcutta. While chairing the Congress session at Surat in 1907, Sri Aurobindo effected the first schism in the Indian National Congress by giving official orders for a split between the Nationalists and the Moderates. After a number of unsuccessful charges of sedition against him, Sri

Aurobindo was finally arrested in a bomb-blast case and sent as an undertrial prisoner to Alipore Jail in 1908. Here in the prison, he had the famous 'Vasudev Darshan': "I lay on the coarse blankets that were given me for a couch and felt the arms of Sri Krishna around me, the arms of my Friend and Lover." Retiring from active politics, he shifted to Pondicherry in 1910 and devoted his remaining years to the development of his Integral Yoga and the descent of the Supermind into earthly existence. He died on 5 December 1950, leaving behind a vast literary and spiritual legacy.

Sri Aurobindo was a multi-faceted figure—he was a poet and politician, a philosopher and scholar, a seer and prophet, and finally a yogi and Guru. But he himself wished to be known first and foremost as a poet. His first poem "Light"—running into eight stanzas of eight lines each—was published in 1883 when he was ten, and he was seen giving final touches to his magnum opus *Savitri*—comprising nearly 24,000 lines of blank verse—till a few days before his death in 1950.

His first collection *Songs to Myrtilla*, consisting mostly of poems written in England, was published in 1895, and has individual poems on such figures as Goethe, Charles Stewart Parnell, Bankim Chandra Chatterji, and Madhusudan Dutt. *Urvasie* (1896), Sri Aurobindo's first long poem, foreshadows *Savitri* in many ways. It portrays the inner battle of a heroic soul to regain his soul's desire, is a tale of the meeting of earth and heaven, of Pururavus and Urvasie. The central theme, however, is of Love confronting its antagonist—the forces that oppose its fulfilment—and eventually conquering it. The opponent here is fate or the laws of heaven. Coming during the heyday of the Indian Renaissance, the poem is also tinged with a nationalistic fervour. Pururavus' decision to abdicate kingship to join Urvasie in Gundhurva loka is seen as the failure of the Kshatriya, for which the later generations were to pay heavily:

Yet hast thou maimed the future and discrowned
The Aryan people;
……..
Thy sin, Pururavus — of beauty and love:
And this the land divine to impure grasp
Yields of barbarians from the outer shores."

Love and Death (1899) carries the theme forward, but the antagonist is redefined. It is death which mars the beauty of life. Ruru succeeds in bringing back his bride Priyumvada

from the kingdom of death but only after paying the heavy price of half his life. The issue—the triumph of love over death—will only be resolved once and for all in *Savitri*.

There are many shades in Sri Aurobindo's vast poetic corpus: for example, *Baji Prabhou* is about the heroism of a national icon and *Ilion: An Epic in Quantitative Hexameters* is a retelling of the Trojan War. The focus of the poems, however, from 1900 onwards shifts slowly but decisively to matters spiritual and philosophical, as can be seen from some of the titles—"The Vedantin's Prayer", "The Triumph Song of Trishuncou", "Parabrahman", "God", "The Rishi", "The Mahatmas", "Jivanmukta", "Nirvana", "Rose of God", "A God's Labour", "Krishna", and "Shiva". Sri Aurobindo also wrote some 90 sonnets on similar themes, and also a few poems as metrical experiments.

Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol, Sri Aurobindo's *magnum opus*, is the longest epic in the English language. The story originally told in the *Mahabharata* in 700 lines expands here into 12 books, 49 cantos, and 23,811 lines. It takes into its purview the entire cosmos—all the worlds and planes of existence, gods and demons, the whole gamut of human aspiration and struggle, his joys, pain, and suffering, the vision of the Divine Mother and the Supreme Godhead, the ladder of Yoga and the scale of Realisations, and the Upanishadic arguments and battle of wits between Savitri and Yama. There is something for everyone here and everything for some, remarked Sisirkumar Ghose. "*Savitri* is perhaps the most powerful artistic work in the world for expanding man's mind towards the Absolute," wrote Raymond F. Piper. But more than anything else, *Savitri* is also a prophetic poem:

I saw the Omnipotent′s flaming pioneers

Over the heavenly verge which turns towards life
Come crowding down the amber stairs of birth;
Forerunners of a divine multitude,
Out of the paths of the morning star they came
Into the little room of mortal life.
I saw them cross the twilight of an age,
The sun-eyed children of a marvellous dawn,
The great creators with wide brows of calm,
….
Into the fallen human sphere they came,

Faces that wore the Immortal′s glory still,

Voices that communed still with the thoughts of God,

Bodies made beautiful by the spirit′s light,

Carrying the magic word, the mystic fire,

….

Their tread one day shall change the suffering earth

And justify the light on Nature′s face.

M. K. Naik aptly sums up: "The first major poetic voice in the annals of Indian English verse, Sri Aurobindo is a poet of varied achievement in lyric, narrative, and epic modes."

Some other poets writing during this period need to be mentioned briefly. Sri Aurobindo's elder brother, **Manmohan Ghose (1869-1926),** is a study in contrast. He was also taken to England along with his younger brother and received a similar education. He won an open scholarship to Christ Church, Oxford, where he became great friends with Laurence Binyon. His early poems appeared in *Primavera: Poems by Four Authors* (1890) with Binyon, Arthur Cripps, and Stephen Phillips, and drew special praise from Oscar Wilde. Living with his English friends, he had become so anglicised that even when he returned to India in 1894, he failed to take roots here. In a letter to Binyon, he wrote, "I am four-fifths an Englishman, if not entirely one." His collection of poems, *Love Songs and Elegies* (1898), is reminiscent of the colourful aesthetism of contemporary British poetry. The only other collection, *Songs of Love and Death*, edited by his daughter with the help of Binyon, appeared posthumously in 1926. Neither here nor there, living in a no-man's-land, Manmohan remains a minor poet.

Sarojini (Chattopadhyay) Naidu (1879-1949) was educated at King's College, London, and Girton College, Cambridge. Here, she learned the craft of poetry and started composing like English poets. Edmund Gosse advised her to write on Indian themes and set her poems in the Indian landscape. She published her first volume of poems, *The Golden Threshold,* in 1905, and followed it with *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing* (1917). Her collected poems appeared as *The Sceptred Flute* in 1946. Most of her poems charmingly narrate snippets from Indian folk, mythology, and history, but are devoid of any great poetic vision of life that can link them all. It is this great vision that makes a great poet, and therefore

she too remains a minor poet. One reason for this arrested poetic growth may be her too early and all-consuming entry into the Freedom Movement—she became the President of the Indian National Congress and was the Governor of Uttar Pradesh at the time of her death.

Harindranath Chattopadhyay (1898-1990) excelled in many fields, including politics, music, and acting (playing an unforgettable role in the Hindi film *Bawarchi*). He received the Padma Bhushan in 1973 for his contribution to Indian life and culture, but remained a poet at heart all through his life. Like his elder sister Sarojini Naidu, he too was educated at Cambridge. His poetic output, by any standards, is prolific. His first book of poems, *The Feast of Youth,* appeared in 1918, followed by *The Magic Tree* (1922), *Poems and Plays* (1927), *Strange Journey* (1936), *The Dark Well* (1939), *Edgeways and the Saint* (1946), *Spring in Winter* (1956), *Masks and Farewells* (1961), and *Virgins and Vineyards* (1967). He was deeply influenced by Blake and Sri Aurobindo, and his poetry reveals a sporadic touch of mysticism. He was also swayed at times by the dialectical materialism of Marx, which is the source of irony and social concerns in his work. While his early work is full of echoes from the English Romantic poets, "Chattopadhyay's later verse," writes M. K. Naik, "has shed most of the early lushness and exuberance and shows an increasing capacity for abstract thought and more controlled expression. Unfortunately, he has not yet been able to organise these later insights firmly enough to produce major poetry."

2.3.2 Fiction: The Famous Trio

Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao were all born in the first decade of the twentieth century, published their first novels in 1935, 1935, and 1938 respectively, and all three coincidentally died in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The period of their growing into manhood and the beginning of their creativity is the period of the 'Gandhian whirlwind' in the Indian Freedom Movement. Quite understandably, all three were deeply impacted by Gandhi's persona and philosophy. If the focus of the Indian voice in the nineteenth century was the amelioration of women's condition, Gandhi, with the launch of his weekly newspaper *Harijan* in 1933, became the voice of India championing the cause of the marginalised, as well as swadeshi and village economy. It was Gandhi, therefore, who provided the material for the first books of the famous trio.

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004), the eldest of the trio, was born in Peshawar (now in Pakistan), sailed to England in 1924 for higher studies, where he married an English woman with leftist political leanings. He was a founding member of the Indian Progressive Writers' Association—an organ with pronounced Marxist ideology—which came into existence in 1935 in London. He was also a major contributor to the drafting of its manifesto and became its first elected President. *Untouchable,* Anand's most famous work, also came out in 1935. It captures the events of a single day in the life of Bakha, a young sweeper working in a north Indian cantonment town. The day ends, after a series of painful and humiliating events, with some promise of hope—a missionary suggests that becoming a Christian will bring a radical change in the protagonist's social status; a poet predicts that the introduction of flush toilets will end sweepers' miseries; and finally, Bakha hears Gandhi's speech promising better dispensation for Harijans in days to come. Anand's next novel, *Coolie* (1936), is again a story of downtrodden and disinherited people and is woven on a much wider canvas, both in terms of time and space. It is a tale of tribulations in the life of Munoo, a young orphan village boy from the hills who sets out in search of livelihood and moves from one place to another, from one pattern of exploitation at the hands of a cruel, unjust, and immoral society to another. *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) is the story of exploitation and inhuman treatment of labourers in a tea plantation in Assam. Gangu, a poor peasant from a Punjab village, is almost a prisoner at the plantation run by unscrupulous Englishmen and is forced to live under most unhygienic conditions. The manager attempts to rape Gangu's daughter and, in a rage, kills the father. The trilogy *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1941), and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) portrays the life of Lal Singh, beginning with his growing up in a village, and then moving to Europe as a sepoy in the First World War. After facing two imprisonments, Lal Singh returns home and faces another choice, between communism and Gandhism.

Anand divorced his English wife and returned to India in 1947, settled in Bombay, married a Parsi woman in 1950, and continued publishing one novel after another, the last one coming in 2002, less than two years before his death in 2004. His other works include *The Big Heart* (1945), *Seven Summers* (1951), *The Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953), *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960), *The Road* (1961), *Death of a Hero* (1964), *Morning Face* (1968), *Confession of a Lover* (1976), *The Bubble* (1984), *Nine Moods of Bharata* (1998), and *Reflections on a White Elephant* (2002). Most of Anand's writing, to quote Iyengar, "is infiltrated with disgust and hate." To find out how much of his crusade for the

downtrodden is socialist propaganda, and how much it owes its inspiration to the Gandhian ideal, will require a closer scrutiny of Anand's vast literary oeuvre.

R. K. Narayan (1906-2001), an equally prolific writer, is the most popular and entertaining storyteller among the three. You can still find a copy of his first novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935), in any bookshop anywhere in the country. Most of his novels, beginning with *Swami*—a delightful account of a small school-going boy—are set in Malgudi, a fictional, idyllic village somewhere in South India. Narayan is neither a crusader for a cause nor a social reformer. He is the Jane Austen of our times, untouched by those larger concerns that affect politicians, reformers, and philosophers with an intellectual bent of mind. His stories are about the simple, uncomplicated, everyday life of common men and women, about their little joys and sorrows, their little politics, scheming and ambition, their small-town love-affairs. It is a comic vision of life, overflowing with touches of humour and innocuous irony, suggesting that nothing is to be taken too seriously. The next book, *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), is about a grown-up boy who has received English education and, as a result, is afflicted with Western notions of love and marriage. Frustrated that such things are not possible in India, he runs away from home and, for a time, becomes a sanyasi. Wisdom makes him see that the traditional arranged marriage is not such a bad affair after all. Accepting his Indian fate, he settles down for good. In *The Dark Room* (1938), a husband is having an extramarital affair, and the wife, in frustration, is forced to leave home with her children, only to realise shortly thereafter that this is not a lasting, viable option. She returns home and makes peace with her fate. Naik aptly calls it "a little storm in a small domestic tea-cup." *The English Teacher* (1946) is a domestic idyll of happy married life till the wife dies, and the widower takes to spiritual practice in order to communicate with the spirit of his dead wife. *Mr. Sampath* (1949) is about a small-time filmmaker bent upon making a large-scale mythological film.

Of the next four novels, *The Financial Expert* (1952), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *The Guide* (1958), and *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1962), *The Guide* is in a league apart, and for which Narayan was awarded the Sahitya Akademi in 1960. Made famous by a Dev Anand starrer Hindi film, the book is a serious exploration of love, dejection, and the making of a (fake?) holy man. Raju, the protagonist, a guide-turned-sanyasin now, undertakes prayer and fasting to save the villagers from an untimely drought. When his death is followed by an unexpected rain shower, as if in answer to his prayers, the book ends on an ambivalent note. Narayan is no mystic competent enough to explore such a mystery, even if he comes so

close to the supernatural, as also in *The English Teacher.* There is an attempt to capture the presence of Gandhi during the freedom struggle in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, but without much success. The last six of his novels—*The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1976), *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), *Talkative Man* (1986), *The World of Nagaraj* (1990), and *Grandmother's Tale* (1992)—retain the charm of Narayan's storytelling but do not add anything new.

Raja Rao (1908-2006), unlike the other two, is not a prolific writer. His first book, *Kanthapura,* appeared in 1938, and was followed by *The Serpent and the Rope* after a gap of 22 years in 1960. *Kanthapura*, the only full-length Indian novel in English entirely devoted to the Gandhian movement, is better known now for its Foreword in which Rao announced his credo and which became a kind of literary manifesto for Indian writing in English:

One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own….We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American.

With the publication of *The Serpent and the Rope,* Rao announced his true literary vocation. Carrying faithfully the ancient burden of his forefathers on his shoulders, he was a truth-seeker, an interpreter of Indian culture and spiritual traditions to the West. Ramaswami, the protagonist in *The Serpent and the Rope,* is Rao himself. "For all books are autobiographies," says Ramaswami, "whether they be books on genetics or on the history….They all represent a bit of oneself, and for those who can read rightly, the whole of oneself." He goes to France for higher studies and marries a Frenchwoman, just like Rao himself. He forms relationships with three women—Madeleine, Savithri, and Lakshmi—with each one of a different nature and intensity. He also keeps coming back to India and travels across the country to Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad; to Mussoorie and Naini Tal in the Himalayas; to the ghats of the Ganga in Benares and Allahabad. Rao's oft-quoted insight about India occurs in this book: "India is not a country like France is, or like England; India is an idea, a metaphysic." Gandhi is almost a living God to Ramaswami, and equating satyagraha with Vedanta, he says in a prophetic tone, "Vedanta must become real again before India can be truly free." Though quite proficient in philosophical reasoning—"Then

what is Georges? Georges is Man. So Georges is not Georges—Georges is Man. And Man is simply Man: a principle, the Truth. So Georges is the Truth."—Ramaswami knows that there is no crossing over without a Guru. So he prays for and finds his Guru:

No, not a God but a guru is what I need. "Oh Lord, my guru, my Lord," I cried…. I saw the silvery boat, and the boatman had a face I knew. I knew His face, as one knows one's face in deep sleep. He called me, and said: "It is so long, so long, my son. I have awaited you. Come, we go." I went, and man, I tell you, my brother, my friend, I will not return. I have gone whence there is no returning.

With such a vast canvas encompassing the East and West, *The Serpent and the Rope,* an epic poem in prose, has rightly been hailed as "the greatest of Indian English novels" (Naik). The final comment to the novel's most important contribution comes from C. D. Narasimhaiah: "It has been observed that in *The Serpent and the Rope*, for the first time in creative writing in English, India is made real to the West. I should add made real to Indians as well."

The Cat and Shakespeare (1965), on Rao's own authority, is a sequel: "*The Serpent and the Rope* is a novel of discovery of the Guru. *The Cat and Shakespeare* shows how one functions after one has found the Guru." The cat symbolises a form of bhakti, of complete surrender to the Divine, and Shakespeare of man's intellectual efforts to grasp the mystery of the Real. *Comrade Kirillov* (1976) is the story of Padmanabha Iyer, who marries a Czech Marxist and adopts the new religion of communism. But in spite of all this, Padmanabha cannot forsake his adoration of Gandhi and his homeland. *The Chessmaster and His Moves*, part of a planned trilogy, came out in 1988 and is the last of Rao's published works during his lifetime. The Raja Rao Endowment website, in a recent announcement, said: "The second book in Raja Rao's trilogy based upon *The Chessmaster and His Moves* has been edited by David Iglehart… and is awaiting publication. The third book is complete and will be edited and published soon."

2.3.3 Prose

The twentieth century saw the appearance of a number of great prose writers in Indian English literature. The most prominent and influential among them are—Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan.

Rabindranath Tagore: One of the earliest prose writings of Tagore consists of his lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1913, and published the same year as a book titled *Sadhana*. In line with his illustrious predecessor Vivekananda, these lectures are Tagore's message of the unitary vision of Indian religion to the West— "Thou dwellest in me and I in Thee." His next tour to the U.S. produced two more books, *Personality* (1913) and *Nationalism* (1917). The first one explores man's existential relationship with his universe, while the latter focuses on a fine distinction between society and nation. Three more collections that came out later—*Creative Unity* (1922), *The Religion of Man* (1930), and *Crisis in Civilization* (1941)—only strengthen Tagore's position as a humanist and an interpreter of religion for modern times.

In the range of subjects and opulence of output, no one comes even close to **Sri Aurobindo**. During his political heyday, he published a series of articles in *Indu Prakash, Yugantar,* and *Karmayogin,* providing new directions to Indian nationalism and the freedom movement, and inspiring, by his own example, a whole generation to dedicate their lives to this cause. After coming to Pondicherry, he started a monthly philosophical journal, *The Arya* (1914-21), in whose pages most of his famous works appeared for the first time. *The Life Divine* (1940), Sri Aurobindo's *magnum opus* in prose, presents his cosmic vision of the universe and human existence; *The Synthesis of Yoga* is the reformulation of ancient yogas with new insights and synthesis for modern man; *The Secret of the Veda, Hymns to the Mystic Fire, Essays on the Gita, Isha Upanishad,* and *Kena and Other Upanishads* are commentaries on ancient sacred texts; *The Renaissance in India* offers a strong defence of Indian culture and arts; *The Human Cycle* contains essays on social and political thought; and *The Future Poetry* is a masterpiece of literary criticism. This catalogue in itself speaks volumes for Sri Aurobindo's prose writings in English.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) brought out his first periodical, *Indian Opinion* (1903-14), in South Africa, in which his first major work, *Hind Swaraj,* originally written in Gujarati, and later translated into English by the author, appeared. It is the only book written by Gandhi in English. The following excerpt from its Preface shows the lasting influences on Gandhi's philosophy:

Whilst the views expressed in Hind Swaraj are held by me, I have but endeavoured humbly to follow Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, Emerson, and other writers, besides the masters of Indian philosophy. Tolstoy has been one of my teachers for a number of years.

And the one below, from the same source, neatly sums up the core of Gandhi's vision:

…the ancient civilisation of India, which, in my opinion, represents the best that the world has ever seen….the Modern Civilization, which is the Kingdom of Satan, and the Ancient Civilization, which is the Kingdom of God. The one is the God of War, the other is the God of Love.

Many of Gandhi's discourses, talks, and other writings have been collected and published as books, including *The Story of My Experiments with Truth,* which more than anything else is a spiritual classic; but all these are in the form of translations, occasionally revised by the author, and therefore cannot be a legitimate part of Indian English literature.

Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), as in politics, so for his 'literary' writings, has hogged more limelight than his actual achievements, literary or otherwise, deserve. Educated at Harrow and Cambridge, 'the last of Englishmen in India' as Gandhi called him once, the first Prime Minister of India, Nehru was a westernised socialist at heart and suffered from a number of intellectual biases in his interpretation of history and culture. For example, he writes:

The invaders who came to India from the north-west, like so many of their predecessors in more ancient times, became absorbed into India and part of her life. Their dynasties became Indian dynasties, and there was a great deal of racial fusion by intermarriage. A deliberate effort was made, apart from a few exceptions, not to interfere with the ways and customs of the people. They looked to India as their home country and had no other affiliations. (*The Discovery of India*, 237-8)

Isn't he telling only half-truths and addressing a particular constituency, intellectual or otherwise? True, he could write very chaste English prose, but how many of the literary critics who have bestowed superlative praise on Nehru's *Glimpses of World History* (1934), *An Autobiography* (1936), and *The Discovery of India* (1946) were not sponsored directly or indirectly by the then governments headed by the Nehru clan with grants, titles, and positions? When Naik writes, "Among Indian masters of English, Nehru is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding," isn't he going a little overboard?

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975). Like Vivekananda and Tagore before him, Radhakrishnan is the most influential interpreter of Indian religions and philosophy to the West. But unlike the other two, he was a scholar, academician, and a Professor of Philosophy and thus commanded a much wider audience among university scholars and intellectuals.

Two of his books, *Indian Philosophy,* in two volumes (1923, 1927), and *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy,* co-edited with Charles A. Moore (Princeton University Press, 1957), are among the all-time favourite academic texts. His lectures delivered in 1926, at Manchester College, Oxford, formed the basis of his book *The Hindu View of Life* (Oxford, 1926), which was a powerful defence of Hinduism in the heyday of British colonialism. In the very first lecture, he explains how the Indian religion and philosophical thought are so very different from other religions and schools of philosophy:

While fixed intellectual beliefs mark off one religion from another, Hinduism sets itself no such limits. Intellect is subordinated to intuition, dogma to experience, outer expression to inward realisation. Religion is not the acceptance of academic abstractions or the celebration of ceremonies, but a kind of life or experience.

Another of his timeless classics, and a seminal work, *An Idealist View of Life* (George Allen & Unwin, 1932), is largely based on lectures delivered in 1929 and 1930 at the University of Manchester and University College, London. Charles A. Moore has rightly noted that this book is Radhakrishnan's "most concentrated presentation of his religion of the spirit." The author asks his audience in his opening lecture a question that is no less relevant for you today:

Have you that spiritual dimension to your being, that mood of reflective inquiry and self-contemplation, that anxiety of mind to know the things spiritual in which is the true dwelling-place of man? Or do you belong to the race of unreflective people who are satisfied with business or politics, or sport, whose life is dull prose without any ideal meaning?

Radhakrishnan's other important works include *Eastern Religion and Western Thought* (1939), *The Principal Upanishads* (1953), *Recovery of Faith* (1967), *Religion and Culture* (1968), and *The Present Crisis of Faith* (1970).

2.4 MODERNISM IN INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

2.4.1 Poetry

Modernism of Indian English poetry is largely an offshoot of modernism in British and American poetry. Many of these 'modern' poets spent a large part of their lives in England

or America (Dom Moraes, Nissim Ezekiel, R. Parthasarathy, Arun Kotatkar, A. K. Ramanujan, Vikram Seth), became followers and subtle imitators of Eliot, Auden and others, rehashed their received wisdom from the Angrez, and attempted to transplant it on Indian soil. Dispossessed, to whatever degree, of their roots, theirs is a voice of painful alienation and crude derision of all things Indian, especially the age-old values of its culture and society. While Parthasarathy as a young and hopeful poet was "hypercritical of everything Indian," Arvind Krishna Mehrotra is even intolerant of equating "Indian poetry with Indianness. A good poem is a good poem, and not because it matches the colour of the poet's skin or passport." So what was this 'modernism' that became so fashionable among our new poets?

Modernism began in Europe as "an urban aesthetic" in the aftermath of industrialisation when individuals became alienated "from their families, their villages, and their connection to the land," writes Ian Buchanan in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford). Chris Baldick further elaborates:

Modernist writing is predominantly cosmopolitan, and often expresses a sense of urban cultural dislocation, along with an awareness of new anthropological and psychological theories. Its favoured techniques of juxtaposition and multiple point of view challenge the reader to re-establish a coherence of meaning from fragmentary forms. (*The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*).

"Modernist poetry followed… an iconoclastic agenda, overthrowing conventional forms and moving towards fragmentation, free verse, complex allusion and patterning, and personal discourse, often purposefully obscure," adds Dinah Birch (*The Oxford Companion to English Literature*).

Not finding any substantial support and worthwhile appreciation from Indian academic critics—Iyengar, Naik, and Narasimhaiah—'the modern' poets, as if in a bid to build their own canon, began to bring out anthologies of their favoured poets and favourite poetry. They wrote their 'introductions' for putting up some kind of manifesto wherein they argued what constituted good poetry and what was decisively bad, and also 'critically' appreciated each other almost in the manner of 'you scratch my back and I scratch yours.'

The first of these anthologies, Pritish Nandy's *Indian Poetry in English Today* (1973), was quite pathbreaking and included 20 poets in all, but nine of them—Rakshat Puri, P. Lal, Keshav Malik, Suresh Kohli, Tilottama Rajan, Subhoranjan Dasgupta, Siddharth Kak, and

Nandy himself—never found a place again in the canon of later anthologies. Coming next, R. Parthasarathy's *Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets* (1976) was quite a trendsetter and included selections from Keki N. Daruwalla, Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar, Shiv K. Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, R. Parthasarathy, Gieve Patel, and A. K. Ramanujan. *Two Decades of Indian Poetry* (1980), edited by Keki N. Daruwalla, added a few more names—G. S. Sharat Chandra, Dilip Chitre, Gauri Deshpande, Eunice de Souza, Adil Jussawalla, Kersi Katrak, Deba Patnaik, and Saleem Peeradina. Vilas Sarang's *Indian English Poetry since 1950* (1989) added Dom Moraes and some new names—Vilas Sarang, Manohar Shetty, Santan Rodrigues, and Darius Cooper. Interestingly, of the 18 poets in Sarang's anthology, 14 are from Mumbai! *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992), edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, famously drops Kamala Das and R. Parthasarathy from its selection and adds a new name—Vikram Seth. As if to assure that no one misses the bandwagon, the latest and largest (over 900 pages) anthology, *The Penguin Book of Indian Poets* (2022), offers selections from no less than 94 poets!

Of those ensconced firmly in the canon, the most prominent is **Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004)**, a poet's poet, almost a god, of this school, in whose name the lesser mortals swear! His nine collections of poems that appeared between 1952 and 1982 have been brought together in the *Collected Poems* (1989, OUP). "Enterprise" from *The Unfinished Man* (1960), one of his better-known poems, is nothing but a poor pastiche of Eliot's "Journey of the Magi", and these lines from "In India" have echoes from Eliot's "Preludes" :

Here among the beggars, / Hawkers, pavement sleepers, / Hutment dewellers, slums, / Dead souls of men and gods, / Burnt-out mothers, frightened / Virgins, wasted child / And tortured animal, / All in noisy silence / Suffering the place and time

True, the images are evocative and realistically portray the scene in a metropolis, but this could be anywhere in the world. So, why India? Is this all he sees in this country, and is this what he wants to show the world? And what are the 'gods' doing here? Is it only because India is a land of gods, *devabhumi*? But why call this poem "In India", and not just give it a generic name, 'in a metropolitan street' or something similar? Isn't it a conscious India-bashing? But wait! In *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), there is a more deliberate desecration of one of India's most sacred symbols—"Guru". Ezekiel's poem "Guru" parades a charlatan and then the poet as a great wise man asks—"If saints are like this, / what hope is there then for us?" In a nation where millions chant every morning, *na guroradhikam tattvam na*

guroradhikam tapah and Raja Rao makes the search for Guru the burden of his magnum opus, it would be considered, if not blasphemy, certainly a deliberate attempt to hurt the religious sentiments of a whole race. Summing up the achievements of this pigmy-sized magus, or sizing him up, Iyengar writes:

Past middle age, the poet meets, within and without alike, a vacancy, a sterility, a darkness….The 'Passion Poems' are drained of all passion and poetry alike, and it is strange that Ezekiel should discover in the Sanskrit poets only "breasts and buttocks". As for the 'Hymns in Darkness', they no doubt evoke darkness in some measure, but are they 'hymns'?

Kamala Das (1934-2009) is known for her direct, uninhibited style and is occasionally equated with Sylvia Plath as a great confessional poet. Her first major collection of poems, *Summer in Calcutta,* appeared in 1965. The other notable collections include *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *The Stranger Time* (1977), and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996). Kamala Das's memorable take on languages in her autobiographical poem "An Introduction" reads almost like a credo for any Indian writing in English:

I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest

She writes about the loveless exploited woman in Indian society, but flaunting her "grand, flamboyant lust" she parades a little too much her sexual attributes, as in

Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,

The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers

It is because of such unbridled outpouring in poetry that a sensitive critic like Vimala Rao remarked," Kamala Das finally appears to be a poet of decadence... a victim of the inadequacies of her life, failing to gain control even over her art" (quoted in Iyengar).

A. K. Ramanujan (1929-1993), whose first volume of poems, *The Strider,* appeared in 1966 and was followed by *Relations* (1971) and *Second Sight* (1986), was the most mature, accomplished, austere, and also 'Indian' among the moderns in India. One thing that contributed most to the depth and richness of his persona was his work as a translator. His translations of Indian classics from Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu into English included *The Interior Landscape* (1967), *Speaking of Siva* (1973), *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981), and *Poems of Love and War* (1985). Acknowledging the influences that shaped his writings, Ramanujan says,

English and my disciplines (linguistics, anthropology) give me my "outer" forms—linguistic, metrical, logical, and other such ways of shaping experience, and my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics, and Folklore give me my substance, my "inner" forms, images, symbols.

His poems have sometimes the novelty to reveal the hidden strata of the subconscious. Apparently, a thematically simple poem, "Love Poem to a Wife", begins with something always known but never noticed: "Really what keeps us apart / at the end of years is unshared / childhood," and closes with a lurking worm of incest: "Probably / only the Egyptians had it right: / their kings had sisters for queens / to continue the incests / of childhood into marriage."

Similarly, another poem, "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing", shows the influence of Freudian psychology on the poet: "When she was four or five / she sat on a village swing / and her cousin, six or seven, / sat himself against her; / with every lunge of the swing / she felt him / in the lunging pits / of her feeling." The poem closes showing how deeply a childhood experience is embedded in a person's adult make-up: "Now she looks for the swing / in cities with fifteen suburbs / and tries to be innocent / about it."

Many of his poems show the modernistic trend of overloading images, metaphors, and conceits, with such a criss-cross that occasionally it becomes difficult to make any sense of them: "Flames have only lungs. Water is all eyes. / The earth has bone for muscle. And the air / is a flock of invisible pigeons. / But anxiety / can find no metaphor to end it" ("Anxiety"). Everywhere in Ramanujan, one notices an authority and economy in the use of words: in the poem "Obituary", when the father dies, he leaves behind debts, daughters, a decaying house "And he left us / a changed mother / and more than / one annual ritual."

Sometimes, modernism can also take the form of symbolist poetry, as here in "Chicago Zen": "Watch your step, watch it, I say, / especially at the first high / threshold, / and the sudden low / one near the end / of the flight / of stairs, / and watch / for the last / step that's never there."

But brilliant as these poems can sometimes become with sudden illumination of verbal and intellectual magic, they remain mere snippets and fail to attain a connected and coherent vision of anything major.

Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-2023) was born in Cuttack, Odisha, taught Physics at college, and came to poetry late. His first book of poems, *Close the Sky, Ten by Ten*, appeared in 1971, and was followed by *Svayamvara and Other Poems* (1971), *A Father's Hours* (1976), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Waiting* (1979), *The False Start* (1980), *Life Signs* (1983), *Dispossessed Nests* (1986), *Burden of Waves and Fruit* (1988), and *The Temple* (1989). Mahapatra's alienation and dispossession of roots come from a grandfather, who "starving, on the point of death…embraced Christianity in 1866." His search for roots takes him to familial, cultural, historical, and mythic past from which he tries to forge his identity. His poetry, he admits, is a "struggle to go deep into the nothingness that surrounds us in this world of ours," and consequently abounds in frustration, failure, and meaninglessness.

Stylistically, when he attempts to write in the Eliotic tradition of modernity, he can only create a collation of disparate, disjointed images that hardly make sense except pointing to some vacuous nothingness: "Swans sink wordlessly to the carpet / miles of polished floors / reach out / for the glass of voices" ("I Hear My Fingers Sadly Touching on Ivory Key"). But elsewhere, when he can discard this verbal monstrosity of modernity, his poems acquire a lyrical grace and transparent confessional note: "Of that love, of that mile / walked together in the rain, / only a weariness remains/… Years have passed / since I sat with you, watching / the sky grow lonelier with cloudlessness, / waiting for your body to make it lived

in." ("Of that Love"); or "I touch my shoulders; they are bare, contrite. / Like the shape of a deserted park bench in the rain" ("Waiting").

Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004), a bilingual poet writing in Marathi and English, is introduced thus by Mehrotra (*Twelve Modern Indian Poets*):

A poem by Arun Kolatkar is a pattern cut in language, the grainy material without which there would be no self to speak of. What name we afterwards give the material makes little difference: "मैं भाभी को बोला / क्या भाईसाब के ड्यूटी पे मैं आ जाऊँ? / भड़क गयी **** / रहमान बोला गोली चलाऊँगा / मैं बोला एक ***के वास्ते? चलाव गोली ***". The poem is written in Bombay Hindi, published in Kolatkar's book of Marathi poems, translated by him into American English, and, rightly, has been included in an anthology of Indian verse in English: "allow me beautiful / I said to my sister in law / to step in my brother's *** / you had it coming said rehman / a gun in his hand / shoot me punk / kill your brother I said / for a bloody ****". (Also available on Wikipedia)

As if to demonstrate the farthest limits of how much Indian values and sacred symbols can be desecrated in the name of satire and a rebellious modernism, Kolatkar, expanding the theme of Ezekiel's "Guru", and including gods and sacred sites as well, published his long poem *Jejuri* in English in 1977. Just a few excerpts:

"The roof comes down on Maruti's head. / Nobody seems to mind.

"No more a place of worship this place / Is nothing less than the house of god.

"A low temple keeps its gods in the dark. / You lend a matchbox to the priest. / One by one the gods come to light.

"The eight arm goddess, the priest replies. / A sceptic match coughs. / You can count. / But she has eighteen, you protest. / All the same she is still an eight arm goddess to the priest.

"You come out in the sun and light a 45harminar. / Children play on the back of the twenty-foot tortoise.

"'Sweet as grapes / Are the stones of Jejuri', / He popped a stone / in his mouth / and spat out gods."You turn to the priest / who has been good enough to arrange / that bit of sacred cabaret act at his own house.

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (1947-) Youngest of the group, and the most modern of the 'modernists', Mehrotra was born in Lahore and taught English at the University of Allahabad.

He describes himself as "not an Indian poet but a poet writing a universal language of poetry, of feeling, of love, and hate and sex." He has four major collections of poetry to his name—*Nine Enclosures* (1976), *Distance in Statute Miles* (1982), *Middle Earth* (1984), and *The Transfiguring Places* (1998); besides *Collected Poems 1969-2014*, which appeared as a Penguin Modern Classics in 2014.

His surrealist poems present a tangled forest of images from which the reader has to struggle to extricate some meaning—"a naked man / a Flat-eye goat upon his back / runs up the steps of Sunset." Or — "I swallowed the round minute / Fed clocks to my sheep / Tied them to the wings of birds / Burnt them in fireplaces / Dissolved them in chemicals / Sent them away in ships I knew would sink / Only to be shown by the round head of a flower / The soil's mechanism." But sometimes, as in the poem "Songs of the Ganga", he can be quite lucid and take the stance of a neutral observer—"I am the bridge / I am the fort and the archer / Taking aim / I am the great dissolver of men / I give life and I take it back." Meenakshi Mukherjee very rightly remarked in another context that such "poems owe their origin to the poets 'response to the English language rather than to the urgent need to communicate a perception."

At no moment is the individual separate from the collective and universal; existing as little whorls and eddies, we are part of the river. We always owe something to our ancestors—a debt, or else inherit their sins, but bound to them in either case. When you are paying their debt, you carry on their work, but when you bear the burden of their sins, you try to free yourself by disowning them and rebelling against them. When we decide to use the English language, for whatever purpose, don't we also acquiesce to the demands of the cultural baggage that comes with it? Is it at all possible for the Indian poet writing in English to completely do away with the influences from Shakespeare, Shelley, and Eliot?

2.4.2 Fiction

The great 'Trio' have continued to produce their work well into the days of the 'moderns'—Rao published his last novel in 1988, Narayan in 1992, and Ananda in 2002. Is it because no other tree can flourish under the shadows of the great banyan tree that the later-day Indian novelists writing in English could make only brief though notable appearances without becoming major voices? **Bhabani Bhattacharya (1906-1988)** drew attention with his *So Many Hungers* (1947), *Music for Mohini* (1952), and *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1955). **Manohar Malgonkar (1913-2010)** is remembered for *Distant Drum* (1960), *A Combat of*

Shadows (1962), and *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), all of them being stylistically mediocre and limited in scope. **Khushwant Singh (1915-2014)** is best known for *Train to Pakistan* (1956), a novel depicting the horrors of the Partition. The other novels of note about the Partition are *Azadi* (1975) by **Chaman Nahal (1927-2013)**, and *Cyclones* (1987) by **Manoj Das (1934-2021)**, a bilingual author who is better known for his Odia works. **Arun Joshi (1939-1993)**, because of the recurring theme of alienation in his novels, has earned the reputation of being the first of the 'moderns'. His novels include *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), and *The Last Labyrinth* (1981). Among the women novelists, **Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004)** earned a reputation for her *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), and **Nayantara Sahgal (1927-)** is better known for her memoirs *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954) than for her novels *A Time to be Happy* (1958), *This Time of Morning* (1968), *Rich Like Us* (1985) and others. **Anita Desai (1937-)**, the youngest of the group, is also the most varied and substantial novelist. Her novels are chiefly about the interior landscape of the mind without much concern for social and political issues. *Cry the Peacock* (1963), and *Voices in the City* (1965) are her most famous novels. After the silence of a decade and more, she has come out with a novella, *Rosarita* (2025), which is currently being discussed in literary circles for its postcolonial themes of memory, identity, and cultural intersection.

As for the latest crop of Indian novelists writing in English, let the doyen of Indian literary criticism in English, Professor C. D. Narasimhaiah, have the last word:

I wish other Indians who have acquired a kind of bizarre reputation, Internationally, such as Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor and Arundhati Roy had a claim on our attention for inclusion in this lecture. But you have a right to know why they stand excluded. Rushdie won the Booker Prize for what has come to be called his "magical realism." He turned to Marquez, and to *Arabian Nights,* as part of his Islamic inheritance; but what concerns us is how he uses it as fiction.

It isn't ironic self-awareness, but an unashamed fact when Rushdie makes his narrator say "I am prepared to distort everything to place myself in a central role." His *Midnight's Children* is not the country's story, but his hero's, which means his own despicable role. When he gloats he is "mysteriously handcuffed to history," it calls for resources beyond what is given to him, to make a success of it. He amputates a hard-earned epoch of history to his pigmy size; ….Every character that figures in the novel had some morbid association: his

aunt is “lascivious”, his cousin “wets mattresses” and Paravthi is “witch-like”. The war for Bangladesh betrays him, though he offers to defend his stand under the facade of Emergency, imposed by the “widow”, his crude word for Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Why is Shiva “victor” and Salim a “victim”? Surely a reflection of his Islamic bias—the names proclaim it. Why do soldiers “try” him and tyrants “fry” him? Jejune world play! he claims “languages rioted in his head." Is his “magical realism” value to be cherished because his contribution to English consists of words like “Chamcha” and “Chutnification?” His wish to advance beyond the “verbal stage” is doomed to failure. He is a juggler of words like Shashi Tharoor, a juggler of myths, who uses the *Mahabharata* to mediate contemporary reality, but admits, “I have told my story from a completely mistaken perspective." What does one do with a writer who makes that confession?

Then comes Vikram Seth who emerged as a phenomenon in subliminal advertising. As someone said, Vikram became a Seth receiving, or reported as receiving, as no author before, a fabulous advance of two crores of rupees from the publishers for what really was a door-stopper of 1400 pages. Every review of *A Suitable Boy* talks of it as if it is a criterion of literary excellence and a measure of the function and goal of literature—perhaps a popular American bid to level down world’s cultures, destroying whatever is left of even countries like India, while a Camus praised India for “preserving its deeply embedded spiritual principle" in a world of increasing degradation. A member of the House of Lords, not an academic, would not, as Chairman of the Committee, allow it to be even short-listed, because it had “no compulsive passions and the characters were of the level gaze.”

The Booker Committee which redeemed itself by such a bold decision must have seen supreme merit in Arundhati Roy. Do awards and prizes reflect those who constitute the committee, in all countries? For, a different Committee of the same Booker Prize saw much merit in Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things.* We are told 60,000 copies of the book sold in far-off Norway like Seth’s four lakhs of *A Suitable Boy*. How incredible! Quantification is all. One will have to read the first 30 pages of the book to have a taste of Arundhati’s *God of Small Things* “the God of Loss, the God of Goofe Bumps, and Sudden Smiles, of Sour Metal smells and smells of the bus conductor’s hands”. There is no stopping the “inebriate author” with her non-stop flow of words, Rushditis, thanks to his magical realism, brilliant in its feeling *for* words, not *into* words. Here is an irrepressible example: “If he held her, he couldn’t kiss her. If he kissed her, he couldn’t see her; if he saw her, he couldn’t feel her.” This is what Indian poeticians called *atyukti* and dismissed it as worthless. These are the new

gods of Indian fiction in English. Three cheers to Indian democracy! Look how an African novelist, Achebe could impart a sense of humour in such contexts: "if I hold her foot she says 'don't touch'; if I hold her hand, she says 'don't touch', if I hold her waist beads, she pretends is not to know." So subdued and so successful with so few words!

2.5 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS:

1. Examine the main thrust of Indian English literature in the nineteenth century.

2. Discuss Rabindranath Tagore's position as an Indian English poet and the debates surrounding his English writings.

3. What is meant by "The Famous Trio" in Indian English fiction?

4. Gitanjali is deeply rooted in which literary and spiritual tradition?

   a. Upanishadic philosophy of certainty
   b. Sufi mysticism
   c. Vaishnava bhakti tradition
   d. Classical Greek lyricism

5. *Kanthapura* is significant in Indian English fiction because it:

   a. Is the first Indian novel written in English
   b. Focuses on urban modernity
   c. Is entirely devoted to the Gandhian movement
   d. Presents postcolonial identity conflicts

Answers to Self-assessment Questions

1. Refer to 2.3
2. Refer to 2.3.1
3. Refer to 2.3.2
4. (C)
5. (C)

2.6 Model and Terminal Questions

1. Trace the growth of Indian English literature from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, highlighting its social, national, and philosophical concerns.
2. Critically analyse the contribution of the "Famous Trio" to Indian English literature.
3. Examine the contribution of Indian English prose writers to nationalism and spiritual thought.
4. Critically evaluate the contribution of Rabindranath Tagore to Indian English literature as poet and prose writer.

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UNIT-3 TORU DUTT "THE LOTUS"

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Dear learners in the previous block, you were introduced to the broad landscape of **Indian Writing in English**, tracing its origins, historical development, and the diverse voices that have shaped its growth. That foundation has prepared you to appreciate the richness and complexity of this literary tradition.

This block will help you engage more deeply with selected writers and works, exploring how Indian English literature reflects cultural identity, social realities, and artistic innovation. You will encounter poems that not only highlight the creative use of English in the Indian context but also reveal the interplay of tradition and modernity, local and global influences.

This unit introduces you to the writer Toru Dutt and his major poem "The Lotus*"*. Toru Dutt was a remarkable Anglo-Indian Poet whose brief yet brilliant literary career left an ever-lasting imprint on Indian English literature. Through this elegant sonnet, Dutt engages with classical Western symbols—the rose and the lily—and reclaims aesthetic authority by crowning the lotus, a deeply rooted emblem of Indian spirituality and beauty, as the supreme flower. The poem becomes more than a floral allegory; it is a subtle assertion of cultural pride, poetic synthesis, and the power of imagination. This unit explores the poem's themes, symbols, and stylistic features, while situating it within the broader context of Dutt's life, her bicultural sensibility, and her contribution to postcolonial literary discourse.

Dear Learner,

The course comprises multiple components, with the Self-Learning Material (SLM) and counselling sessions being key elements. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the course content, it is essential that you engage with all these components in a balanced manner. As you are enrolled in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program, self-directed study plays a vital role in your academic success. Accordingly, each unit concludes with a list of suggested readings and references. You are strongly encouraged to consult these resources to enhance your comprehension and deepen your engagement with the subject matter.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, students will be able to:

- Understand the life and literary contributions of Toru Dutt.

- Analyze the poem "The Lotus" in terms of theme, structure, and symbolism.
- Interpret the poem's allegorical and aesthetic dimensions.
- Explore the cultural and philosophical significance of the lotus in Indian and Western traditions.
- Identify poetic devices and stylistic features used by the poet.
- Engage in critical discussion on beauty, rivalry, and reconciliation as presented in the poem.

3.3 TORU DUTT: BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Tarulatta Datta, or popularly known as Toru Dutt (1856–1877) was a pioneering figure in Indian English literature, remembered for her remarkable literary output despite her tragically short life. Dutt was born into an affluent and intellectually vibrant Bengali Christian family in Calcutta, India. She was exposed to a rich blend of Indian and Western cultures from an early age. She got an academic background from her family, her father, Govin Chunder Dutt, was a renowned poet and linguist, and her family encouraged her literary pursuits and education, especially for women—a rare stance in colonial India.

Dutt's formal education took her across continents. She studied in France and England, becoming fluent in French where she got deeply engaged with European literature and philosophy. Her time abroad sharpened her literary sensibilities and broadened her worldview, yet she remained deeply connected to her Indian heritage. This dual cultural identity shaped her writing, which allowed her to blend classical Western forms with Indian themes and sensibilities in a way that was both innovative and emotionally resonant.

Dutt was an Indian Bengali poet and translator from British India, who wrote in English and French. She is among the founding figures of Indo-Anglian literature, alongside Henry Louis VivianDerezio (1809–1831), Manmohan Ghose (1869–1924),

and Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949). She is known for her volumes of poetry in English, *Sita*, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876) and *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882), and for a novel in French, *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* (1879). Her poems explore themes of loneliness, longing, patriotism and nostalgia. Her literary contributions include a wide variety of genres including poetry, translations, and prose. *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876) showcased her skill in translating French poetry into English, while *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* which was published posthumously in 1882 revealed her deep engagement with Indian mythology and folklore. Through these works, Dutt gave voice to Indian narratives in English, asserting cultural pride and literary sophistication at a time when colonial attitudes often dismissed native expression.

Dutt's legacy lies in her ability to bridge cultures and challenge literary boundaries. She was among the first Indian women to write extensively in English and French, and her work continues to be celebrated for its lyrical beauty, emotional depth, and quiet defiance of colonial norms. Though she died of tuberculosis at the age of 21, her poetry remains a testament to the power of imagination, cross-cultural dialogue, and the enduring spirit of a young woman who wrote against the odds.

Dutt's writing style is a graceful fusion of classical Western forms and Indian thematic richness. Educated in Europe and deeply immersed in French and English literature, she adopted traditional poetic structures such as the Petrarchan sonnet and the ballad with remarkable ease. Her command over meter, rhyme, and form reflects a disciplined poetic sensibility, yet her voice remains distinctively her own. Rather than merely imitating Western models, she infused them with Indian imagery, mythological references, and emotional depth, creating a unique literary idiom that bridged cultures. Her diction is elegant and refined, often elevated by a lyrical cadence that lends her poetry a musical quality.

A hallmark of Dutt's writing style is her use of allegory and symbolism to convey layered meanings. In poems like "The Lotus", she personifies abstract concepts such as Love and Flora, and uses flowers as symbols of cultural ideals. Her imagery is vivid and often drawn from nature, mythology, and spiritual traditions, allowing her to express complex ideas with clarity and grace. She frequently employs contrasts—between East and West, passion and purity, mortality and transcendence—to explore deeper philosophical and emotional truths. This duality in her work reflects her own bicultural identity and her desire to reconcile the tensions between colonial influence and native heritage. Another striking feature of her

style is its emotional sincerity. Whether she is writing about personal loss, national pride, or mythological heroines, Dutt's tone remains earnest and contemplative. Her poems often carry a quiet intensity, revealing a mind that is both introspective and visionary. She does not rely on ornate language for its own sake; instead, her stylistic choices serve the emotional and intellectual purpose of the poem. Her prose, too, as seen in her novel *Bianca* and her translations, is marked by clarity, sensitivity, and a deep engagement with character and theme.

Toru Dutt's writing style is a testament to her literary maturity and cultural consciousness. She wrote with the precision of a scholar and the soul of a poet, crafting works that continue to resonate for their beauty, depth, and cross-cultural insight. Her style not only reflects her personal journey but also anticipates the broader trajectory of Indian English literature, where hybridity, resistance, and lyrical innovation remain central concerns.

3.4 KEY WORKS

Dear Learners,

Now let us take a brief look at Toru Dutt's famous collection of works:

- ***A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876)**

This was Toru Dutt's first published work—a collection of French poems translated into English, accompanied by her own notes and commentary. It reflects her deep engagement with French literature and her linguistic prowess. The selection includes works by prominent French poets such as Victor Hugo, Alfred de Musset, and Leconte de Lisle. Dutt's translations are not merely literal; they capture the emotional and lyrical essence of the originals, often adding her own interpretive insights. Her annotations reveal a thoughtful reader and critic, capable of bridging cultural and poetic traditions.

The book was privately published in Calcutta and received praise from literary circles in England and France. It demonstrated Dutt's commitment to literary cosmopolitanism and her desire to introduce Indian readers to European poetic traditions. At the same time, her choice of poems and her commentary often reflect themes of exile, longing, and spiritual depth—motifs that resonate with her own life. This work laid the foundation for her later

poetry, where she would reverse the direction of translation by bringing Indian legends into English verse.

- ***Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*** (1882, posthumous)

This collection is considered Toru Dutt's magnum opus. It contains ballads and narrative poems based on Indian mythology and folklore, retold in English with lyrical grace and emotional intensity. Poems like "Savitri", "Sita", and "Lakshman" reimagine epic tales from the Mahabharata and Ramayana, focusing on female strength, moral courage, and spiritual devotion. Dutt's poetic voice here is both reverent and innovative—she preserves the grandeur of the original legends while infusing them with Romantic sensibility and personal emotion.

The ballads are notable for their dramatic structure, vivid imagery, and philosophical undertones. Dutt often highlights the inner lives of her characters, especially women, portraying them as complex and heroic. Her use of blank verse and lyrical stanzas allows for both narrative flow and poetic beauty. This work is a landmark in Indian English literature, as it asserts the richness of Indian cultural heritage in a language historically associated with colonial authority. It also reflects Dutt's desire to reclaim and reinterpret Indian identity through literary means.

- ***The Diary of Mademoiselle d'Arvers*** (published posthumously)

This unfinished French novel reveals another dimension of Toru Dutt's literary talent. Written in French, it tells the story of a young woman navigating love, loss, and identity in a European setting. The diary format allows for introspection and emotional nuance, and the narrative explores themes of cultural displacement, longing, and spiritual awakening. Though incomplete, the novel showcases Dutt's ability to write prose with elegance and psychological depth.

The protagonist's voice is sensitive and reflective, mirroring Dutt's own bicultural experience. The novel's setting and tone suggest a romantic influence, but its emotional core is universal. It stands as a testament to Dutt's versatility—not only could she write poetry in English and translate French verse, but she could also craft original fiction in French. The

novel's posthumous publication added to her reputation as a multilingual literary pioneer and deepened scholarly interest in her cross-cultural legacy.

- **Selected Poems: "Our Casuarina Tree", "The Lotus", "Sita, Lakshman"**

- **"Our Casuarina Tree"** is a deeply personal elegy that blends nature imagery with themes of memory and loss. The tree becomes a symbol of childhood, friendship, and emotional continuity. Dutt's use of metaphor and lyrical rhythm evokes both nostalgia and transcendence.

- **"The Lotus"** is a sonnet that allegorizes the rivalry between the rose and the lily, ultimately crowning the lotus—a symbol of Indian beauty and spirituality—as the ideal flower. It reflects Dutt's nationalist pride and her poetic skill in blending myth, allegory, and cultural assertion.

- **"Sita"** and "**Lakshman"** reimagine episodes from the Ramayana, focusing on emotional depth and moral dilemmas. Dutt's portrayal of Sita emphasizes dignity and suffering, while Lakshman's inner conflict is rendered with psychological realism. These poems elevate epic characters into lyrical and humanized figures.

3.5 ABOUT THE POEM: "THE LOTUS"

Love came to Flora asking for a flower

That would of flowers be undisputed queen,

The lily and the rose, long, long had been

Rivals for that high honour. Bards of power

Had sung their claims. "The rose can never tower

Like the pale lily with her Juno mien"—

"But is the lily lovelier?" Thus between

Flower factions rang the strife in Psyche's bower.

Give me a flower delicious as the rose

And stately as the lily in her pride"—

"But of what colour?"—"Rose-red," Love first chose,

Then prayed,—"No, lily-white,—or, both provide;"

And Flora gave the lotus, "rose-red" dyed,

And "lily-white,"—the queenliest flower that blows.

"The Lotus" is a sonnet from the collection of poetry, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* by Toru Dutt. The volume was published in London in 1882, with an introductory memoir by Mr. Edmund Gosse. The quotation from Sir Philip Sidney's *Apologie for English Poetry* is inscribed in the book. For the first time in literature, a book struck a genuinely Indian note that reveals the sincerity of a mind proud of the intellectual traditions of its native land. The poem is a sonnet that has 14 lines. Toru Dutt's sonnet "The Lotus" is a masterful blend of classical poetic form and cultural symbolism, offering a subtle yet powerful assertion of Indian identity within a colonial literary framework. Composed in the Petrarchan sonnet structure, the poem explores the rivalry between two iconic flowers—the rose and the lily—each representing distinct aesthetic ideals. Through the intervention of Flora, the goddess of flowers, the poem resolves this rivalry by introducing the lotus, a flower deeply rooted in Indian tradition and spirituality. In just fourteen lines, Dutt crafts a poetic allegory that celebrates synthesis, beauty, and cultural pride.

The poem opens with the personification of Love, who approaches Flora seeking a flower that could be crowned the undisputed queen of all blossoms. This sets the stage for a symbolic debate between the rose, associated with passion and romance, and the lily, emblematic of purity and dignity. Dutt references the long-standing poetic tradition in which both flowers have been praised by "bards of power," highlighting their entrenched positions in Western literary and cultural imagination. However, she subtly questions these conventions by asking whether the lily is truly lovelier than the rose, thereby introducing the possibility of a new aesthetic ideal.

The volta, or thematic shift, occurs midway through the sonnet, when Love expresses a desire for a flower that combines the rose's "delicious" appeal with the lily's "stately" pride. Flora responds by creating the lotus, dyed in both rose-red and lily-white hues, and declares it the "queenliest flower that blows." This resolution is not merely botanical—it is allegorical. The lotus, revered in Indian philosophy, religion, and art, symbolizes spiritual enlightenment, purity emerging from the mud, and divine beauty. By elevating the lotus above the rose and lily, Dutt reclaims aesthetic authority and subtly challenges colonial hierarchies of taste.

Stylistically, "The Lotus" is a tightly constructed sonnet with a clear rhyme scheme and metrical rhythm. Dutt's use of personification—Love and Flora as active agents—adds a mythic dimension to the poem, while her diction remains elegant and evocative. The imagery is rich yet restrained, allowing the symbolic weight of each flower to resonate without excessive ornamentation. The final line, "the queenliest flower that blows," serves as both a poetic climax and a cultural declaration, asserting the lotus's supremacy in beauty and meaning.

Thematically, if we see the poem explores the tension between competing ideals—passion versus purity, Western versus Eastern, tradition versus innovation. Dutt does not reject either the rose or the lily; instead, she proposes a synthesis that transcends rivalry. This theme of reconciliation is central to her broader literary project, which often seeks to harmonize Indian and Western elements. In "The Lotus", this synthesis is achieved through the creation of a new symbol that embodies both qualities while asserting a distinct cultural identity.

The poem also engages with the politics of representation. In a colonial context where Western symbols dominated literary discourse, Dutt's elevation of the lotus can be read as an act of resistance. She does not argue directly against colonialism, but her poetic choices subtly undermine its aesthetic authority. By placing an Indian flower at the center of a classical Western form, she reconfigures the boundaries of literary legitimacy and beauty.

Moreover, "The Lotus" reflects Dutt's personal and poetic sensibility. As a bilingual and bicultural writer, she was deeply aware of the tensions and possibilities inherent in cross-cultural expression. Her choice of the sonnet form—a hallmark of European poetry—demonstrates her technical mastery, while her thematic focus on Indian symbols reveals her emotional and cultural allegiance. The poem becomes a microcosm of her literary identity: rooted in Indian soil, yet fluent in Western forms.

In conclusion, "The Lotus" is a deceptively simple poem that offers profound insights into aesthetics, identity, and cultural synthesis. Through elegant language, symbolic richness, and formal precision, Toru Dutt crafts a sonnet that is both timeless and timely. It stands as a testament to her poetic genius and her quiet defiance of colonial norms. For readers and students alike, the poem invites reflection on how beauty is defined, who gets to define it, and how poetry can serve as a bridge between worlds.

3.6.1 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Toru Dutt's sonnet "The Lotus" is built around the idea that beauty is not confined to singular ideals but can emerge from synthesis—a harmonious blending of opposites. The speaker, through allegorical figures like Love and Flora, explores the rivalry between two celebrated flowers: the rose and the lily. These flowers, long praised in Western poetic tradition, represent contrasting qualities—passion and purity. The poem's central argument is that true beauty lies in the union of these qualities, embodied in the lotus, a flower deeply rooted in Indian cultural and spiritual symbolism.

From the very beginning, the tone of the poem is declarative and allegorical. The poem opens with mythological personification. Love seeks the ideal flower from Flora, setting the stage for a symbolic debate about beauty and supremacy. In the first two lines, the speaker presents a mythic scene:

"Love came to Flora asking for a flower

That would of flowers be undisputed queen."

This sets the stage for a symbolic debate. Love seeks a flower that surpasses all others in beauty, and Flora, the goddess of flowers, is tasked with fulfilling this desire. The language is formal yet imaginative, evoking a classical setting where abstract ideals are personified. In the next stanza, Dutt introduces the rose and the lily as long-standing rivals:

"The lily and the rose, long, long had been

Rivals for that high honour; bards of power / Had sung their claims."

These lines acknowledge the literary tradition that has elevated both flowers. The rose, often associated with love and sensuality, and the lily, linked to purity and majesty, have been praised by poets across centuries. However, the speaker begins to question these conventions. In the lines

"The rose can never tower

Like the pale lily with her Juno mien—

But is the lily lovelier?",

Dutt contrasts the rose's passionate beauty with the lily's regal bearing. The lily is likened to Juno, queen of the gods, suggesting dignity and grandeur. Yet the rhetorical question challenges the assumption of the lily's superiority, opening the door to a new aesthetic possibility.

The third stanza shifts the focus to resolution. The speaker describes how the debate between the flower echoes in "Psyche's bower," a mythological setting associated with love and the soul. Then Love articulates a desire for a flower that combines both qualities: "Give me a flower delicious as the rose, And stately as the lily in her pride." This request reflects the Romantic ideal of unity in diversity—a longing for a beauty that transcends binary oppositions.

The final stanza delivers the poem's resolution. Flora responds to Love's plea with creative brilliance:

"And Flora gave the lotus, 'rose-red' dyed,

And 'lily-white'—the queenliest flower that blows."

The lotus, sacred in Indian tradition, is presented as the perfect synthesis of passion and purity. Its dual coloring—rose-red and lily-white—symbolizes the union of emotional intensity and serene dignity. By crowning the lotus as the "queenliest flower," Dutt reclaims aesthetic authority for an Indian symbol, subtly challenging colonial hierarchies of taste.

Symbolically, the lotus carries profound cultural significance. In Indian philosophy and art, it represents spiritual enlightenment, purity emerging from the mud, and divine beauty. By choosing the lotus over the rose and lily, Dutt elevates Indian identity within a Western poetic form. The poem's imagery—flowers, colors, mythic figures—serves not only aesthetic purposes but also ideological ones. It becomes a quiet act of resistance, asserting that Indian symbols can stand at the center of global literary discourse. "The Lotus*"* is a sonnet of synthesis, symbolism, and subtle defiance. Through elegant language and allegorical structure, Toru Dutt challenges inherited ideals of beauty and offers a new vision—one that embraces complexity, unity, and cultural pride. The poem stands as a

testament to her poetic genius and her ability to weave Indian sensibility into classical form with grace and conviction.

3.7 MAJOR THEMES

Now we shall discuss the Major themes found the poem "The Lotus",

3.7.1 Beauty Through Synthesis

At the heart of "The Lotus" lies the theme of aesthetic synthesis—the idea that true beauty is not found in isolated qualities but in the harmonious blending of opposites. The poem presents the rose and the lily as traditional rivals; each admired for distinct traits: the rose for its passionate allure and the lily for its stately purity. Rather than choosing between them, the speaker seeks a flower that combines both virtues. The lotus, created by Flora in response to this desire, embodies this synthesis. It is both "rose-red" and "lily-white," symbolizing the union of emotion and dignity. Through this resolution, Dutt suggests that ideal beauty arises from balance, not conflict.

3.7.2. Cultural Assertion and National Pride

A powerful undercurrent in the poem is Toru Dutt's subtle assertion of Indian cultural identity. By elevating the lotus—a flower revered in Indian philosophy, religion, and art—as the queenliest flower that blows, Dutt challenges the dominance of Western symbols like the rose and lily. These flowers, long celebrated in European poetry, are replaced by a native emblem that carries spiritual and aesthetic significance in Indian tradition. This poetic choice becomes a quiet act of resistance against colonial literary norms, allowing Dutt to reclaim space for indigenous beauty within the framework of English verse.

3.7.3 Allegory and Mythological Symbolism

The poem is rich in allegorical and mythological elements, which deepen its symbolic resonance. Figures like Love and Flora are personified abstractions drawn from classical mythology, and the setting of "Psyche's bower" evokes a romantic and divine atmosphere. These elements transform the poem from a simple floral debate into a philosophical allegory about desire, creativity, and idealism. The lotus, in this context, becomes more than a flower—it is a metaphor for spiritual beauty, poetic innovation, and cultural reconciliation. Dutt's use of myth allows her to engage with timeless themes while embedding her own cultural perspective.

3.8 SYMBOLS

Now we shall discuss the symbols found the poem "The Lotus",

3.8.1 The Rose

The rose in "The Lotus" symbolizes passion, sensual beauty, and romantic allure. Traditionally celebrated in Western poetry, the rose is associated with emotional intensity and desire. In the poem, it represents one side of the aesthetic spectrum—the vibrant, expressive, and seductive qualities of love. However, Dutt also subtly critiques its limitations by suggesting that the rose, while "delicious," lacks the stately grace of the lily. The rose's symbolic role is essential in setting up the contrast that leads to the creation of the lotus.

3.8.2 **The Lily**

The lily stands for purity, dignity, and classical elegance. It is described as having a "Juno mien," likening it to the Roman goddess Juno, who embodies majesty and authority. In Western literary tradition, the lily often symbolizes chastity and spiritual refinement. In Dutt's poem, it serves as the counterpoint to the rose—cool, pale, and regal. While admired for its stateliness, the lily is also questioned: "But is the lily lovelier?" This rhetorical challenge opens the way for a new symbol that transcends both extremes.

3.8.3 **The Lotus**

The lotus is the central and most powerful symbol in the poem. It represents synthesis, spiritual beauty, and cultural pride. By combining the rose's "rose-red" and the lily's "lily-white," the lotus embodies both passion and purity. In Indian tradition, the lotus is sacred—associated with divinity, enlightenment, and resilience. It grows from muddy waters yet remains untouched by impurity, symbolizing transcendence. Dutt's choice to crown the lotus as the "queenliest flower that blows" is a poetic and cultural assertion, elevating an Indian symbol within a Western form.

3.8.4 **The Flora**

Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers, symbolizes creative power and divine intervention. She is the one who resolves the aesthetic conflict by creating the lotus. In the poem, Flora represents nature's ability to harmonize opposites and produce beauty that transcends

rivalry. Her role is symbolic of poetic imagination itself—capable of blending tradition and innovation to create something new and meaningful.

3.8.5 **Psyche's Bower**

"Psyche's bower" is a symbolic setting that evokes mythological and romantic associations. Psyche, in classical mythology, represents the soul and its journey through love and transformation. The bower—a secluded, natural retreat—suggests a space of emotional and spiritual reflection. By placing the "flower-factions" in Psyche's bower, Dutt adds depth to the poem's allegory, implying that the debate over beauty is not just external but also internal and soulful.

3.9 LITERARY DEVICES

3.9.1 Personification

Toru Dutt uses personification to animate abstract concepts and mythological figures. Love and Flora are portrayed as sentient beings capable of speech and decision-making. "Love came to Flora asking for a flower," and Flora responded by creating the lotus. This device transforms the poem into a living allegory, where emotions and ideals are dramatized through divine characters. It also adds a lyrical and imaginative quality, making the philosophical debate about beauty more engaging and accessible. The personification also serves to elevate the poem's tone, aligning it with classical traditions where gods and goddesses intervene in human affairs. By invoking Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers, Dutt situates her poem within a mythological context familiar to Western readers, while subtly preparing to introduce an Indian symbol—the lotus—into that canon. This strategic use of personification bridges cultural worlds and makes the poem's resolution feel both divine and poetic. It also reflects Dutt's mastery of blending form and content, using Western literary devices to express Indian themes.

3.9.2 Allegory

The entire poem functions as an allegory—a symbolic narrative that conveys deeper meanings beneath its surface. The rose and lily represent opposing ideals of beauty: passion and purity. Their rivalry reflects broader cultural and aesthetic tensions. The creation of the lotus symbolizes reconciliation, unity, and the emergence of a new ideal. Through this allegorical structure, Dutt explores themes of synthesis, cultural pride, and poetic innovation without overt didacticism. The allegory also extends to the poem's cultural subtext. In a colonial context where Western symbols dominated literary discourse, Dutt's

elevation of the lotus became a subtle act of resistance. The lotus, sacred in Indian tradition, symbolizes spiritual enlightenment, purity emerging from adversity, and divine grace. By placing it at the center of her allegory, Dutt reclaims aesthetic space for Indian identity. The allegorical framework thus allows her to engage with timeless themes—love, rivalry, creation—while embedding a quiet but powerful cultural assertion.

3.9.3. Symbolism

Symbolism is central to the poem's impact. Each flower carries layered meanings: the rose symbolizes sensual love, the lily represents dignity and chastity, and the lotus embodies spiritual beauty and cultural identity. The colors— "rose-red" and "lily-white"—also symbolize emotional and moral qualities. These symbols are not just decorative; they serve as vehicles for the poem's thematic concerns, allowing Dutt to express complex ideas through simple, vivid imagery. The lotus, introduced in the final stanza, is the poem's most potent symbol. In Indian culture, the lotus is associated with spiritual purity, divine beauty, and resilience—it blooms in muddy waters yet remains untouched by impurity. By combining the rose's "rose-red" and the lily's "lily-white," the lotus becomes a symbol of synthesis, balance, and cultural pride. It represents a new aesthetic ideal that transcends rivalry and embraces unity. Dutt's symbolic choices are not decorative; they are deliberate and meaningful, allowing her to express complex ideas through simple, evocative images.

3.9.4. Rhetorical Question

Dutt employs rhetorical questioning to challenge conventional notions of beauty. The line "But is the lily lovelier?" invites the reader to reconsider inherited aesthetic judgments. This device introduces doubt and opens the possibility for a new synthesis. It also reflects the speaker's contemplative tone, encouraging reflection rather than assertion. Rhetorical questioning also reflects the speaker's internal conflict. Torn between admiration for the rose and the lily, the speaker seeks a resolution that goes beyond binary choice. The question marks a turning point in the poem, leading to the desire for synthesis expressed in the next stanza. It also aligns with the poem's broader philosophical inquiry: how do we define beauty, and can it exist beyond opposites? Through this device, Dutt adds depth to her poetic voice, making it both inquisitive and visionary.

3.9.5 Alliteration

Alliteration enhances the musicality and rhythm of the poem. Phrases like "flower-factions" and "strife in Psyche's bower" use repeated consonant sounds to create a lyrical flow. This device contributes to the poem's elegance and reinforces its thematic unity. The sound

patterns echo the harmony that the poem ultimately celebrates through the lotus. Beyond its aesthetic function, alliteration also reinforces thematic unity. The repetition of sounds mirrors the poem's emphasis on blending and synthesis. Just as the lotus combines colors and qualities, the poem's language combines sounds to create cohesion. Dutt's use of alliteration is subtle but effective, demonstrating her control over poetic technique and her sensitivity to the musical dimension of verse.

3.9.6 Classical Allusion

The poem is rich in classical allusions, referencing figures like Flora, Juno, and Psyche. These mythological names evoke Western literary and cultural traditions, situating the poem within a familiar framework. At the same time, Dutt uses these allusions to introduce and elevate an Indian symbol—the lotus—into that tradition. This device allows her to blend cultural references and assert a bicultural literary voice. These allusions also serve a strategic purpose. They provide a familiar framework for Western readers, allowing Dutt to introduce Indian symbols—like the lotus—into a context they recognize. This blending of cultural references reflects her bicultural literary identity and her ability to navigate multiple traditions. The classical allusions are not ornamental; they are integral to the poem's structure and message, enabling Dutt to speak across cultures with poetic grace.

3.9.7 Imagery

Vivid imagery is used throughout the poem to evoke beauty and emotion. The visual contrast between the rose and lily, the mention of "rose-red" and "lily-white," and the final image of the lotus blooming—all contribute to the sensory richness of the poem. Dutt's imagery is precise and symbolic, enhancing both the aesthetic and thematic dimensions of the work. The setting of "Psyche's bower" adds another layer of imagery, suggesting a secluded, mythic space where emotional and aesthetic conflicts unfold. This image evokes intimacy, reflection, and transformation. Dutt's imagery is precise and restrained, allowing symbols to speak without overwhelming the reader. Her visual language enhances both the lyrical and philosophical dimensions of the poem, making it a rich and rewarding text for close reading.

3.10 SUMMING UP

In this unit, you learned how Toru Dutt's sonnet "The Lotus" uses classical poetic form to explore themes of beauty, cultural identity, and synthesis. You examined how the poem

presents a symbolic rivalry between the rose and the lily—representing passion and purity—and resolves it through the creation of the lotus, a flower sacred in Indian tradition. Through this, Dutt asserts that true beauty lies in the harmonious blending of opposites.

You also explored the poem's rich use of literary devices, including personification, allegory, symbolism, rhetorical questioning, and classical allusion. Each device contributes to the poem's lyrical elegance and philosophical depth. By analyzing the poem stanza by stanza, you gained insight into how Dutt reclaims aesthetic space for Indian symbols within a Western literary framework. Overall, this unit deepened your understanding of how poetry can serve as both artistic expression and cultural dialogue.

3.11 MODEL QUESTIONS (SHORT ANSWER / COMPREHENSION)

1. What is the central theme of Toru Dutt's "The Lotus"?
2. How does the poem reconcile the rivalry between the rose and the lily?
3. Explain the symbolic significance of the lotus in Indian culture.
4. What poetic form does Toru Dutt use in "The Lotus"?
5. How does the poem reflect the blending of Indian and Western traditions?
6. Identify and explain one literary device used in the poem.
7. Why is "The Lotus" considered a landmark in Indian English poetry?
8. What role does the goddess Flora play in the poem?
9. How does Toru Dutt use imagery to elevate the lotus above other flowers?
10. What message does the poem convey about unity and harmony?

Terminal Questions (Essay / Analytical)

1. Discuss "The Lotus" as a symbolic poem that integrates Indian cultural identity with Western poetic form.
2. Critically analyze the use of myth and personification in Toru Dutt's "The Lotus".

3. Compare the symbolic roles of the rose, lily, and lotus in the poem. How does Dutt resolve their rivalry?
4. Evaluate "The Lotus" as a Petrarchan sonnet. How does its structure contribute to meaning?
5. Examine the poem as a reflection of Toru Dutt's larger literary project of asserting Indian heritage in English literature.
6. "The Lotus embodies unity in diversity." Discuss this statement with reference to the poem.
7. How does Toru Dutt's "The Lotus*"* challenge Eurocentric ideals of beauty in poetry?
8. Write a critical appreciation of The Lotus", focusing on its themes, symbolism, and poetic devices.
9. Analyze the cultural and spiritual significance of the lotus in the poem compared to its role in Indian tradition.
10. Discuss how "The Lotus" represents Toru Dutt's contribution to Indian English poetry in the 19th century.

3.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

- Dutt, Toru. *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. Kegan Paul, 1882.
- Gosse, Edmund. "Memoir of Toru Dutt." *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, by Toru Dutt, Kegan Paul, 1882.
- Kumar, Prince. "Summary of *The Lotus* by Toru Dutt." *Lit for India*, 10 Jan. 2024, litforindia.com/summary-of-the-lotus-by-toru-dutt/.
- "Poem 'The Lotus' by Toru Dutt: Notes-Summary, Themes, Poetic Devices." *Sirji Tutorials*, sirjitutorials.com/poem-the-lotus-by-toru-dutt-notes-summary-themes-poetic-devices/.
- "Critical Appreciation of the Poem *The Lotus* by Toru Dutt." *Semester 3 Study Material*, SB College Ara, sbcollegeara.in/cpanel/e_learning_study_materials/Semester%203.pdf.

- Ranjan, Shailesh. "Analysis of the Poem 'The Lotus' by Toru Dutt." *Indian Writing in English Lecture Notes*, Maharaja College, maharajacollege.ac.in/material/eng_lect1_by_shailesh_ranjan.pdf.

UNIT 4 SAROJINI NAIDU "VILLAGE SONG"

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we will explore the life and literary contributions of Sarojini Naidu, the acclaimed Indian poetess whose writings reflect the spirit, culture and aspirations of India and who is lovingly referred to as *the Nightingale of India*. She was not only a poet but also a freedom fighter who fought for India's independence. Her poems are simple in words but carry deeper meanings.

In this Unit, we will read her poem *"*Village Song*"*. More than just a descriptive lyric, the poem "Village Song" is a subtle assertion of Indian identity and a celebration of the artistry embedded in ordinary lives. It demonstrates Naidu's gift of transforming folk imagery into philosophical reflection, while situating her work within the broader discourse of Indian English poetry and postcolonial cultural expression. This unit explores the poem's themes, symbols, and stylistic features, while also considering Naidu's life, her bicultural sensibility, and her contribution to the shaping of modern Indian literature.

Dear Learner,

The course comprises multiple components, with the Self-Learning Material (SLM) and counselling sessions being key elements. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the course content, it is essential that you engage with all these components in a balanced manner. As you are enrolled in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program, self-directed study plays a vital role in your academic success. Accordingly, each unit concludes with a list of suggested readings and references. You are strongly encouraged to consult these resources to enhance your comprehension and deepen your engagement with the subject matter.

4.2 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, you will be able to;

- Understand the life and literary contributions of Sarojini Naidu.
- Analyze the poem "Village Song" in terms of theme, structure, and symbolism.
- Interpret the poem's allegorical and philosophical dimensions.
- Explore the cultural and universal significance of weaving as a metaphor for human life.
- Identify poetic devices and stylistic features used by the poet.
- Engage in critical discussion on the cycle of life, tradition, and cultural identity as presented in the poem.

4.3 SAROJINI NAIDU: BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Dear learners, you all are well acquainted with Sarojini Naidu whose poetry we have discussed in the Semester I where we discussed her major poems like "Indian Weavers", and "In the Bazaars of Hyderabad". We also discussed her writing styles and techniques, her use of symbols and imagery which makes her poetry distinct from all her contemporaries. Naidu, who is remembered as the *Nightingale of India*, occupies a unique place in the history of modern India. She was both a gifted poet and a pioneering political leader. Born on 13 February 1879 in Hyderabad, she was the eldest daughter of Aghorenath Chattopadhyay, a scientist, philosopher, and educationist, and Barada Sundari Devi, a poetess with a strong literary sensibility. Growing up in a household that valued intellectual pursuit and artistic expression, Naidu was exposed to literature, science, and philosophy from an early age. This environment nurtured her creativity and gave her the confidence to pursue poetry in English while remaining deeply rooted in Indian traditions. Her early education took place in Hyderabad, but her brilliance soon attracted wider attention. At the age of sixteen, she was sent to England to continue her studies at King's College, London and later at Girton College, Cambridge. These years abroad were formative, as she encountered Western literary traditions and absorbed the lyricism of English poetry. Yet, she never abandoned her Indian

identity. Instead, she developed a bicultural sensibility, blending the imagery of Indian landscapes, customs, and spirituality with the stylistic elegance of English verse.

This synthesis became the hallmark of her poetry and distinguished her from many of her contemporaries. Naidu's literary career began with the publication of her first collection, *The Golden Threshold* (1905), which was introduced by Edmund Gosse, a prominent English critic who recognized her talent. This volume established her reputation as a poet of delicate imagery and musical rhythm. It was followed by *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing* (1917), each of which deepened her exploration of themes such as love, death, patriotism, and the beauty of Indian life. Her poems often celebrated ordinary people—fishermen, bangle sellers, palanquin bearers, and weavers—transforming their daily labor into symbols of cultural pride and philosophical reflection. Through these works, she gave voice to India's traditions in a language accessible to the world.

Her literary achievements earned her the affectionate title *Nightingale of India*, a name that reflected the melodious quality of her verse and her ability to sing of India's soul. Yet, Naidu's life was not confined to poetry. Inspired by the nationalist movement, she became an active participant in India's struggle for independence.

She worked closely with leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and Jawaharlal Nehru, and lent her eloquence and organizational skills to the cause. Her speeches, delivered with passion and clarity, inspired thousands and demonstrated that her gift for language extended beyond poetry into political oratory. In 1925, Sarojini Naidu achieved a historic milestone by becoming the **first Indian woman to preside over the Indian National Congress**, a position that placed her at the forefront of nationalist politics. Her leadership was not symbolic; she actively participated in campaigns, protests, and negotiations, often enduring imprisonment for her role in civil disobedience movements. After independence in 1947, she was appointed the first woman Governor of Uttar Pradesh, making her the first woman to hold the office of governor in independent India. This achievement underscored her pioneering role in breaking barriers for women in public life.

Naidu's personal life was equally remarkable. In 1898, she married Govindarajulu Naidu, a physician, in what was considered a bold step at the time, as it was an inter-caste

marriage. Their union was based on mutual respect and shared ideals, and together they raised five children. Among them was Padmaja Naidu, who later became a prominent freedom fighter and politician, continuing her mother's legacy of service to the nation.

Beyond politics and poetry, Sarojini Naidu was a passionate advocate for women's rights and education. She believed that women should be empowered to participate fully in public life and worked tirelessly to promote female education and social reform. Her speeches often emphasized the importance of women's voices in shaping the destiny of the nation, and she herself became a role model for generations of Indian women who aspired to leadership.

Sarojini Naidu passed away on 2 March 1949 in Lucknow, just two years after India gained independence. Her death marked the end of a life that had seamlessly combined artistic brilliance with political activism. Yet her legacy endures. As a poet, she remains one of the most important voices in Indian English literature, celebrated for her ability to capture the rhythms of Indian life in lyrical verse. As a leader, she is remembered for her courage, eloquence, and pioneering role in the nationalist movement and in women's empowerment.

Naidu's biography reflects a rare synthesis of art and politics. She was a poet who sang of India's beauty and traditions, and a leader who fought for its freedom and progress. Her life story illustrates the power of words—whether in poetry or in political speeches—to inspire change and to affirm cultural identity. For students of literature, she offers an example of how artistic expression can be deeply intertwined with social and national concerns.

4.4 SAROJINI NAIDU AS A POET

4.4.1 Lyricism and Musical Quality

One of the most striking features of Sarojini Naidu's poetry is its lyrical and musical quality. Her verses often resemble songs, flowing with rhythm and melody that make them memorable and emotionally engaging. This musicality earned her the title *Nightingale of India*, a name that reflects both the sweetness of her voice and the charm of her poetic expression. Poems such as "Palanquin Bearers" and "Bangle Sellers" are excellent examples, where the cadence of the lines mirrors the rhythm of the activities being described. The repetition of sounds and the balance of phrases give her poetry a chant-like quality, making it appealing to both the ear and the imagination.

Beyond mere sound, Naidu's lyricism serves a deeper purpose. It transforms ordinary subjects into artistic experiences, elevating daily life into something poetic. The musical flow of her verse makes her work accessible to readers of all backgrounds, while also reinforcing the emotional resonance of her themes. Her ability to combine rhythm with meaning demonstrates her mastery of language, and it is this quality that continues to make her poetry popular in classrooms and anthologies.

4.4.2 Imagery and Symbolism

Naidu's poetry is rich with imagery and symbolism, which give her work depth and universality. She frequently employed colors, natural elements, and cultural motifs to convey layered meanings. In the poem "Indian Weavers", which you all have read in Semester 1 Understanding poetry she uses various symbols and imagery for instance, the colors blue, purple, gold, and white are not simply descriptive but symbolic of innocence, joy, prosperity, and peace. Similarly, in the poem "Coromandel Fishers", the sea becomes a symbol of both livelihood and destiny, reflecting the intimate relationship between humans and nature. These images allow her poetry to operate on multiple levels—descriptive, cultural, and philosophical.

Naidu's symbolism as you all might be acquainted with also reflects Indian traditions and spirituality. In her poetry everyday objects such as bangles, veils, and shrouds are transformed into metaphors for life's stages, while natural imagery like wings, flames, and clouds connects human experience to the larger cosmic rhythm. This symbolic layering makes her poetry accessible yet profound, allowing readers to appreciate both its surface beauty and its deeper meaning. Through imagery and symbolism, Naidu elevates ordinary experiences into universal reflections on existence.

4.4.3 Romantic Influence and Indian Realism

Sarojini Naidu was really influenced by the Romantic poets of England, particularly in her emphasis on emotion, nature, and beauty. You all are acquainted with Romantic poetry which we have discussed in Block 3 of Understanding Poetry in SemesterI. Romantic poetry is marked by its emphasis on emotion, imagination, nature, and individual freedom, standing in contrast to the rigid rules of earlier Neoclassical poetry.. Naidu's verse also often reflects such Romantic ideals of lyricism, imagination, and sensitivity to the natural world. However, she did not merely imitate Western styles. Instead, she combined Romantic lyricism with Indian realism, writing about fishermen, weavers, sellers, and other ordinary figures. By

doing so, she gave dignity to everyday labor and highlighted the artistry embedded in Indian traditions.

This blending of Romantic influence with Indian cultural reality actually gave her poetry authenticity and originality. While her style carried the elegance of English verse, her themes were distinctly Indian, rooted in local landscapes, rituals, and occupations. This duality allowed her to bridge cultures, making Indian traditions accessible to global audiences while preserving their authenticity. Her poetry thus stands as a unique synthesis of Romantic sensibility and Indian identity.

4.4.4 Themes of Love, Nature, and Spirituality

Naidu's poetry often explores themes of love, both personal and spiritual. Many of her verses celebrate the beauty of relationships, the passion of youth, and the tenderness of human bonds. At the same time, her poems reflect spiritual love, drawing upon Indian rituals and beliefs to express devotion and transcendence. This dual focus on personal and spiritual love gives her poetry emotional depth and cultural resonance.

Nature is another recurring theme in her work. She wrote about rivers, seas, flowers, and skies, often using them as metaphors for human emotions and experiences. Spirituality also permeates her poetry, as seen in her references to marriage fires, funeral shrouds, and divine imagery. By combining love, nature, and spirituality, Naidu created poetry that is versatile and layered, appealing to both the heart and the mind.

4.4.5 Nationalist and Patriotic Spirit

Beyond personal and aesthetic concerns, Naidu's poetry carries a strong nationalist spirit. She used verse to express her love for India and her pain at its colonial oppression. Poems such as "The Gift of India" pay tribute to Indian soldiers who fought in World War I, combining lyrical beauty with political resonance. Her poetry thus became a medium for both artistic expression and political activism, reflecting her dual identity as a poet and a freedom fighter.

Her nationalist themes are not limited to overtly political poems. Even her cultural lyrics, which celebrate Indian traditions and occupations, carry an implicit message of pride and resistance. By dignifying Indian life in English verse, she asserted the value of her culture in a colonial context. This patriotic dimension makes her poetry historically significant, as it contributed to the larger movement of cultural and political awakening in India.

4.4.6 Musicality and Accessibility

Naidu's style is marked by simplicity and accessibility. Her poems are easy to understand yet profound in meaning, making them suitable for both general readers and scholars. The musicality of her verse ensures that it appeals to the ear as much as to the mind. This accessibility has contributed to the enduring popularity of her work in classrooms and anthologies, where students can appreciate both its beauty and its depth.

Her accessibility does not mean lack of sophistication. On the contrary, her ability to combine simplicity with layered meaning demonstrates her skill as a poet. By writing in a style that is both lyrical and clear, she ensured that her poetry could reach a wide audience while still offering material for critical analysis. This balance of accessibility and depth is one of the reasons her work continues to be studied and celebrated.

4.4.7 Philosophical aspect

Sarojini Naidu's poetry carries a strong philosophical dimension, often reflecting on the inevitability of life's cycle and the deeper meaning behind ordinary experiences. In her poem "Indian Weavers", she presents birth, marriage, and death as interconnected stages of existence, symbolized through the garments woven at morning, evening, and night. The use of colors—blue for innocence, purple and gold for joy, and white for peace—shows her acceptance of life's rhythm and mortality. Rather than portraying death as tragic, she depicts it as serene and natural, suggesting a worldview rooted in harmony and continuity. This philosophical outlook emphasizes that human life, like fabric, is woven with threads of joy, responsibility, and eventual rest.

Another philosophical aspect of Naidu's poetry is her belief in the unity between human beings and the larger universe. Ordinary labor, such as weaving or fishing, becomes a metaphor for destiny and interconnectedness. In "Coromandel Fishers", for example, the sea is not only a source of livelihood but also a symbol of fate, linking human effort to cosmic forces. Through such imagery, Naidu conveys that life is part of a greater order, where individual experiences reflect universal truths. Her poetry thus transforms simple cultural practices into meditations on existence, affirming both the dignity of tradition and the spiritual depth of everyday life.

4.5 KEY WORKS

Sarojini Naidu's literary career is marked by a series of poetry collections that brought Indian themes into the mainstream of English literature. Her first major work, *The Golden Threshold* (1905), introduced readers to her lyrical style and her ability to blend Indian imagery with English poetic forms. This collection includes poems such as "The Bangle Sellers" and "Palanquin Bearers", which celebrate everyday Indian life while elevating it to the level of art. Her second collection, *The Bird of Time* (1912), reflects a more mature voice, exploring themes of love, mortality, and patriotism. In this volume, Naidu's verse becomes more philosophical, showing her growing awareness of the complexities of human existence.

Her third collection, *The Broken Wing* (1917), published during the period of India's rising nationalist movement, contains poems that are both lyrical and political. Here, Naidu's poetry resonates with the spirit of freedom and the longing for India's independence. Later works, such as *The Feather of the Dawn* (published posthumously in 1961 by her daughter Padmaja Naidu), further reveal her enduring commitment to poetic expression and cultural identity.

Across these collections, Naidu's poems often focus on ordinary figures—fishermen, weavers, sellers, and bearers—transforming their daily labor into symbols of beauty, resilience, and tradition. Her ability to capture the rhythms of Indian life in English verse made her one of the most distinctive voices of Indo-Anglian poetry. In addition to her published collections, individual poems like "Indian Weavers", "Coromandel Fishers", and "The Village Song" remain widely anthologized and studied for their simplicity, musicality, and depth of meaning.

- **The Golden Threshold (1905)**

Sarojini Naidu's first published collection, *The Golden Threshold*, established her reputation as a lyrical poet. The poems in this volume are rich with Indian imagery and musical rhythm. Everyday figures such as "Palanquin Bearers" are celebrated for their artistry and devotion, while poems like "The Indian Weavers" and "Coromandel Fishers" transform simple occupations into metaphors for life, tradition, and resilience. The collection reflects Naidu's ability to blend Indian cultural motifs with English poetic forms, making her work accessible to both Indian and Western audiences. It is also notable for its introduction by Edmund Gosse, who recognized her talent and helped bring her poetry to wider attention.

- **The Bird of Time (1912)**

Her second collection, *The Bird of Time*, reveals a more mature and philosophical voice. Here, Naidu moves beyond descriptive lyricism to explore deeper themes such as love, mortality, and patriotism. The title itself suggests the fleeting nature of life, and many poems in this volume meditate on the passage of time and the inevitability of change. Poems like "The Hussain Saagar" and "The Temple"

reflect her spiritual sensibility, while others highlight the beauty of Indian landscapes and traditions. This collection also contains patriotic undertones, foreshadowing her growing involvement in India's nationalist movement. The blend of personal reflection and cultural pride makes *The Bird of Time* a significant step in her literary journey.

- **The Broken Wing (1917)**

Published during a period of political ferment, *The Broken Wing* combines lyrical beauty with nationalist fervour. The poems in this collection often express longing for freedom and the pain of oppression, while still retaining Naidu's characteristic musicality. The title suggests both fragility and resilience, symbolizing India's struggle under colonial rule. Poems such as "

The Gift of India" stand out for their patriotic intensity, paying tribute to Indian soldiers who fought in World War I. This volume demonstrates how Naidu's poetry became a vehicle for political expression, blending art with activism. It marks her transition from purely lyrical themes to poetry that directly engages with historical and social realities.

- **The Feather of the Dawn (1961, posthumous)**

The Feather of the Dawn was published after Naidu's death by her daughter, Padmaja Naidu. This collection contains poems that had not been published during her lifetime, offering readers a final glimpse into her creative spirit. The poems continue her exploration of themes such as love, spirituality, and cultural identity, while also reflecting her enduring optimism and lyrical style. The title evokes delicacy and lightness, symbolizing both the fragility and beauty of life. Though less widely studied than her earlier collections, *The Feather of the Dawn* enriches our understanding of Naidu's poetic legacy and demonstrates the consistency of her voice across decades.

4.6 ABOUT THE POEM: "VILLAGE SONG"

Sarojini Naidu's "Village Song" is a deeply evocative poem that presents the voice of a young village girl making her way home at dusk after fetching water from the river Jamuna. The poem captures her inner conflict between the fleeting joy of lingering to listen to the boatmen's song and the anxiety of facing the dangers of nightfall alone. The girl's pitchers are full, yet the path is long and solitary, and she is haunted by the possibility of serpents, evil spirits, or sudden storms. The imagery of "shadows of evening gather so thickly, like black birds in the sky" conveys the overwhelming darkness and the sense of foreboding that surrounds her. At the same time, the poem emphasizes her emotional ties to her family: she imagines her brother's reproach and her mother's tears, which highlight the protective and affectionate bonds of rural life. The Jamuna river itself becomes symbolic—it is both a source of

sustenance and a force of danger, rushing swiftly and unpredictably. Naidu's use of repetition, especially the refrain that we see"Ram re Ram! I shall die," actually underscores the girl's reliance on divine protection, reflecting the spiritual consciousness embedded in everyday village experiences. The poem blends natural imagery, cultural tradition, and spiritual invocation to portray the vulnerability of human life and the strength derived from faith. In doing so, it not only paints a vivid picture of rural India but also universalizes the theme of human dependence on divine guidance when confronted with uncertainty and fear.

4.6.1 The Text

Full are my pitchers and far to carry,

Lone is the way and long,

Why, O why was I tempted to tarry

Lured by the boatmen's song?

Swiftly the shadows of night are falling,

Hear, O hear, is the white crane calling,

Is it the wild owl's cry?

There are no tender moonbeams to light me,

If in the darkness a serpent should bite me,

Or if an evil spirit should smite me,

Ram re Ram! I shall die.

My brother will murmur, " Why doth she linger? "

My mother will wait and weep,

Saying, " O safe may the great gods bring her,

The Jamuna's waters are deep. " ...

The Jamuna's waters rush by so quickly,

The shadows of evening gather so thickly,

Like black birds in the sky ...

O! if the storm breaks, what will betide me?

Safe from the lightning where shall I hide me?

Unless Thou succour my footsteps and guide me,

Ram re Ram! I shall die.

Explanation:

"Full are my pitchers and far to carry,

Lone is the way and long,

Why, O why was I tempted to tarry,

Lured by the boatmen's song?"

Explanation:

In these lines the girl says that the pitchers that she is carrying are already filled with water, but she still has a long and lonely walk home. She admits that she delayed her journey because she was tempted by the boatmen's song and stopped to listen, which made her late. The pitcher here in these lines has a deeper meaning and symbolises the everyday responsibilities of village life, particularly those carried by women. Filled with water, it represents the weight of domestic labour and social obligation that must be borne regularly and often without choice. Its fullness suggests how these duties are heavy and demanding, while the long distance the speaker must travel reflects the endless nature of such responsibilities.The lines "Lone is the way and long" represents our life's journey which is lonely. This reminds us that life's struggles must ultimately be faced alone, making loneliness an unavoidable part of human existence. The boatmen's song here symbolizes the allure of pleasure and youthful indulgence. It represents the distractions of life that pull the girl away from her duty of carrying water home. Just as music enchants and delays her, it metaphorically reflects how human beings are often tempted by beauty, joy, or leisure even when responsibilities await.

"Swiftly the shadows of night are falling,

Hear, O hear, is the white crane calling,

Is it the wild owl's cry?"

Explanation:

In these lines the speaker says that evening is approaching quickly and darkness is spreading. She hears bird calls and wonders whether it is the cry of the crane or the ominous hoot of the owl. These sounds make her anxious as she walks through the twilight. The speaker here symbolically talks about his psychological state, where darkness and natural sounds mirror her inner fear. They mark the transition from a routine journey to a moment of emotional vulnerability, which suggests that when certainty fades, the human mind becomes dominated by apprehension and superstition. The lines "is the white crane calling, Is it the wild owl's cry?" here symbolises ominous signs and superstition. In rural belief systems, the cries of birds—especially owls—are often associated with bad omens or impending misfortune. The speaker's anxious questioning shows how fear magnifies ordinary natural sounds into threatening signs.

"There are no tender moonbeams to light me,

If in the darkness a serpent should bite me,

Or if an evil spirit should smite me,

Ram re Ram! I shall die."

Explanation:

The Girl in these lines says that there is no moonlight to guide her, and she fears the dangers of the dark path. She imagines that a snake might bite her or that evil spirits might harm her. Frightened, she calls upon Lord Rama, believing his name will protect her. The absence of tender moonbeams here symbolises the lack of guidance, safety, and reassurance. Light, which usually offers comfort and direction, is missing, which suggests that the speaker is left alone to face danger without support. The imagined serpent bite symbolises sudden and hidden threats—dangers that can strike silently and without warning. The fear of an evil spirit

reflects deep-rooted superstition and psychological anxiety, where unseen forces become sources of terror.

"My brother will murmur, "Why doth she linger?"

My mother will wait and weep,

Saying, "O safe may the great gods bring her,

The Jamuna's waters are deep."

Explanation:

In these lines the speaker says that her family will be worried about her delay. She imagines her brother murmuring in concern and her mother waiting anxiously, even weeping. Her mother fears the dangers of the deep Jamuna River and prays to the gods for her daughter's safe return. These lines symbolically show that the woman's journey is not an isolated event; it is emotionally connected to her family. They emphasise how individual vulnerability is intertwined with familial love, concern, and faith, which reinforces the poem's theme of human dependence on both social bonds and divine protection. The deep waters of the Jamuna symbolise danger and uncertainty. The river here becomes a metaphor for the risks that lie beyond the safety of home and for the unpredictable forces of life.

"The Jamuna's waters rush by so quickly,

The shadows of evening gather so thickly,

Like black birds in the sky …"

Explanation:

In these lines the girl says that the river flows swiftly and the evening shadows gather densely, appearing like black birds in the sky. Black birds traditionally symbolise doom, fear, and impending disaster. Here, they visually represent how darkness and fear seem to surround and overwhelm the speaker. These images show the threatening environment surrounding her. This describes how the river flows swiftly, which symbolizes danger and unstoppable time and darkness grows denser as the night approaches. These lines symbolise the rapid advance of fate and fear, where nature mirrors the speaker's emotional state. The imagery

suggests that time, darkness, and danger are closing in simultaneously, heightening the feeling of helplessness and urgency. The thickening shadows of evening symbolise the approach of darkness, fear, and uncertainty. As light fades, danger seems closer, reflecting the speaker's growing anxiety.

"O! if the storm breaks, what will betide me?

Safe from the lightning where shall I hide me?

Unless Thou succour my footsteps and guide me,

Ram re Ram! I shall die."

Explanation:

The speaker in these lines says that she fears what will happen if a storm breaks out or if lightning strikes. She wonders where she could hide to be safe. The storm symbolises sudden catastrophe and life's uncontrollable crises, the events that arise unexpectedly and place human life in danger. The speaker's anxious question, "what will betide me?", reflects the speaker's uncertainty about survival itself. Once again, she pleads with God to guide her footsteps and protect her, repeating Rama's name as a prayer for safety. These lines depict her helplessness and her complete dependence on the almighty who she believes will protect her in every situation.

Glossary:

pitchers: vessel for carrying and storing water

tarry: to stay, to delay

lured: tempted, charmed

swiftly: quickly, in a fast manner

shadows of night falling: darkness approaching

crane: a kind of aquatic bird with a long neck and long legs wild owl: bird treated as ominous

betide: happen

murmur: speak in an unintelligible voice

succour: help, to strengthen

4.7 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Sarojini Naidu's "Village Song" is a lyrical ballad that captures the emotional tension between youthful desire and social duty, set against the backdrop of rural Indian life. Through the voice of a young village girl returning home at dusk, Naidu transforms a simple rural experience into a profound meditation on vulnerability, faith, and cultural identity. The poem's strength lies in its ability to elevate everyday village tasks into universal reflections on human emotions, while simultaneously affirming the richness of Indian traditions.

• Structure and Progression

The poem unfolds as a monologue that dramatizes the girl's journey home with pitchers of water. It begins with her regret at lingering to hear the boatmen's song, then moves into her growing fear of serpents, spirits, and storms as darkness falls. The progression mirrors the emotional arc from youthful impulse to mature responsibility, symbolizing the transition from carefree desire to sober awareness. The repeated refrain "Ram re Ram! I shall die" intensifies the tension and underscores her reliance on divine protection.

• Symbolism of Imagery

Naidu's imagery is central to the poem's resonance. The Jamuna river symbolizes both sustenance and danger, embodying the dual nature of existence. The boatmen's song represents temptation and the fleeting pleasures of youth, while the shadows, cranes, and owls evoke fear and uncertainty. Everyday objects like the pitchers of water become symbols of duty and routine, grounding the poem in village life. Through this interplay of images, Naidu universalizes the struggle between personal autonomy and social responsibility.

• Dialogue as Metaphor

Although the poem is presented as a monologue, the imagined voices of the girl's brother and mother create a subtle dialogue. This dialogue becomes a metaphor for the inner conflict of human existence: the girl's longing for freedom versus her family's concern and societal expectations. The brother's impatience and the mother's sorrow symbolize the weight of tradition and duty, while the girl embodies youthful longing. In this way, Naidu dignifies ordinary village voices and reveals their philosophical depth.

• Tone and Mood

The tone of the poem shifts between lyrical enchantment and anxious supplication. The girl's voice is musical and filled with wonder, reflecting innocence and temptation. As the poem progresses, the tone becomes urgent and prayerful, emphasizing fear and dependence on divine guidance. The mood is contemplative rather than oppressive, highlighting the delicate balance between joy and duty, freedom and restraint.

• Universal and Cultural Dimensions

While deeply rooted in Indian rural imagery, the poem's themes are universal. Every culture recognizes the tension between personal freedom and social obligation. At the same time, Naidu asserts cultural pride by foregrounding village life, traditional chores, and folk rhythms. "Village Song" thus functions both as a universal allegory of human emotions and as a celebration of India's cultural identity, aligning with Naidu's broader project of giving Indian traditions a lyrical voice in English literature.

• Literary Techniques

Naidu employs several devices to enhance the poem's resonance:

- **Repetition**: The refrain "Ram re Ram! I shall die" intensifies fear and faith.
- **Imagery**: Rivers, shadows, cranes, and owls make abstract themes tangible.
- **Symbolism**: Everyday objects and natural elements symbolize freedom, duty, and temptation.
- **Musicality**: The rhythm and cadence echo folk ballads, reflecting Naidu's lyrical style.
- **Contrast**: The juxtaposition of youthful longing with familial concern enriches the thematic depth.

• Philosophical Insight

At its core, "Village Song" is a meditation on the balance between desire and duty. The girl's longing for freedom and her reliance on divine protection are presented not as opposites but as interconnected forces shaping human life. The poem suggests that just as rivers flow freely yet return to the sea, human desires must ultimately harmonize with social and cultural obligations. Far from being restrictive, duty is portrayed as a guiding force that protects and sustains community life.

"Village Song" is deceptively simple yet profoundly philosophical. Through its structure, imagery, and spiritual invocation, Naidu captures the universal human struggle between freedom and responsibility, while celebrating the cultural richness of Indian village traditions. The poem dignifies

ordinary rural voices, transforming them into symbols of timeless human emotions, and stands as a testament to Naidu's ability to blend Indian ethos with lyrical English expression.

4.8 MAJOR THEMES

1. Temptation vs. Duty

One of the central themes of "Village Song" is the conflict between youthful temptation and social duty. The girl regrets lingering to hear the boatmen's song, a moment of indulgence that delayed her return home. This act symbolizes the allure of pleasure and freedom, while her pitchers of water represent responsibility and routine. Through this tension, Sarojini Naidu highlights the universal struggle between desire and obligation, showing how even small choices can carry significant consequences in the context of family and community life.

2. Fear and Vulnerability

The poem strongly conveys the fear of a lone woman in a dangerous natural setting vividly portrays the girl's fear as night falls and she journeys alone. She imagines serpents, evil spirits, storms, and the cries of wild birds, all of which intensify her sense of vulnerability. The imagery of gathering shadows and rushing waters conveys the overwhelming power of nature and the fragility of human life. This theme reflects the anxiety of being exposed to danger without protection, emphasizing the precariousness of rural existence and the emotional weight carried by ordinary tasks.

3. Faith and Spiritual Reliance

A recurring refrain in the poem is the girl's cry, *"*Ram re Ram! I shall die," which underscores her reliance on divine protection. Faith becomes her source of strength and comfort in the face of uncertainty. The invocation of Lord Rama situates the poem within the spiritual traditions of India, while also universalizing the idea of seeking divine guidance during moments of fear. This theme highlights how spirituality is woven into everyday village life, offering reassurance and hope when human effort feels insufficient.

5. Nature as a Threatening force

Nature in "Village Song" is depicted as a dual force—both life-giving and dangerous. The Jamuna River provides water essential for survival, yet its swift currents symbolize peril. The shadows, storms, and cries of birds create an atmosphere of dread, reminding the girl of her vulnerability. This theme reflects the coexistence of beauty and danger in the natural world, showing how rural life is constantly shaped by the rhythms and unpredictability of nature.

6. Cultural Identity and Rural Life

Finally, the poem celebrates the cultural richness of Indian village traditions. Everyday tasks such as fetching water are elevated into poetic meditation, while folk rhythms and spiritual invocations give voice to rural experiences. By dignifying ordinary village voices, Naidu affirms the value of cultural identity and situates Indian traditions within the broader framework of English literature. This theme highlights her larger project of blending indigenous life with lyrical artistry, making rural India both particular and universal.

4.9 SYMBOLS

4.9.1 The Jamuna River

The Jamuna River here is a powerful symbol of life's uncontrollable flow and inevitable fate. Its rapidly moving waters suggest the force of time that waits for no one and sweeps everything along with it. For the speaker, the river represents both physical danger and emotional depth. It separates safety from uncertainty and mirrors her inner turmoil. The Jamuna's depth also signifies the risks women face when they step beyond familiar spaces, highlighting vulnerability within a patriarchal rural setting.

4.9.2 The Boatmen's Song

The boatmen's song here in this poem symbolizes temptation, allure, and distraction. It is not merely a literal sound but represents the seductive pull of pleasure, curiosity, and emotional longing. The song draws the speaker away from her responsibility, causing her to delay her journey. Symbolically, it reflects how external attractions can divert individuals—especially women—from socially prescribed duties, leading to anxiety and fear of consequences.

4.9.3 Invocation of "Ram"

The repeated cry "Ram re Ram!", in the poem symbolizes faith, surrender, and spiritual dependence. In moments of extreme fear and helplessness, the speaker turns to the divine for protection. This invocation highlights the cultural belief in divine intervention and reflects how religion provides emotional strength when human support is absent. It also symbolizes moral reassurance and the hope for survival in the face of death.

4.9.4 Darkness

Darkness in the poem symbolizes fear, uncertainty, and danger. The absence of moonlight intensifies the sense of isolation and vulnerability. Darkness represents not only physical obscurity but also moral and emotional confusion. It suggests the threatening unknown that surrounds the speaker and reflects the societal dangers faced by women traveling alone.

4.9.5 The Pitchers

The pitchers here symbolize domestic duty, responsibility, and social obligation. Carrying full pitchers reflects the burden of traditional roles assigned to women in rural society. The weight of the pitchers represents both physical labour and moral responsibility. Symbolically, they anchor the speaker to duty even as temptation and fear pull her in different directions.

4.9.6 The Serpent

The serpent in the poem symbolizes hidden threat and sudden death. Its imagined presence in the darkness reflects the speaker's heightened fear and awareness of unseen dangers. Symbolically, the serpent stands for unpredictable harm that can strike without warning, emphasizing the fragility of human life and the risks inherent in isolation.

4.10 LITERARY DEVICES

Sarojini Naidu's "The Village Song" employs a range of literary techniques that enrich its meaning and enhance its lyrical quality. These devices transform a simple description of weaving into a profound allegory of human life.

Repetition:

Repetition is used in the poem to intensify the speaker's fear and emotional distress. The line "Why, O why was I tempted to tarry" repeats the word "why" to express regret over delaying her journey. The recurring refrain "Ram re Ram! I shall die" appears at moments of heightened danger and fear. This repetition reinforces the speaker's sense of helplessness and highlights her instinctive turning towards God for protection.

Imagery:

The poem contains strong visual and auditory imagery that creates a vivid picture of the village landscape at dusk. Visual imagery is evident in "Swiftly the shadows of night are

falling" and "There are no tender moonbeams to light me," which depict the growing darkness and absence of safety. Auditory imagery appears in "Hear, O hear, is the white crane calling, / Is it the wild owl's cry?" These sounds of birds at night heighten the sense of fear and loneliness. Together, these images help the reader experience the anxiety of the speaker.

Alliteration:

Alliteration contributes to the musical and lyrical quality of the poem. The repetition of the s sound in "Swiftly the shadows of night are falling" creates a smooth but eerie rhythm that mirrors the silent spread of darkness. Similarly, "Shadows of evening gather so thickly" uses repeated consonant sounds to enhance the flowing movement of the lines and maintain the folk-song quality of the poem.

Simile:

The poet uses a simile to describe the approaching darkness in a striking manner. In the line "Like black birds in the sky," the gathering shadows are compared to black birds. This simile emphasizes the thickness, movement, and ominous nature of the darkness, suggesting danger and fear associated with night.

Personification:

Personification is used to make elements of nature appear active and threatening. In "The shadows of evening gather so thickly," shadows are presented as if they possess human intention. Likewise, "The Jamuna's waters rush by so quickly" gives the river a sense of force and urgency. By personifying nature, the poet intensifies the speaker's fear and portrays the natural world as overpowering and unsafe.

Rhetorical Questions:

Rhetorical questions are employed to express the speaker's inner conflict and fear. The question "Why, O why was I tempted to tarry?" reflects her regret and self-blame. Another question, "Safe from the lightning, where shall I hide?" expresses anxiety about her safety. These questions do not seek answers but reveal the psychological state of the speaker.

5.10 SUMMING UP

In this unit, you have studied Sarojini Naidu and her celebrated poem "Village Song". Through its rich symbols such as the river, boatmen's song, jewels, grain, and the lone path,

Naidu explores the tension between youthful desire and traditional duty. You have also examined the literary devices she employs — imagery, contrast, repetition, symbolism, personification, and lyricism — all of which deepen the emotional impact of the poem. Together, these elements highlight Naidu's skill as the "Nightingale of India," showing how she blends musical language with profound themes of freedom, temptation, and responsibility.

5.11 MODEL AND TERMINAL QUESTIONS

Model Questions (Long Answer / Essay Type)

1. Discuss the use of symbols in Sarojini Naidu's "Village Song". How do they enhance the meaning of the poem?
2. Explain the central conflict between duty and desire in the poem. How does Naidu portray this through imagery and contrast?
3. Analyze the role of the mother's voice in the poem. How does it represent tradition and caution?
4. Examine the literary devices used in "Village Song" and show how they contribute to its lyrical quality.
5. "The Village Song reflects the universal struggle between tradition and modernity." Justify this statement with reference to the poem.

Terminal Questions (Short Answer / Objective Type)

1. Who is the poet of "Village Song"?
2. What does the river symbolize in the poem?
3. What is represented by the boatmen's song?
4. Which two objects symbolize wealth and sustenance?
5. Why is the path described as lone?
6. Name one literary device used in the poem.
7. What is the main theme of "Village Song"?

8. Why is Sarojini Naidu called the "Nightingale of India"?

1.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Works by Sarojini Naidu

- Naidu, Sarojini. *The Golden Threshold*. Introduction by Edmund Gosse, Macmillan, 1905.
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- Naidu, Sarojini. *The Broken Wing: Songs of Love, Death & Destiny, 1915–1916*. William Heinemann, 1917.
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- Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. Sterling Publishers, 1985.
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Contextual Readings

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UNIT 5- SRI AUROBINDO "THE STONE GODDESS"

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Dear learners,

Poetry is primarily an expression of emotions and imagination of the poet, and is usually written in a rhythmic pattern. In this book you will be acquainted with the poem "The Stone Goddess" by Sri Aurobindo who was an eminent Indian poet. Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) occupies a unique place in modern Indian literature and philosophy. He was not only a nationalist leader during the freedom struggle but also a profound spiritual thinker who later devoted his life to yoga and writing in Pondicherry. His poetry reflects this dual identity: the revolutionary spirit that sought India's liberation and the mystic vision that explored the depths of consciousness.

Aurobindo's "The Stone Goddess" is one of his devotional poems that captures the transformative power of spiritual experience. Inspired by his darshan of the Goddess Kali at Dakshineswar temple, the poem describes how a seemingly lifeless stone idol suddenly radiates divine energy. This moment of vision turns the inert image into a living embodiment of Shakti, the cosmic power. Through this experience, Aurobindo conveys the idea that divinity is not confined to abstract realms but can manifest in material forms, awakening the human spirit to higher truths.

The course comprises multiple components, with the Self-Learning Material (SLM) and counselling sessions being key elements. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the course content, it is essential that you engage with all these components in a balanced manner. As you are enrolled in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program, self-directed study plays a vital role in your academic success. Accordingly, each unit concludes with a list of suggested readings and references. You are strongly encouraged to consult these resources to enhance your comprehension and deepen your engagement with the subject matter

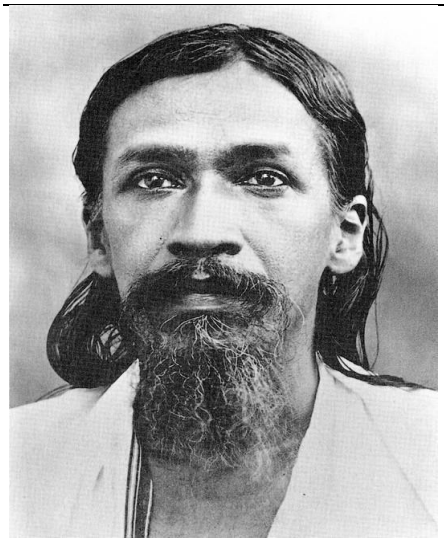
5.2 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to introduce you to Sri Aurobindo. Over the course of reading this unit, you will also be acquainted with the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, which resonates

in his poems. It is essential for you to get a glimpse of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy as it primarily focuses on the individual's inner journey, which in reality is the only journey that one can undertake. In this unit we shall also be discussing Sri Aurobindo as a poet. Furthermore, his poem, "The Stone Goddess" will also be discussed at length. A reading of this poem will provide you an incentive to explore Sri Aurobindo further. At the end after reading this unit you will be able to:

- Recognize Sri Aurobindo's role as a poet, philosopher, and a spiritual thinker.
- Explore key themes of the poem "The Stone Goddess".
- Identify Poetic Devices as mentioned in the poem.
- Develop a critical thinking of the poem, how it illustrates the relationship between matter and spirit.

5.3 SRI AUROBINDO: BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS



Sri Aurobindo was born on 15 August 1872 in an affluent Bengali family at Calcutta. His father, Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghosh, was a surgeon who had taken his degree in Medicine from Aberdeen University and desired English education for his children. The young Aurobindo was brought up in an Anglicized atmosphere. He received his elementary education at Loreto Convent, Darjeeling, before moving to England along with his two brothers, at the tender age of seven.

In London the three Ghosh brothers were kept under the care of Reverend W.H. Drewett and his wife who imparted "secular" education to the brothers privately. It was under the tutelage of the Drewett couple that Sri Aurobindo copiously read Western literature.

Furthermore, besides English, Sri Aurobindo also acquired a sound knowledge of Greek and Latin. Right from his early years the young Sri Aurobindo exhibited exceptional talent as a writer. He read avidly and wrote copiously. His first poems came out at the age of ten in the Fox's Weekly. Later on, in England, Sri Aurobindo went to the prestigious educational institutions like St. Paul's School and King's College, Cambridge. Sri Aurobindo was passionate about literature and even in his adolescence emerged as an extraordinary scholar of literature and philosophy. It is worthy to note here that the young

Aurobindo always excelled better in English than the native English speakers.

He won various illustrious prizes for his writings, both at the school and University levels. Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghosh had high hopes from his sons who wanted to see them as civil officers, but Sri Aurobindo did not have a liking for civil services. Thus, when he was forced to appear for the prestigious ICS exam, which he cleared easily, he on purpose got himself disqualified in horse riding. After spending his formative years in England, Sri Aurobindo finally left the shores of England

and set sail for India at the age of twenty-one to join the service of the Maharaja of Baroda. As he reached the shores of his native land, he could "feel a strange peace descending upon him"; a tranquility and assurance one experiences in familiar shores. Sri Aurobindo spent the next thirteen years of his life in Baroda working in various capacities including that of lecturer in French, Professor of English and Vice Principal and acting Principal of the Baroda College. Only when Sri Aurobindo came to India did he realize much to his shame that he was ignorant of Indian culture and literature and thus, took it upon himself to acquire a firm grounding on Indian culture. This initial phase of his literary sadhana is termed as the "intense jnana yoga" phase. During this phase, Sri Aurobindo translated major portions of the Sanskrit classics including the Bala and the Ayodhya kandas from the Ramayana, the Sabha and Udyog Parvas from the Mahabharata, Meghduta and the first canto of Kumarsambhavam of Kalidas into English.

Sri Aurobindo also made immense contributions during the Indian independence movement. He who was also a 'karm yogi' plunged into the Freedom Movement and contributed in awakening a patriotic fervor among the people by writing a number of revolutionary articles in various journals like Indu Prakash and Yuganta. Furthermore, he also associated himself with some of the revolutionary groups of the country. The partition of Bengal in the year 1905, can be marked as a watershed period in Sri Aurobindo's life as it brought him into the mainstream Freedom Movement. It was during the time of the Partition of Bengal that Sri Aurobindo left Baroda and settled in his home town of Calcutta. In Calcutta Sri Aurobindo took up the editorship of Bandemataram, an English daily started by Bipin Chandra Pal. Later he also took up the principalship of the newly established Bengal National College, Calcutta. It was during his Calcutta days that he started being hailed as a prominent extremist leader and paid the price for his outspokenness on several occasions. On 4 May 1908, he was arrested in the Muzzafarpur bomb case and was detained at the Alipore jail. During the trial, Sri Aurobindo had his first full-fledged mystical experience of 'Narayan Darshan' which he recounts in the

Uttarpara Speech. Eventually Sri Aurobindo was acquitted in the Muzaffarpur bomb case. Once out of the jail he launched a new weekly, the Karmayogin. However, after the above-mentioned mystical experience at the Alipore jail, Sri Aurobindo was no longer a man of this world and his spiritual yearnings became even more pronounced.

In 1910, he finally gave up politics for spirituality, left Calcutta and finally reached Pondicherry, then a French colony, where he practiced Integral Yoga "a path of integral seeking of the Divine" and through which man is "liberated out of the Ignorance…into a Truth beyond the Mind, a Truth not only of highest spiritual status but of a dynamic spiritual self-manifestation in the universe". In a series of his monumental works like *The Life Divine, The Synthesis of Yoga, Essays on The Gita, The Secret of The Veda, Hymns to the Mystic Fire, The Upanishads, The Renaissance in India, War and Self-determination, The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity* and *The Future Poetry* were published in the magazine. Later when Richards left for France, the onus of bringing out the magazine fell on the shoulders of Sri Aurobindo. As Sri Aurobindo was unable to bring out the magazine singlehandedly, he had to discontinue it in the year 1921. At Pondicherry Sri Aurobindo developed a spiritual practice which he called Integral Yoga. The central theme of his vision behind Integral Yoga was the evolution of human life into a Life Divine. Gradually Sri Aurobindo started gaining wide recognition on the basis of his integral yoga and a number of disciples from all over the world came to him to learn integral yoga. Although Sri Aurobindo had many disciples, it was Mirra Richards nee Alfassa who became his spiritual collaborator and later on 'The Mother' of the Ashram. The Mother was no ordinary human being and Sri Aurobindo knew this from his very first meeting with her. He held her in high esteem and considered her to be an incarnation of the 'Supreme Shakti'. The Mother, right from her childhood was drawn into an inner life like Sri Aurobindo and had studied occultism in France with Max Theon, the famous Polish Jewish Kabbalist and Occultist. She had come to Pondicherry on a spiritual quest but after spending some time in the Ashram, she along with her husband, Paul Richards, had to leave for France as during those days Europe was on the brink of the First World War. However, Europe was not her final destination and she returned to Pondicherry within six years, in 1920.

In 1926, when Sri Aurobindo retired into seclusion to work on the "Descent of the Supramental", which is considered to be the highest realization that could be attained on Earth, the mother, took charge of the Ashram upon herself and continued to work for the Ashram till she passed on, on 17 November 1972. As mentioned earlier, Sri

Aurobindo was the propounder of Integral Yoga, and to realize it fully he withdrew from public life, confined himself to a room and came out of his room only on the four 'Darshan' days, ie. (15 August, 24 November, 21 February and 24 April) in a calendar year to meet and bless his disciples. It is believed that for the Ashramites(disciples) each Darshan was "an experience, nearly a super-realization." Although, besides these four days Sri Aurobindo did not come out of his room, he maintained contact with the outside world, particularly with his disciples, through letters. These letters later came out in the form of a book called Letters on Yoga. It is interesting to note that India's independence coincided with Sri Aurobindo's seventy-fifth birthday. Sri Aurobindo did not see this as something incidental.

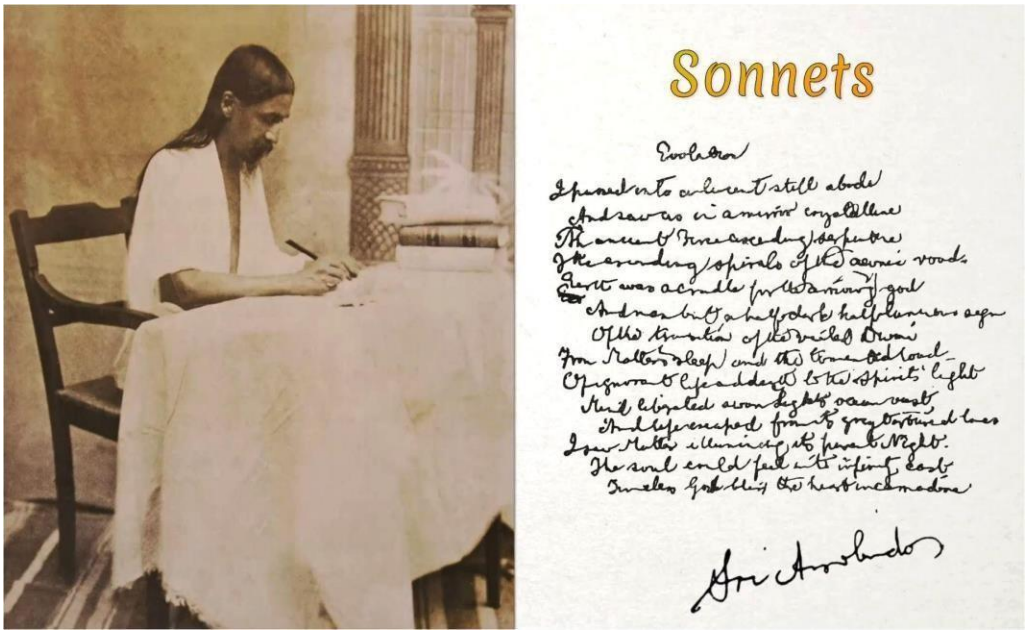
Sri Aurobindo had dedicated his life to his spiritual, literary and philosophical pursuit. Savitri, his magnum opus epic, a spiritual poem in blank verse of approximately 24,000 lines can be seen as the culmination of his life's sadhana. Sri Aurobindo passed away on the morning of 5 December 1950 at the age of seventy-eight. His passing left a void in the lives of the Ashramites. As Sri Aurobindo shed his mortal coil, the Mother stood by his side watching his soul depart. As the Mother witnessed Sri Aurobindo's passing, she had a "material sensation' of Sri Aurobindo's Supramental force passing into her body" and urged her to carry on the works that they had started together with honesty and dedication. After Sri Aurobindo's passing the Mother continued to work on the spiritual works the two had started together and provided motivation and guidance to the disciples.

5.4 THE PHILOSOPHY OF SRI AUROBINDO

As already mentioned in the introduction, Sri Aurobindo had many dimensions to his personality. He was a patriot, yogi, philosopher and poet, all rolled into one. Sri Aurobindo was a mystic- philosopher whose life's vision was to chart a course for human progress and spiritual evolution. He urged his fellow humans to aspire for a Higher State of Supramental existence which he believed could be attained by focusing on the inner life. Sri Aurobindo believed in leading by example. He retreated into seclusion in order to discover the meaning and true purpose of his life. By leading an inward and secluded life, Sri Aurobindo could perceive the ineffable mysteries of life. Sri Aurobindo's philosophy was not abstract but was a blossoming of his own mystical experiences. His life was to understand the inner self and he believed in making the living experience a Divine experience. All these lofty thoughts are discussed by him at length in his principal

philosophical work The Life Divine. The book begins with "man's awakening, proceeds through the process of creation and ends with the inner spirit gaining total mastery over the outer matter." The Life Divine can be seen as a theory of the spiritual evolution of man from a mental into a supramental being. In Sri Aurobindo views man's purpose on Earth is to achieve oneness with the Absolute Sri Aurobindo further confirmed that a Divine Life could be experienced on Earth by practicing Integral Yoga. Sri Aurobindo had firm faith that Integral Yoga had the power to transform man's state of mind and thereby his life. He urged his fellow countrymen to transform their minds into super minds so that they could experience a Divine Life on Earth itself. Sri Aurobindo laid stress on a Divine Life because he believed that through it a "new order of beings and a new earth-life" could be brought about on earth.

5.5 LITERARY ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF SRI AUROBINDO



Sri Aurobindo was a scholar of extraordinary calibre. Right from his formative years spent in England, he exhibited tremendous potential as a writer. His first body of literary output was published when he was just ten years of age. He won many accolades for his writings both at the school and the University levels. His well- known songs 'Songs to Myrtilla' and 'The Virgil of Thaliard' were written during his Cambridge days. On returning to India, he dedicated his time to the study of the Indian classics like the Vedas, Upanishads, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and translated major portions from these texts into English. Sri Aurobindo had a deep love for literature. Although he was much known to the world as a philosopher and a yogi, he primarily considered himself to be a

poet. Sri Aurobindo's love for literature was so immense that during the independence movement too when he was involved in the freedom struggle, he took out time and wrote some of his finest literary works like 'Baji Prabhou', 'Vidula', 'Perseus the Deliverer' (a five-act play), 'Urvasie' 'Love and Death' 'Chitrangada' and 'Uloupie'. All these works were rife with patriotic themes and highlight the importance of the doctrine of karma. Sri Aurobindo's literary blossoming took place in his "Cave of Tapasya" in Pondicherry. More than half of his collected poems, including 5000 lines of 'Illion', an incomplete epic which traces the Trojan saga, his celebrated love plays Eric and Vasuvadutta and even his magnum opus Savitri were all written at the Pondicherry Ashram.

5.6 SRI AUROBINDO: THE POET

Sri Aurobindo was one of the most influential figures of the Indian Renaissance. Not only was he a nationalist, a philosopher and a yogi, but was also a man of letters; a literary scholar, critic and a prolific poet. Sri Aurobindo's poetic output includes two epics, narratives, various short and long poems and a number of sonnets. Sri Aurobindo poetry is largely based upon Indian myths, legends, symbols and images. However, the beauty of Sri Aurobindo's poetry lies in the fact that although like Shakespeare he borrows his plots from mythologies and histories, yet he makes them richer and profounder by linking these ancient stories with the eternal quest of man and this is what makes his works universal and timeless. A Mystic: Sri Aurobindo was a mystic and being a mystic, his poems abound in mystical themes. Sri Aurobindo laid great stress on the Awakening of Consciousness. Sri Aurobindo firmly believed that the homo sapiens were still in the process of evolution and the next stage of evolution for him was that of a Superman. Through his practice Sri Aurobindo came to the realization that the attainment of this stage was very much possible here on the earth. He exhorted people to rise up above their petty existences and work towards a Greater Consciousness in order to experience the Divine Bliss – Satchidananda. Whenever one reads Sri Aurobindo's poems, especially the ones written during his Pondicherry phase, one needs to bear in mind that they are written by a seer and are not to be examined only on the surface. Sri Aurobindo saw divinity in each and every particle of the cosmos and recognized the presence of the divine omnipresence in many of his poems such as "Who" "Cosmic Consciousness" and "Because Thou Art". He was a Singer of Love, a Seer who saw Love as an essential force that brought about the Cosmic Creation. For him love was not just the narrow emotion that existed within the confines of the man-

woman relationship but the Power that brought about a transformation even in the grossest of humans. He saw death as a redeemer and believed that "someday surely the world too shall be saved from death by love." Sri Aurobindo's opus Savitri delves into the intricacies and depth of love.

Besides Savitri, there are other poems of Sri Aurobindo that also deal with various other aspects of love. Love can be witnessed as a vital force in Sri Aurobindo's poems. Many of Sri Aurobindo's early poems like 'Night by the Sea", 'the Lovers Complaint" "Love in Sorrow" deal with the sensuous aspect of love. 'The Vigil of Thailand's a chivalric romance set in Europe. Sri Aurobindo's idea of love broadened during the Baroda days and the poems written during this period explore the vastness of Love. Poems like "Immortal Love", "Kama", "The Birth of Sin" "Epiphany" fall under this category. Love in Sri Aurobindo reached its zenith during the Pondicherry days as it was here that the earthly love in his poems culminated as Divine Love. Poems like "Bride of the Fire" "Flame-Wind" "The Dream Boat" and "Because Thou Art" are dedicated to the Supreme Being.

Symbolism:

Sri Aurobindo is one of the greatest modern symbolist poets. It is said of Sri Aurobindo that he matured into a Yogi by growing along his symbols. Symbols recur time and again in the works of Sri Aurobindo. He draws symbols from the past as well as the modern times and uses them in his poems with dexterity and finesse. He exploits the various myths and uses them in the modern context to make us realize the purpose of our existence, so that we are able to rise above our ordinariness and become "Superhumans". It is interesting to note that Sri Aurobindo exploits symbols not just from mythical and legendary tales but also from science and esoteric traditions which give his poems a distinct quality. Sri Aurobindo's use of symbols is not superficial for through his use of symbols he wants the reader to experience higher realms of consciousness. For example, in his "Discovery of Science" Sri Aurobindo uses symbols from science in order to show that even a modern discipline like science is a mere cog in the larger scheme of things. As a Philosophical Poet: Sri Aurobindo was an influential philosopher and a profound thinker. His reputation as a philosopher is so great that it sometimes overshadows his achievement as a poet. His *The Life Divine* is a philosophical, mystical and a spiritual treatise which deals with "the salvation of human race." Unlike Western philosophers who have an inherent tendency to compartmentalize things, Sri Aurobindo believed in a harmonious existence.

Sri Aurobindo propounded the philosophy of cosmic salvation through spiritual evolution. According to the philosophy of cosmic salvation, "the paths to union with Brahman are two-way streets, or channels: enlightenment comes from above (thesis), while the spiritual mind (supermind) strives through yogic illumination to reach upward from below (antithesis). When these two forces blend, a gnostic individual is created (synthesis). This yogic illumination transcends both reason and intuition and eventually leads to the freeing of the individual from the bonds of individuality, and, by extension, all mankind will eventually achieve moksha (liberation). Thus, Aurobindo created a dialectic mode of salvation not only for the individual but for all humankind." It is ironic that Sri Aurobindo did not see himself as a philosopher. Perhaps he holds this view because he did not see philosophy merely as a mental construct but as a way of life. Through his poems, Sri Aurobindo explores the meaning of everything that the cosmos holds; life, death, nature, matter, man, love, spirituality, to name a few, and he tries to develop an integrated and a holistic view of everything in the cosmos. Sri Aurobindo's philosophical streak even finds way in his early poems such as "A Tree" in which he strikes an analogy between a tree and the earthbound man. His "Life and Death" views death as life disguised. This philosophy of Sri Aurobindo culminates in Savitri in which the true face and Supreme Lord of Life and Delight is revealed through Death.

5.7 KEY WORKS

Sri Aurobindo's writings cover poetry, philosophy, social thought, and spiritual practice, making him one of the most versatile figures in modern Indian literature. His greatest poetic achievement is *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, a vast epic that explores the journey of the soul, the confrontation with death, and the triumph of spiritual consciousness. In *The Life Divine*, he sets out his philosophy of spiritual evolution, explaining how humanity is destined to rise towards a higher state of being through the realization of the "Supermind." Complementing this, *The Synthesis of Yoga* provides a systematic exposition of his spiritual discipline known as Integral Yoga, which seeks to harmonize the paths of knowledge, devotion, and action. His *Essays on the Gita* reinterpret the Bhagavad Gita for modern readers, emphasizing its relevance for both worldly action and spiritual growth. In *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity*, he reflects on society, culture, and the future of humanity, envisioning a world guided by spiritual values rather than material divisions. His literary works also include *Collected Poems and Plays*, which reveal his mastery of lyrical and dramatic expression, and *Letters on Yoga*, a

compilation of his guidance to disciples on spiritual practice. Together, these works demonstrate Aurobindo's ability to merge poetic imagination with philosophical depth, offering a vision of life that integrates nationalism, spirituality, and universal human progress.

Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol

This epic poem, running to nearly 24,000 lines, is Sri Aurobindo's magnum opus and one of the longest poems in the English language. It retells the ancient Indian legend of Savitri and Satyavan, but transforms it into a symbolic narrative of the soul's journey. Savitri, the heroine, confronts Death itself to reclaim her husband, symbolizing the eternal struggle of the human spirit against mortality. The poem blends myth, philosophy, and mysticism, presenting Aurobindo's vision of spiritual evolution and the triumph of consciousness. It is both a literary masterpiece and a spiritual scripture, offering profound insights into yoga, destiny, and the transformative power of love.

The Life Divine

This philosophical treatise is the cornerstone of Aurobindo's thought. It explores the nature of existence, the purpose of life, and humanity's potential for spiritual evolution. Aurobindo argues that human beings are not limited to the mental plane but are destined to ascend to a higher level of consciousness — the "Supermind." The book systematically explains how matter, life, and mind are stages in a divine unfolding, and how spiritual realization can transform human life. It is regarded as one of the most comprehensive works of modern Indian philosophy, bridging Eastern spiritual traditions with Western rational inquiry.

The Synthesis of Yoga

This work provides a detailed exposition of Aurobindo's spiritual practice known as Integral Yoga. Unlike traditional yogas that emphasize one path — such as knowledge (Jnana), devotion (Bhakti), or action (Karma) — Integral Yoga seeks to harmonize all paths into a unified discipline. The book explains how each aspect of human nature can be transformed through spiritual practice, leading to the realization of the divine in everyday life. It is both practical and philosophical, guiding seekers on how to integrate spiritual growth with worldly responsibilities.

Essays on the Gita

In this work, Aurobindo reinterprets the Bhagavad Gita for modern readers. He

emphasizes that the Gita is not merely a text of renunciation but a call to action rooted in spiritual awareness. Aurobindo highlights the balance between worldly duties and spiritual realization, showing how the Gita teaches the integration of life and yoga. His essays present the Gita as a timeless guide for harmonizing action, devotion, and knowledge, making it relevant for both spiritual seekers and those engaged in social or political life.

The Human Cycle

This book reflects Aurobindo's vision of social and cultural evolution. He traces the development of human society through stages such as symbolic, typal, conventional, individualistic, and subjective ages. Aurobindo argues that humanity is moving towards a spiritual age, where collective life will be guided by inner values rather than external structures. The work is significant because it connects his philosophy of consciousness with practical ideas about the future of civilization.

The Ideal of Human Unity

In this text, Aurobindo examines the possibilities of global unity and the challenges of nationalism, internationalism, and cultural diversity. He envisions a future where humanity transcends divisions of race, nation, and religion to achieve a spiritual unity. While acknowledging political and social realities, he insists that true unity must be based on spiritual consciousness rather than coercion. The book remains relevant in discussions of globalization and world peace.

5.8 "THE STONE GODDESS": THE TEXT

Text:

In a town of gods, housed in a little shrine,
From sculptured limbs the Godhead looked at me, –
A living Presence deathless and divine,
A Form that harboured all infinity.
The great World-Mother and her mighty will
Inhabited the earth's abysmal sleep,
Voiceless, omnipotent, inscrutable,
Mute in the desert and the sky and deep.
Now veiled with mind she dwells and speaks no word,

Voiceless, inscrutable, omniscient,

Hiding until our soul has seen, has heard
The secret of her strange embodiment,

One in the worshipper and the immobile shape,

A beauty and mystery flesh or stone can drape.

5.9 ABOUT THE POEM: "THE STONE GODDESS"

Sri Aurobindo's "The Stone Goddess" is a devotional and mystical poem that reflects his spiritual philosophy and poetic vision. The poem was inspired by his darshan of the goddess Kali at the Dakshineswar temple, where he experienced a profound transformation: the stone idol of the goddess, seemingly lifeless and inert, suddenly radiated divine energy and presence. This moment of vision became the foundation of the poem, which describes how matter can be infused with spirit, and how the divine can manifest through physical forms.

The poem begins with the image of the goddess as a stone idol, symbolizing permanence, tradition, and the material world. Yet, through the poet's mystical perception, the idol comes alive, embodying Shakti — the cosmic energy that sustains creation. The transformation from stone to living presence is not merely physical but deeply symbolic, representing the awakening of consciousness and the realization that divinity is immanent in all things. Aurobindo uses rich imagery and symbolic contrasts to convey this experience. The static, cold, and lifeless qualities of stone are juxtaposed with the dynamic, radiant, and awe-inspiring qualities of the goddess when she reveals herself. The poem thus becomes a meditation on the union of matter and spirit, showing that the divine is not distant or abstract but present in the world around us, waiting to be realized through spiritual vision.

Beyond its devotional aspect, "The Stone Goddess" also carries cultural and national significance. The goddess embodies Shakti, which in Indian tradition represents strength, energy, and liberation. In the context of Aurobindo's nationalist thought, the goddess becomes a symbol of India itself — a nation that may appear subdued or inert under colonial rule but is alive with spiritual power and destined to awaken.

Stylistically, the poem combines lyrical beauty with philosophical depth. Its tone is reverent, mystical, and awe-filled, capturing the intensity of spiritual experience. The language is vivid and symbolic, making the poem both a personal record of mystical vision

and a universal reflection on the nature of divinity. In essence, "The Stone Goddess" is not just about a temple idol; it is about the realization that spirit permeates matter, that the divine can be encountered in the most ordinary forms, and that literature can serve as a bridge between mystical experience and cultural identity.

• CRITICAL ANALYSIS

"The Stone Goddess" is a profound meditation on mystical vision. Through the transformation of a stone idol into a living goddess, Aurobindo illustrates the immanence of the divine, the unity of matter and spirit, and the awakening of consciousness. The poem is devotional, philosophical, and symbolic, making it a key text for understanding his integration of poetry, spirituality, and cultural identity.

"In a town of gods, housed in a little shrine,
From sculptured limbs the Godhead looked at me, –
A living Presence deathless and divine,
A Form that harboured all infinity."

Explanation:

The poem opens with the image of a stone idol in a shrine. At first, the goddess appears as a sculpted figure, lifeless and material. Yet, through the poet's mystical perception, the idol radiates presence and consciousness. The phrase "harboured all infinity" suggests that the divine is not confined to abstract realms but can manifest through finite forms. This stanza sets the tone of awe and reverence, showing how matter can become a vessel of divinity.

"The great World-Mother and her mighty will
Inhabited the earth's abysmal sleep,
Voiceless, omnipotent, inscrutable,
Mute in the desert and the sky and deep."

Explanation:

Here, the goddess is identified as the "World-Mother," symbolizing Shakti, the cosmic energy that sustains creation. Though she appears silent and immobile, her presence is

omnipotent and inscrutable. The "earth's abysmal sleep" reflects humanity's ignorance of her power, while "mute in the desert and the sky and deep" conveys her hidden yet pervasive presence. This stanza emphasizes the paradox of divinity: outwardly still, yet inwardly dynamic and all-encompassing.

"Now veiled with mind she dwells and speaks no word,
Voiceless, inscrutable, omniscient,
Hiding until our soul has seen, has heard
The secret of her strange embodiment,"

Explanation:

This stanza highlights the goddess's concealment. She is "veiled with mind," meaning that human perception, limited by intellect, cannot easily grasp her essence. She remains silent and inscrutable, waiting for the soul to awaken. Only through spiritual vision can one perceive the "secret of her strange embodiment" — the mystery of spirit dwelling in matter. This reflects Aurobindo's philosophy of Integral Yoga, where higher consciousness reveals truths hidden from ordinary perception.

"One in the worshipper and the immobile shape,
A beauty and mystery flesh or stone can drape."

Explanation:

The final stanza resolves the tension between matter and spirit. The goddess is revealed as one with the worshipper, showing the unity between devotee and deity. The idol, though immobile, becomes alive with beauty and mystery, embodying divine presence. The lines suggest that both flesh (human form) and stone (idol) can serve as vessels of the divine. This conclusion emphasizes the immanence of the divine and the possibility of experiencing spiritual truth in everyday forms.

5.11 MAJOR THEMES

5.11.1 Divinity in Matter

One of the central themes of "The Stone Goddess" is the idea that spirit can inhabit matter. At first, the goddess appears as a lifeless stone idol, "sculptured limbs" without movement or voice. Yet, through mystical perception, the idol radiates presence and consciousness, becoming "a living presence deathless and divine." This transformation illustrates Sri Aurobindo's belief that divinity is not confined to abstract or transcendent realms but is immanent, present even in inert material forms. The stone, often seen as cold and lifeless, becomes a vessel of infinite energy. This theme challenges the ordinary distinction between matter and spirit, suggesting that the divine permeates all existence and can be realized through spiritual vision. It also reflects our Indian tradition of murti worship, where idols are not merely taken as symbolic rather living embodiments of the divine when approached with devotion.

5.11.2 Mystical Awakening

The poem dramatizes the moment of mystical awakening, when the poet perceives the goddess not as stone but as the "World-Mother" inhabiting "the earth's abysmal sleep." This awakening is sudden, intense, and transformative — a "revelation's lightning blaze" that alters perception. Aurobindo suggests that spiritual truth is hidden until the soul is ready to perceive it. The goddess remains "mute" and "voiceless" until the devotee's consciousness opens to her presence. This theme highlights the importance of inner awakening in spiritual practice: divinity is always present, but only mystical vision allows one to experience it directly. The poem thus becomes a record of a spiritual breakthrough, where ordinary perception is replaced by a higher consciousness.

5.11.3 Concealment and Revelation

Another key theme is the paradox of concealment and revelation. The goddess is described as "veiled with mind," silent and inscrutable, hiding her essence until the soul has "seen, has heard / The secret of her strange embodiment." This suggests that the divine deliberately conceals itself within matter, waiting for the seeker's consciousness to evolve. The veil of mind represents human limitation — intellect and ordinary perception cannot grasp the fullness of spirit. Revelation occurs only when the soul transcends these limits. This theme reflects Aurobindo's philosophy of Integral Yoga, where spiritual progress involves unveiling deeper layers of consciousness until the divine truth is revealed.

5.11.4 Unity of Worshipper and Deity

The final stanza emphasizes the unity between worshipper and deity: "One in the worshipper and the immobile shape." This theme asserts that divinity is not external but internal, realized in the devotee's consciousness. The idol, though immobile, becomes alive with "beauty and mystery," embodying the divine presence. The unity of devotee and deity reflects the non-dualistic vision of Indian spirituality, where the human soul and the divine are ultimately one. It also illustrates Aurobindo's belief that spiritual realization is not about escape from the world but about transformation of human life into divine life.

5.11.5 National and Cultural Identity

Though devotional, the poem also resonates with nationalist undertones. The goddess embodies Shakti, the cosmic energy that sustains creation, but also symbolizes India's strength and resilience. Just as the stone idol awakens into living presence, India too, though subdued under colonial rule, holds immense spiritual power waiting to be realized. The poem thus becomes both a mystical meditation and a cultural metaphor, linking personal spiritual vision with collective national awakening.

5.12 SYMBOLS

5.12.1 Stone

The stone in the poem represents permanence, tradition, and the material world. At first, the idol is described as sculpted and lifeless, embodying the static nature of matter. Yet, through mystical vision, the stone becomes infused with divine energy, transforming into a living presence. This duality symbolizes the union of matter and spirit, showing that what appears inert can be a vessel of infinite consciousness. The stone thus becomes a metaphor for the hidden potential within the physical world, waiting to be awakened by spiritual perception.

5.12.2 Goddess / World-Mother

The goddess is the central symbol of the poem, embodying Shakti — the cosmic energy that sustains creation. She is described as omnipotent, inscrutable, and voiceless, reflecting both her hidden power and her transcendence beyond ordinary perception. As the "World-Mother," she represents not only divine energy but also the nurturing force of creation.

Her presence in the idol symbolizes the immanence of the divine in material forms, while her silence suggests that true understanding requires inner awakening.

5.12.3 Silence

Silence recurs throughout the poem, with the goddess described as "voiceless" and "mute." This silence is not emptiness but fullness — a presence beyond words. It symbolizes the hidden nature of divinity, which cannot be grasped through speech or intellect but only through spiritual vision. Silence here conveys mystery, depth, and the paradox of a power that is omnipotent yet concealed. It reflects Aurobindo's belief that the divine often remains veiled until the soul is ready to perceive it.

5.12.4 Worshipper and Idol

The unity between worshipper and idol is a powerful symbol in the poem. In the final stanza, Aurobindo writes that the goddess is "One in the worshipper and the immobile shape." This symbolizes the merging of human and divine consciousness, showing that devotion is not merely external but internal. The idol, though immobile, becomes alive through the devotee's vision, illustrating the idea that spiritual realization is achieved through inner transformation. This symbol reflects the non-dualistic vision of Indian spirituality, where the human soul and the divine are ultimately one.

5.12.5 Beauty and Mystery

The poem concludes with the goddess embodying "a beauty and mystery flesh or stone can drape." Beauty here symbolizes the aesthetic and spiritual radiance of the divine, while mystery conveys its inscrutable nature. Together, they suggest that divinity can manifest in both human and material forms, clothed in mystery yet accessible through devotion. This symbol reinforces the theme of immanence, showing that the divine can be encountered in everyday forms, whether in flesh or stone.

5.13 LITERARY DEVICES

- **Imagery**

Sri Aurobindo uses powerful imagery to transform the stone idol into a living goddess. Phrases like *"*sculptured limbs*"* and *"*a living Presence deathless and divine*"* create vivid

pictures that allow readers to visualize the transformation from inert matter to radiant divinity. The imagery is not merely descriptive but symbolic, helping readers experience the mystical vision alongside the poet. Through these images, the poem conveys both the physical reality of the idol and the spiritual truth hidden within it.

- **Symbolism**

Symbolism is central to the poem. The stone idol symbolizes matter and tradition, while the goddess embodies Shakti, the cosmic energy. Silence symbolizes the hidden nature of divinity, and the unity of worshipper and deity symbolizes spiritual realization. Each symbol carries layers of meaning, connecting personal mystical experience with universal philosophical truths. For example, the goddess as "World-Mother" symbolizes both the nurturing force of creation and India's cultural identity.

- **Contrast**

The poem relies heavily on contrast to highlight transformation. The lifelessness of stone is juxtaposed with the vitality of divine presence. Silence is contrasted with omnipotence, and concealment with revelation. These contrasts emphasize the paradox of divinity: outwardly still and mute, yet inwardly dynamic and infinite. By presenting such opposites, Aurobindo dramatizes the mystical moment when the eternal reveals itself through the temporal.

- **Personification**

The stone idol is personified as a living being. The "Godhead looked at me" suggests that the idol has consciousness and agency, transforming it from an object into a subject. This personification bridges the gap between matter and spirit, showing how the divine can inhabit physical forms. It also intensifies the devotional tone, as the goddess is not distant but actively engaging with the worshipper.

- **Tone**

The tone of the poem is reverent, mystical, and awe-filled. Aurobindo's choice of words — "deathless," "divine," "omnipotent," "inscrutable" — conveys the grandeur and mystery of the goddess. The tone reflects the intensity of spiritual vision, capturing both the humility of the devotee and the majesty of the divine presence.

- **Alliteration and Rhythm**

Sound devices such as alliteration enhance the meditative quality of the poem. For example, *"*Voiceless, omnipotent, inscrutable*"* uses repetition of consonant sounds to emphasize the goddess's qualities and create a rhythmic flow. The sonnet form itself provides a structured rhythm, mirroring the balance between silence and revelation, matter and spirit.

- **Metaphor**

Metaphor enriches the philosophical depth of the poem. The goddess as "World-Mother" is a metaphor for cosmic energy and creation. The "earth's abysmal sleep" metaphorically represents humanity's ignorance of divine presence. These metaphors elevate the poem beyond literal description, turning it into a meditation on universal truths.

5.14 SUMMING UP

In this unit you have studied Sri Aurobindo's "The Stone Goddess" which is a devotional sonnet that captures Sri Aurobindo's mystical vision of the divine manifesting in matter. Beginning with the image of a lifeless stone idol, the poem unfolds into a revelation of the goddess as Shakti, the cosmic energy that sustains creation. Through imagery, symbolism, and philosophical reflection, Aurobindo illustrates the immanence of the divine, the necessity of mystical awakening, and the unity of worshipper and deity. The poem is not only a record of personal spiritual experience but also a cultural metaphor, linking India's spiritual identity with its nationalist awakening. It stands as a profound example of how poetry can bridge devotion, philosophy, and cultural consciousness.

5.15 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*.

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and a History*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education.

Naik, M. K. *A History of Indian English Literature*.

Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

R.Y. Deshpande, *Sri Aurobindo and the Mother: Glimpses of Their Experiments*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems and Plays*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department.

Sri Aurobindo, *The Stone Goddess*, Poetry Foundation.

5.16 MODEL AND TERMINAL QUESTIONS

· Model Questions (for practice and discussion)

1. Explain how Sri Aurobindo uses imagery to transform the stone idol into a living presence.

2. Discuss the significance of silence in "The Stone Goddess".

3. How does the poem reflect Aurobindo's philosophy of Integral Yoga?

4. In what ways does the goddess symbolize India's cultural and national identity?

· Terminal Questions (for assessment)

1. Critically analyze the theme of divinity in matter as presented in "The Stone Goddess".

2. Examine the role of concealment and revelation in the poem.

3. Discuss the unity of worshipper and deity in the final stanza and its philosophical implications.

UNIT 6- JAYANTA MAHAPATRA "IN A NIGHT OF RAIN"

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Dear learners,

In the last unit you were acquainted with Sri Aurobindo-the great philosopher, yogi and a mystic. Now in this unit, you will study another major poet Jayanta Mahpatra and his life and works. Jayanta Mahapatra, is one of the most distinguished poets in Indian English literature and the first to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award for poetry in English. His poetry is deeply rooted in the cultural and geographical landscape of Odisha, blending local imagery with universal human concerns. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Mahapatra's verse is marked by stark realism, minimalist language, and a contemplative tone. He often explores themes of mortality, hunger, faith, and the paradoxes of Indian society, making his poetry both regionally grounded and globally resonant. Through poems such as "Dawn at Puri", "Hunger", "Indian Summer", and "In a Night of Rain*"* Mahapatra gives voice to the struggles of ordinary people while reflecting on the sacred and the existential. This unit will introduce his major work "In a Night of Rain", and analyze her selected poems, and highlight the literary devices, themes, and symbols that define his contribution to Indian English poetry.

The course comprises multiple components, with the Self-Learning Material (SLM) and counselling sessions being key elements. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the course content, it is essential that you engage with all these components in a balanced manner. As you are enrolled in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program, self-directed study plays a vital role in your academic success. Accordingly, each unit concludes with a list of suggested readings and references. You are strongly encouraged to consult these resources to enhance your comprehension and deepen your engagement with the subject matter

6.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to.

- Know Jayanta Mahapatra's life, literary career, and his place in Indian English poetry.
- To examine his major works, especially "In a Night of Rain", for its thematic and cultural significance.
- To understand how Mahapatra blends local Odia traditions, landscapes, and rituals with

universal human concerns such as mortality, faith, and suffering.

- To analyze the literary devices, imagery, and symbolism that shape his poetic style.
- To encourage critical reflection on how Mahapatra's poetry critiques social realities while preserving cultural identity.

6.3 JAYANTA MAHAPATRA: BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Born on 22 October 1928 into a prominent Odia Christian family Mahapatra received his early schooling at Stewart School in Cuttack, a well-known institution in Odisha. He is the first Indian poet to win a Sahitya Akademi award for English poetry He later pursued higher studies in science, completing his Master of Science (M.Sc.) degree in Physics from Patna University, Bihar. His training in science gave his poetry a distinctive precision and clarity, though his creative imagination was deeply influenced by the cultural and spiritual ethos of Odisha. Before gaining recognition as a poet, Mahapatra worked as a teacher of Physics in various colleges. His literary career began relatively late, in the 1960s and 1970s, when his poems started appearing in international journals. He quickly established himself as a major voice in Indian English poetry. His works often reflected the landscapes of Odisha, the rituals of Puri, and the social realities of poverty and marginalization. Mahapatra was part of a trio of poets who laid the foundations of Indian English Poetry, which included A.K.Ramanujan and R. Parthasarathy. He differed from the others in not being a product of Bombay school of poets. Over time, he managed to carve a quiet, tranquil poetic

voice of his own, different from those of his contemporaries Unlike many of his contemporaries,Mahapatra's poetry was marked by stark realism, minimalist imagery, and

contemplative tone.

Mahapatra became the **first Indian poet writing in English to win the Sahitya Akademi Award** in 1981 for his collection *Relationship*, which explored his bond with Odisha's cultural and historical heritage. He was also awarded the **Padma Shri in 2009**, India's fourth-highest civilian honor, though he returned it in **2015** as a protest against rising intolerance in the country. His most celebrated poems include "Hunger", "Indian Summer", and "Dawn at Puri", which remain widely anthologized and studied. Mahapatra continued writing until his final years, producing poetry that remained faithful to his minimalist style and contemplative vision. He passed away on **27 August 2023 in Cuttack, Odisha**, at the age of 94. His life reflects a life deeply rooted in Odisha's culture yet shaped by his scientific education and global literary recognition. His journey from a Physics teacher to one of India's most acclaimed poets highlights his unique ability to merge local traditions with universal human concerns.

6.4 LITERARY ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

- **Mahapatra's emergence as a poet**

Jayanta Mahapatra began publishing poetry in the late 1960s, and by the 1970s his work was appearing in international journals, marking him as one of the first Indian poets in English to gain global recognition. His early collections such as *A Rain of Rites* (1976) and *Burden of Waves and Fruit* (1976) has established his reputation for stark realism and contemplative tone. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he avoided romantic or celebratory modes, instead focusing on silence, suffering, and existential truths. Mahapatra's most celebrated work, *Relationship* (1980), won the **Sahitya Akademi Award**, making him the first Indian poet writing in English to receive this honor. This collection explored his deep bond with Odisha's cultural and historical landscape, weaving together myths, rituals, and personal reflections. In 2009, he was awarded the **Padma Shri**, India's fourth-highest civilian award, which he later returned in 2015 as a protest against rising intolerance in the country. His recognition extended internationally, with his poems widely anthologized and studied in universities across the world.

- **His Major Works**

Mahapatra's poetry collections include *Life Signs* (1983), *Indian Summer* (1980), *Temple* (1980), and *Bare Face* (2000). His individual poems such as "Hunger", "Indian Summer", and "Dawn at Puri" remain iconic, capturing the paradoxes of Indian society — poverty alongside ritual, devotion alongside despair. His verse often drew upon the landscapes of Odisha, particularly the sacred town of Puri and the Jagannath temple, blending local imagery with universal themes of mortality and faith. Mahapatra's contribution lies in his ability to merge regional rootedness with global resonance. He gave voice to the marginalized — widows, the poor, the hungry — while reflecting on the paradoxes of faith and ritual. His minimalist style, contemplative tone, and stark imagery set him apart from other Indian English poets. By confronting social realities and existential truths, Mahapatra expanded the scope of Indian English poetry, making it both a cultural chronicle and a universal meditation on human suffering

6.5 IN A NIGHT OF RAIN: THE TEXT

Behind this time of rain, the old town

stinking of mould and wet dogs' skins,

a mist of embarrassed thoughts slowly sweeps

the dark space at the river's edge where

our homeless women have put up their huts.

There's a sound of crying in there,

of an evening jasmine being born,

the sounds of satisfaction after love's being made.

Who cares why this frail flower raised its head

and smiled? Or when one loved

he merely quickened his death?

On a night such as this something

goes far away, into a world where

no one can follow anyone. An hour when

remembrance is vague, the unknown coastline

of a land disappearing into the sea. A time

when indecipherable words of a lost language

filter down the mossed stairs from the empty mouths
of men. Here

a man's heart is moved, but the feeling is needless

like that of serving my country which hangs above me:

a tall, rosewood-framed portrait of an ancestor

that had lost its light and meaning-

in that relentless space

where the water doesn't wet the earth anymore,

but has lost its purpose, like a benediction.

6.6 SUMMARY

Jayanta Mahapatra's "In a Night of Rain" portrays how a natural event like rainfall becomes a mirror of human vulnerability and suffering. Instead of romanticizing the rain, the poem presents it as a force that exposes poverty, discomfort, and helplessness. The leaking roof and damp surroundings symbolize the fragile lives of those who lack security, showing how nature intensifies their struggles. The poem also intertwines the physical reality of rain with reflections on human desire and greed. Mahapatra suggests that even in moments of deprivation, bodily needs and lust persist, revealing the tension between survival and desire. Rain thus becomes both a literal and metaphorical presence which is a reminder of exploitation, social injustice, and the inevitability of suffering.

By using stark imagery and a contemplative tone, Mahapatra transforms rain into a symbol of existential truth. It is not simply a seasonal phenomenon but a backdrop against which human frailty, mortality, and social inequality are revealed. In essence, the poem is a meditation on the paradox of nature and human existence: rain that should nurture life instead deepens despair, reflecting the harsh realities of poverty and the unrelenting vulnerability of the human condition.

6.7 CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND EXPLANATION

"In a Night of Rain" exemplifies Jayanta Mahapatra's distinctive style: stark realism, minimalist imagery, and contemplative tone. The poem is not a romanticized depiction of monsoon but a meditation on poverty, desire, mortality, and cultural decay. By situating the rain in a townscape of mould, dogs' skins, and homeless huts, Mahapatra grounds the poem in social reality, giving voice to the marginalized. Thematically, the poem explores the paradox of existence. Love and intimacy are juxtaposed with death, birth with decay, and memory with loss. Rain, traditionally a symbol of fertility and renewal, is transformed into a metaphor for futility and erosion. This inversion reflects Mahapatra's existential vision, where human life is fragile, transient, and often meaningless.

The poem also critiques social and cultural structures. The fading portrait of the ancestor symbolizes the emptiness of inherited pride and patriotic duty, while the "lost language" suggests cultural disintegration. Mahapatra's Christian background allows him to view Hindu rituals and Indian traditions with both reverence and critical distance, creating a unique duality in his work. Literarily, the poem is marked by powerful imagery, irony, and symbolism. The jasmine flower, the leaking huts, the lost coastline, and the portrait all serve as metaphors for fragility, decay, and futility. The tone is contemplative yet bleak, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable truths about poverty, mortality, and cultural erosion.

Explanation of the poem

The poem opens with vivid imagery of an old town during rain, described as "stinking of mould and wet dogs' skins." This sets a bleak, decaying atmosphere, where rain intensifies the sense of poverty and neglect. The "mist of embarrassed thoughts" sweeping across the river's edge evokes the psychological weight of suffering, while the huts of homeless women symbolize marginalization and vulnerability.

Mahapatra then juxtaposes sounds of crying with the delicate image of "an evening jasmine being born" and the satisfaction after love. This contrast highlights the paradox of human existence: pain and joy, birth and decay, intimacy and mortality coexisting in the same space. The poet questions the meaning of love, suggesting that to love is to hasten death, thereby linking desire with existential futility. The middle section of the poem shifts into a more abstract meditation. Rain becomes a backdrop for memory and loss, where "remembrance is vague" and "indecipherable words of a lost language" filter down from empty mouths. This imagery conveys cultural erosion and the fading of meaning in human life. The coastline disappearing into the sea symbolizes the vanishing of certainty, identity,

and continuity.

In the final section, Mahapatra reflects on the emptiness of patriotic duty and ancestral legacy. The portrait of an ancestor, once a symbol of pride, has "lost its light and meaning." Similarly, water that "doesn't wet the earth anymore" becomes a metaphor for ritual and tradition that have lost their purpose. The poem closes with a sense of futility, where even natural forces like rain are stripped of renewal and reduced to emptiness.

"Behind this time of rain, the old town
stinking of mould and wet dogs' skins,
a mist of embarrassed thoughts slowly sweeps
the dark space at the river's edge where our homeless women have put up their huts."

Explanation:

The poem opens with stark imagery of decay and poverty. The rain intensifies the stench of mould and wet dogs' skins, creating a sense of neglect. The "mist of embarrassed thoughts" suggests collective guilt or shame, while the huts of homeless women highlight social marginalization. Mahapatra sets the tone of suffering and vulnerability.

"There's a sound of crying in there,
of an evening jasmine being born,
the sounds of satisfaction after love's being made.
Who cares why this frail flower raised its head and smiled?"

Explanation:

Here, Mahapatra juxtaposes pain with fragile beauty and intimacy. The crying contrasts with the delicate birth of jasmine and the satisfaction after love, showing how suffering and joy coexist. The rhetorical question underscores the futility of such beauty in a world of poverty, suggesting that even love and renewal are fleeting.

"Or when one loved he merely quickened his death?
On a night such as this something goes far away,
into a world where no one can follow anyone.
An hour when remembrance is vague, the unknown coastline

of a land disappearing into the sea."

Explanation:

Love is linked to mortality, as desire hastens death. Rain becomes a backdrop for existential reflection, where memory fades and certainty vanishes. The disappearing coastline symbolizes the erosion of identity and continuity, leaving only vagueness and loss. Mahapatra emphasizes the transient nature of human experience.

"A time when indecipherable words of a lost language
filter down the mossed stairs from the empty mouths of men.
Here a man's heart is moved, but the feeling is needless
like that of serving my country which hangs above me:"

Explanation:

This section reflects cultural erosion and the emptiness of inherited values. The "lost language" symbolizes fading traditions, while the "empty mouths of men" suggest silence and disconnection. Even patriotic duty feels meaningless, compared to the suffering around. Mahapatra critiques hollow rituals and inherited pride.

"a tall, rosewood-framed portrait of an ancestor
that had lost its light and meaning—
in that relentless space where the water doesn't wet the earth anymore,
but has lost its purpose, like a benediction."

Explanation:

The closing lines deepen the sense of futility. The ancestor's portrait, once a symbol of pride, has lost significance, just as water has lost its purpose. Rain, which should nurture, becomes empty and ritualistic. The poem ends with a bleak meditation on decay, cultural disintegration, and existential despair.

6.8 MAJOR THEMES

6.8.1 Poverty and Marginalization

The poem begins with the image of an old town "stinking of mould and wet dogs' skins," immediately evoking decay and neglect. At the river's edge, homeless women have built fragile huts, which become symbols of social marginalization. Rain, instead of offering

renewal, intensifies their suffering. Mahapatra highlights how poverty strips dignity and exposes the vulnerable to both nature's harshness and society's indifference.

6.8.2 Love, Desire, and Mortality

Mahapatra juxtaposes sounds of crying with the delicate birth of jasmine and the satisfaction after love. This paradox reflects the coexistence of suffering and intimacy. Yet he questions the meaning of love, suggesting that "when one loved he merely quickened his death." Desire is thus linked to mortality, showing how even joy and intimacy are fleeting, hastening decay rather than transcending it.

6.8.3 Memory and Cultural Erosion

The poem actually meditates on fading traditions and collective memory. The lines "Indecipherable words of a lost language" symbolize cultural disintegration, while the coastline disappearing into the sea reflects the vanishing of certainty and identity. Mahapatra portrays memory as vague and unstable, suggesting that cultural heritage, like language and land, is eroded by time and neglect.

6.8.4 Futility of Ritual and Duty

In the final section of the poem, Mahapatra critiques hollow rituals and inherited pride that exists in our society. The portrait of an ancestor, once a symbol of patriotic duty, has "lost its light and meaning." Similarly, water that "doesn't wet the earth anymore" becomes a metaphor for rituals that have now lost their purpose. The poem as a matter of fact questions the relevance of tradition and duty when they fail to address present suffering.

6.8.5 Existential Reflection

Underlying the entire poem is an existential tone. The Rain, traditionally a symbol of fertility, is transformed into a metaphor for futility. Silence, emptiness, and decay dominate the imagery, leaving readers with a sense of despair. Mahapatra suggests that human existence is fragile, transient, and often meaningless, caught between desire, poverty, and cultural erosion.

6.9 SYMBOLS

6.9.1 Rain

Rain is the central symbol of the poem. Traditionally associated with fertility, cleansing, and renewal, Mahapatra subverts this expectation by presenting rain as a force of discomfort and futility. The town "stinking of mould and wet dogs' skins" shows how rain intensifies decay rather than bringing freshness. Later, water that "doesn't wet the earth anymore," symbolizes the loss of purpose and meaning. Rain here becomes a metaphor for suffering, erosion, and the emptiness of rituals that fail to nurture life.

6.8.2 Homeless Women's Huts

The poem depicts huts at the river's edge, built by homeless women, that symbolize marginalization and vulnerability. These symbols represent the precariousness of existence for the poor, who are exposed to both nature's harshness and society's neglect. These fragile shelters highlight how poverty strips dignity and security, and makes even a natural phenomenon like rain a threat rather than a blessing to mankind.

6.8.3 Evening Jasmine

The jasmine flower as depicted in the poem, born amid crying and dampness, symbolizes fragile beauty and fleeting joy. Its delicate presence contrasts with the surrounding decay, yet Mahapatra here questions its significance — "Who cares why this frail flower raised its head and smiled?" The jasmine here becomes a metaphor for the paradox of existence, where beauty and renewal are meaningless in a world dominated by poverty and mortality.

6.8.4 Lost Language

The "indecipherable words of a lost language" filtering down from "empty mouths of men" symbolize cultural erosion and the fading of collective identity. This image conveys the disintegration of tradition and memory, where words lose their meaning and heritage dissolves into silence. Mahapatra uses this symbol to reflect on the fragility of culture in the face of neglect and modern disconnection.

6.8.5 Ancestor's Portrait

The rosewood-framed portrait of an ancestor, once a proud emblem of heritage and patriotic duty, has "lost its light and meaning." This fading image symbolizes the emptiness of inherited pride and rituals that no longer resonate with contemporary realities. It critiques hollow nationalism and ancestral legacy when divorced from compassion and relevance, showing how tradition can become meaningless over time.

6.10 Literary Devices

Mahapatra employs a range of literary devices to heighten the impact of the poem "In a Night of Rain":

- **Imagery:** Vivid sensory images such as "stinking of mould and wet dogs' skins" and "indecipherable words of a lost language" create a bleak atmosphere of decay and cultural erosion.
- **Symbolism:** Rain, jasmine, lost language, ancestor's portrait, and coastline serve as layered symbols of poverty, fragility, mortality, and futility.
- **Juxtaposition:** The poem contrasts crying with the birth of jasmine, and intimacy with death, highlighting the paradox of human existence.
- **Irony:** Rain, usually a symbol of fertility, is ironically depicted as purposeless, intensifying suffering rather than renewal.
- **Metaphor:** The coastline disappearing into the sea and water that "doesn't wet the earth anymore" are metaphors for loss, instability, and the futility of tradition.
- **Tone:** The contemplative yet bleak tone underscores existential despair, compelling readers to reflect on the fragility of life and meaning.

6.11. SUMMING UP

In this unit you read the poem "In a Night of Rain" which is a powerful meditation on poverty, desire, mortality, and cultural decay. Mahapatra transforms rain from a symbol of renewal into one of futility, exposing the fragility of human existence. Through stark imagery and layered symbolism, he critiques social neglect, questions the relevance of love and tradition, and reflects on the erosion of cultural identity. The poem's strength lies in its ability to merge local, everyday images with universal existential concerns, making it both a social document and a philosophical reflection.

6.12. REFERENCES

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6.13. MODEL AND TERMINAL QUESTIONS

Model Questions

1. Discuss the use of rain as a central symbol in Jayanta Mahapatra's "In a Night of Rain".
2. How does Mahapatra juxtapose suffering and intimacy in the poem?
3. Explain the significance of the ancestor's portrait in the context of cultural erosion.
4. Identify and analyze two literary devices used in the poem.

Terminal Questions

1. Critically appreciate Jayanta Mahapatra's "In a Night of Rain" with reference to its themes and symbols.
2. How does the poem reflect both social realities and existential concerns?
3. In what ways does Mahapatra subvert traditional associations of rain in Indian poetry?
4. Evaluate the poem as a meditation on poverty, mortality, and the futility of rituals.

UNIT 7 A. K. RAMANUJAN: "A RIVER"

7.1. INTRODUCTION

In the previous four units you studied an assortment of poems by four Indian poets writing in English i.e. Sarojini Naidu, Sri Aurobindo, Toru Dutt and Jayant Mahapatra. In this unit you will be introduced to A. K. Ramanujan's one of the most celebrated poems "A River". In this poem, Ramanujan traces the changes of life through the symbol of a river. He frequently juxtaposes his views of contemporary American society with his South Indian Brahmin origin in his poems. He explores the concept of human identity in his poem "A River," examining how a person is shaped by their cultural heritage, personal history, and memories. The poem demonstrates his skill to blend contemporary literary sensibilities with Indian imagery to create a work that is both personal and universal.

He is one of the most distinctive and influential voices of twentieth century poetry, whose work continues to provoke, unsettle, and captivate readers across generations. Ramanujan is regarded as one of the best Indian English poets by Ezekiel, and Parthasarathy. His poetry uses a variety of styles that are not seen in the majority of Indian English writers, and it reflects shape without formal organization. His art creates a new, unique form by fusing European and Indian models. Through his work, Ramanujan demonstrates that Indian poets can be both modern and deeply rooted in their own literary and cultural traditions.

Dear Learner,

The course comprises multiple components, with the Self-Learning Material (SLM) and counselling sessions being key elements. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the course content, it is essential that you engage with all these components in a balanced manner. As you are enrolled in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program, self-directed study plays a vital role in your academic success. Accordingly, each unit concludes with a list of suggested readings and references. You are strongly encouraged to consult these resources to enhance your comprehension and deepen your engagement with the subject matter.

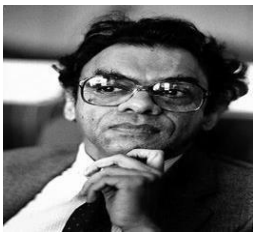
7.2. OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, you will be able to

- To understand the life and literary journey of A.K. Ramanujan.
- To explore how the poet uses recollections and experiences to examine his cultural and personal identity.

- To recognize the influence of Ramanujan's South Indian Brahmin heritage on his imagery and perspective.
- To analyze the poem "A River" in terms of its themes, tone, symbolism, and stylistic devices.
- To develop interpretative and critical thinking skills through close reading and textual analysis.

7.3. A.K. RAMANUJAN: HIS LIFE AND LEGACY



Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan (1929–1993) was a towering figure in modern Indian literature, renowned for his multifaceted contributions as a poet, translator, folklorist, linguist, and scholar. Born on March 18, 1929, in Mysore, Karnataka, into a culturally rich family—his father, Attipat Asuri Krishnaswami, was a respected mathematician and astrologer with deep interests in classical languages—Ramanujan was exposed early to a confluence of traditions and languages that would later shape his intellectual and creative pursuits. He began his education at Marimallappa's High School and Maharaja College in Mysore, initially studying physics before switching to English literature at his father's encouragement.

His academic journey took him to Indiana University Bloomington as a Fulbright Scholar, where he earned a PhD in Linguistics, followed by a fellowship at Deccan College. Ramanujan's teaching career spanned both India and the United States, with early positions in Quilon, Belgaum, and Baroda, and a long-standing tenure at the University of Chicago, where he held appointments in the Departments of Linguistics, South Asian Languages and Civilizations, and the Committee on Social Thought. He also taught at prestigious institutions such as Harvard, Michigan, Wisconsin, UC Berkeley, and Carleton College. He is a tri-lingual writer, who shows his mastery over English, Tamil and Kannada. While English is the language of his creative works, Tamil and Kannada are the mediums of his translations. He has two volumes of verse: *The Striders* (1988) and *Relations:* Poems (1991). The former immediately establishes Ramanujan as a poet of striking imagery and perfect language. His poetic voice tends to be vigorous and his sensibility remains essentially modern.

A prolific writer, Ramanujan authored and translated over two dozen books, including the acclaimed *Speaking of Śiva* (1993), a translation of medieval Kannada devotional poetry that was nominated for the National Book Award in the U.S., and *Folktales from India* (1991), a collection of oral stories from twenty-two Indian languages.

His translation of U.R. Ananthamurthy's Kannada novel *Samskara* is considered a landmark in Indian literary translation. Ramanujan's original poetry, published in both English and Kannada, is celebrated for its introspective depth, cultural resonance, and linguistic precision. His posthumous collection, *The Collected Poems*, earned him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1999. Among his many honours were the Padma Shri (1998), a MacArthur Fellowship (1983), and election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1990). He also delivered the prestigious Radhakrishnan Memorial Lectures at Oxford in 1988. Ramanujan's work is distinguished by its integration of classical, regional, and oral Indian traditions into modern literary forms, and his scholarship helped shape contemporary translation theory and the study of South Asian literature. Despite spending much of his career in American academia, his influence on post-Independence Indian English poetry remains profound. Today, he is remembered not only as a pioneering bilingual poet but also as a visionary thinker who bridged cultures, languages, and disciplines with extraordinary insight and grace.

7.3.1 Ramanujan's Pace in Contemporary Indo-English Poetry

Ramanujan was simultaneously a linguist, anthropologist, translator, and poet; yet it is primarily as a poet that his reputation is likely to endure. He stands out as a poet of remarkable ability and promise. Dr. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes that Ramanujan has "established himself as one of the most gifted among the 'new' poets" (Indian Writing in English, p. 891). In an era marked by the rapid and often indiscriminate proliferation of Indo-English poets, Ramanujan emerges as a significant and reassuring presence. His work places him alongside major contemporaries such as Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Pritish Nandi, and Keki Daruwalla.

Ramanujan's poetry achieves a harmonious balance between emotion and intellect, feeling and thought. It brings together memory and desire, personal experience and literary tradition, youth and maturity, as well as Indian and American sensibilities. Although he occasionally grapples with cultural ambivalence and personal conflict, it is noteworthy that he does not surrender his artistic vision to Western themes and conventions. Instead, he firmly retains his Indian ethos, demonstrating his creative strength without compromising his cultural allegiance. This deep-rooted Indianness lends a distinctive and enduring appeal to his poetry.

7.3.2 Ramanujan's Influential Works

Ramanujan's poems, translations, essays, and folklore studies are examples of a rich fusion of cultural diversity, linguistic accuracy, and introspection. His oeuvre reflects a deep engagement with themes of memory, identity, tradition, and the tensions between modernity and heritage. Ramanujan's work crosses national and linguistic boundaries, establishing him as a global thinker and bilingual poet, even though he is sometimes placed within the post-Independence Indian English literary tradition. His contributions continue to provoke critical discourse in fields as diverse as literary theory, translation studies, folklore, and South Asian cultural history. The following are some of his foundational works:

1. ***The Striders*** **(1988):** Ramanujan's first significant book of poetry in English, The Striders, demonstrates his skill in fusing cultural symbols with personal experience. His deep observations of daily life and his preoccupation with family dynamics, particularly the father-son interaction, are reflected in the poetry. Ramanujan's deft use of rhythm and imagery, as well as his ability to arouse Indian sensitivities via a modernist perspective, have been praised by critics. A lyrical voice that is both cosmopolitan and introspective emerges in this collection.

2. ***Speaking of Śiva*** **(1993):** This groundbreaking translation of medieval Kannada vacanas, or devotional poems, introduces English-speaking audiences to the Virashaiva saints' deep spirituality. Ramanujan's translation is lauded for its intellectual rigor and poetic accuracy, which preserve the spiritual depth and immediacy of the original passages. The book, which has been nominated for the National Book Award in the United States, combines literary scholarship with oral tradition. It highlights Ramanujan's role as a cultural mediator and remains a seminal book in religious studies and comparative literature.

3. ***Folktales from India*** **(1991):** Through the compilation and translation of oral stories from twenty-two Indian languages, this anthology offers a comprehensive picture of India's storytelling traditions. The collection, which captures the diversity of regional dialects while stressing common story patterns, is well known for its literary sophistication and anthropological sensitivity. Scholars have praised the work for its contribution to folklore studies and for opposing colonial and homogenized representations of Indian culture. It demonstrates Ramanujan's unwavering commitment to preserving and comprehending India's oral culture.

4. ***The Collected Poems* (1999):** He published *The Collected Poems* after his death, *which* brings together his English-language poetry, showing the full development of his poetic evolution. The poems explore the themes of exile, linguistic hybridity, cultural memory, and existential reflection. Ramanujan's poetic voice—nuanced, complex, and intellectually rich—continues to influence contemporary Indian poets writing in English. The collection earned him the **Sahitya Akademi Award** in 1999, affirming his reputation as a major figure in Indian literature.

Ramanujan's academic and literary heritage is distinguished by its interdisciplinarity and depth. His work amalgamates classical Indian traditions, regional languages, and modernist poetics, while also advancing contemporary theories of translation and cultural identity. Ramanujan as a poet, translator, folklorist, and linguist, remains a key figure in the study of South Asian literature and his writings continue to resonate across disciplines and generations.

7.4. "A RIVER": THE TEXT

"A River*"* is one of Ramanujan's most celebrated and widely anthologised poems, first published in his debut collection *The Striders* (1988). Ramanujan composed "A River" during a period of profound reflection on tradition and modernity, the poem exemplifies his signature style: ironic, layered, and deeply attuned to linguistic and cultural nuance. "A River" questions the idealised vision of nature and suffering in classical Tamil poetry and contrasts them with the lived realities of ordinary people. The poem transcends mere intertextuality to interrogate broader themes though rooted in literary tradition of social indifference, poetic responsibility, and the politics of representation.

In Madurai,
city of temples and poets,
who sang of cities and temples,
every summer

a river dries to a trickle
in the sand,
baring the sand ribs,
straw and women's hair
clogging the watergates
at the rusty bars
under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them
the wet stones glistening like sleepy
crocodiles, the dry ones
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun
The poets only sang of the floods.

He was there for a day
when they had the floods.
People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda as usual.

The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman

drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls
even before birth.

He said:
the river has water enough
to be poetic
about only once a year
and then
it carries away
in the first half-hour
three village houses,
a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda
and one pregnant woman
expecting identical twins
with no moles on their bodies,
with different coloured diapers
to tell them apart

Glossary

trickle: flowing slowly in a very small amount
baring: laying bare
clogging: blocking
precise: exact
cobbled: made of cobblestones which are stones used for making road

7.5. BACKGROUND OF THE POEM

"A River" arises from Ramanujan's deep engagement with both classical Indian literary traditions and the ground realities of modern India. The poem resists the romanticization of suffering in traditional Tamil poetry, especially the Sangam poets' romantic portrayals of natural calamities like floods. It is set in Madurai, renowned for its temples and literary heritage—the poem contrasts the grandeur of cultural memory with the stark indifference to

human suffering. Ramanujan was trained as both a linguist and a scholar of Indian literature and draws on his intimate knowledge of Tamil poetics to expose how classical verse often glossed over the tragedies of ordinary people.

The speaker of this poem adopts a tone of quiet irony, observing how both ancient and modern poets celebrate the river's seasonal flooding while ignoring the devastation it brings to the marginalized. The entire poem revolves around the river that "carries off three village houses, a couple of cows named Gopi and Brinda, and one pregnant woman." It portrays society's dispassionate detachment, underscoring the erasure of individual suffering in the name of poetic heritage. This moment encapsulates the poet's broader concern with the ethics of representation: who gets remembered, and who is forgotten?

In addition, "A River" is not confessional in the sense that it is personal; rather, it is a reflection of the poet's emotional and intellectual struggle with his twin identities as an English-language poet with strong Indian cultural roots and an insider to both traditions. Where language, memory, and social consciousness converge, the poem becomes a place of cultural critique. "A River" therefore goes beyond its local context to raise timeless issues like the obligations of the artist, the silences of tradition, and the oppressed people's invisibility.

7.6. SUMMARY OF THE POEM

Ramanujan's poem "A River" is a powerful critique of how poets and society celebrate nature while disregarding human suffering. Set in Madurai, a historic temple city in Tamil Nadu, the poem presents the river Vaigai in contrasting seasonal states—dry during summer and flooded during the rains.

Ramanujan starts out by explaining how the river turns into a dry bed of sand in the summer, exposing the skeletons of dead animals, straw, and women's hair. However, it overflows and floods the city during the monsoon. Rather than lamenting the devastation brought about by the floods, poets, both ancient and contemporary, concentrate on their beauty and grandeur, describing the glistening temples and surging rivers while showing little concern for the human tragedies that follow them.

Ramanujan reveals this "chilling detachment" of poets and people alike through sarcasm and striking imagery. He brings up the pregnant mother and her twins who perished in the flood, who represent the many unnamed victims whose agony is ignored. The poem essentially questions the aestheticization of pain and draws attention to the disconnect

between poetic imagination and lived reality by contrasting tradition with modernity. Ramanujan urges readers to look above ceremony and symbolism to the everyday lives of regular people in an impartial yet profoundly humane tone.

7.7. ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

Stanza 1

In Madurai,
city of temples and poets,
who sang of cities and temples,
every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand,
baring the sand ribs,
straw and women's hair
clogging the watergates
at the rusty bars
under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them
the wet stones glistening like sleepy
crocodiles, the dry ones
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun
The poets only sang of the floods.

In the first stanza of this poem, the speaker begins by setting the scene. He is going to be describing how the city of "Madurai" is described by poets. These poets have constantly sung of the same subjects, and the location is composed of "temples and poets." The city's river basin is drained every summer. The sand is exposed when the water "dries to a trickle." What is exposed are dark, rather menacing forms and things. They are "straw and women's hair" and "sand ribs." These obstructions choke the rusty bar "watergates."

In these lines, Ramanujan uses consonance by repeating the letter "g." The word "sand" is also used again in lines six and seven to establish rhythm. Next, the general recurrence of words that start with the letter "s" or that contain the "s" sound. This is particularly valid for the stanza's opening half.

The drainage system has to be repaired because it is outdated. As the waves subside, it becomes evident that the bridge is patchy. Ramanujan compares the stones to animals in

the last lines of this verse using two metaphors. The wet ones seem like sleeping crocodiles, whereas the dry ones look like water buffaloes relaxing. The poets "only sang of the floods" in spite of everything. There is so much more to the city that the poets are ignoring.

Stanza 2

He was there for a day
when they had the floods.
People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda as usual.

There are just eleven lines in "A River's" second verse. The first line's "He" alludes to a poet—possibly the speaker himself. He claims to have merely spent "a day" in the city. Many of the more intricate and private information are disclosed in this verse. The poet mentioned in this verse could easily obtain the specifics; they were not concealed.

Everyone talked about the flood and the horrible things that happened as a result. It is more than simply a straightforward natural phenomenon. In addition to a pregnant woman and "a couple of cows," it "carried off three village houses." These sentences are lighter in tone than some of the others since the cows have names. It is evident that these are not unusual events from the list-like manner in which this portion of the poem is presented. The people are used to them.

Stanza 3

The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
in verse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls
even before birth.

In the third stanza, the speaker discusses the parallels between "old poets" and "new poets," which further elucidates his issue with poets. Both discussed the flooding but disregarded the ensuing catastrophes. To make matters worse, the younger poets just imitated the older ones. Neither the subject nor the style changed.

In the fifth and sixth lines of this stanza, the speaker speculates that it is possible that the woman who passed was going to give birth to twins, increasing the life lost. This is a very interesting contrast to the flooding of the river in the first place. The waters are meant to fertilize the land and make it possible for the next crop to grow. While life is being generated, it is also being destroyed.

Stanza 4

He said:
the river has water enough
to be poetic
about only once a year
and then
it carries away
in the first half-hour
three village houses,
a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda
and one pregnant woman
expecting identical twins
with no moles on their bodies,
with different coloured diapers
to tell them apart.

In the last stanza, the speaker conveys the words of the poet again. He said that the poet expressed dissatisfaction with how "the river has water enough / to be poetic / about only once a year". The poets only take account of it once a year, and even then, they avoid discussing the loss of life or property.

The speaker recurs a section of the second stanza again, reemphasizing what was lost. There are more details added. Now, he says that the woman felt she was "expecting identical twins". They would be identical, and the only way to distinguish them would be to outfit them in "coloured diapers." Though it has a darker undertone, this statement is also amusing.

It illustrates how carelessly the poets treated the country and its inhabitants. There is no attempt to accurately portray their agony or a desire to understand who these individuals are.

7.8. THEMES IN THE POEM

One of Ramanujan's insightful poems, "A River," explores a complex interplay of issues, including sarcasm, cultural memory, social invisibility, tradition and modernity, poetic duty, and criticism of artistic detachment. The poem turns what appears to be a normal occurrence into a reflection on the morality of representation and the silences that permeate social and literary discourse.

1. Tradition, Modernity, and Literary Inheritance

"A River" explores the heritage of traditional Tamil poetry and how it has influenced modern verse. Ramanujan draws a comparison between the idealized portrayals of the Vaigai River in ancient writings and the apathetic reiteration of comparable clichés by contemporary poets. He contends that both are involved in the continuation of a custom that honours the beauty of nature while downplaying its detrimental effects. Ramanujan's larger worry about how literary legacy might obfuscate everyday reality is reflected in this subject.

2. Human Suffering and Social Invisibility

The poem focuses on the disregard of self-suffering in poetic narratives. The speaker points out how neither the ancient nor the contemporary era poets observe the human cost of the river's flooding— "three village houses, a couple of cows named Gopi and Brinda, and one pregnant woman." The obscurity of the underprivileged, whose lives are relegated to footnotes in the vast sweep of literary tradition, is shown by this sharp enumeration. In his critique of this selective memory, Ramanujan calls for a more moral and inclusive method of representation.

3. Irony and Poetic Detachment

Ramanujan's tone is marked by gentle irony and subtle sarcasm. He keeps the poets' fascination with the river's effects while remaining detached from its beautiful characteristics. This sardonic position is a critique of poetic detachment—the tendency to prioritize form and beauty over empathy and reality. The speaker's restrained voice heightens

the moral weight of the poem, inviting readers to challenge the function of art in bearing testimony.

4. Cultural Memory and Selective Remembrance

The poem examines the creation and curation of cultural memory and is set in Madurai, a city rich in religious and literary heritage. The river becomes a metaphor for tradition itself—flowing through time, carrying with it both reverence and neglect. Ramanujan argues that the genuine remembrance that elevates myth while silencing the ordinary and the sad, suggesting that true cultural engagement must include the voices of the forgotten.

9. Language, Identity, and Dual Perspective

"A River", though not being confessional, is a reflection of Ramanujan's own struggle with his dual identity as an English-language poet with strong Indian cultural ties. He develops a multi-layered viewpoint by bridging inner knowledge with outside critique through his use of English to analyse Tamil literary heritage. The poem's voice is enhanced by this duality, which enables it to speak both inside and outside of its cultural setting.

8. Poetic Responsibility and Ethical Representation

The obligation of the poet to express truth as well as create beauty is one of the poem's main themes. What part does the artist play in depicting sorrow, Ramanujan asks subtly? Is it possible for poetry to be apathetic? A River becomes a call to conscience, imploring poets to consider the ethical aspects of their profession by drawing attention to what is left out of poetic tradition.

9. Silence, Absence, and the Power of What's Unsaid

Much of the poem's power is mostly found in what is left unsaid. The speaker does not dramatize the flood or the tragedy; instead, he draws attention to its absence in lyrical speech. This deliberate silence becomes a powerful instrument, drawing attention to the gaps in cultural and literary narratives. "A River" is a reflection on the politics of omission, as Ramanujan employs absence to convey a lot.

7.9. STRUCTURE OF THE POEM

"A River*"* is a free verse poem that challenges poetic tradition and societal apathy through its flexible structure and rich poetic techniques. The poem' s **four irregular stanzas**, each with a different length, illustrate the fragmented attention poets give to real-life tragedies. In order to replicate the flow of the river and convey a sense of urgency, Ramanujan uses enjambment—lines that flow into one another without punctuation—instead of a set rhyme scheme or meter. His tone alternates between disillusionment, analytical observation, and subtle irony, especially when highlighting how both old and new poets romanticize the river while ignoring its destructive floods.

To add further musicality and emphasis, Ramanujan uses **alliteration**, such as in "city of temples and poets," and "wet stones glistening like sleepy crocodiles," to add musicality and emphasis. **Assonance and consonance** appear in lines like "the dry ones shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun," enhancing rhythm and cohesion. **Vivid imagery**, such as "wet stones glistening like sleepy crocodiles" and "the river has water enough to carry away three village houses, one pregnant woman and a couple of cows," contrasts poetic romanticism with harsh reality. These techniques bring the poem's tone together and deepen its emotional impact, compelling readers to confront the overlooked human suffering behind nature's beauty.'

7.10. SUMMING UP

The following unit illuminated A.K. Ramanujan's poem "A River" by analyzing its subtle revelation of societal indifference, its striking imagery, and its critique of literary tradition. Through close analysis of selected stanzas, we explored how Ramanujan juxtaposes the romanticized depictions of nature by old and new poets with the harsh conditions of human suffering, particularly during the river's yearly floods. The poem's free verse structure, use of enjambment, and tonal shifts—from ironic detachment to quiet outrage—reveal how poetic convention often overlooks real tragedies. By highlighting the drowning of a pregnant woman and the destruction of village dwellings, Ramanujan transforms the river from a symbol of beauty into one of forgotten suffering, ultimately challenging the aestheticization of disaster and calling for a more honest poetic gaze.

7.11. Self-Assessment Questions

1. "A River" is set in which South Indian city?
a. Madurai
b. Chennai
c. Bangalore
d. Mysore

2. A. K. Ramanujan was not only a poet but also a _____.
a. Historian
b. Translator and folklorist
c. Novelist
d. Playwright

3. In "A River", what natural event becomes the central metaphor?
a. Earthquake
b. Flood
c. Drought
d. Cyclone

4. Which recurring image in the poem symbolizes both destruction and indifference?
a. The temple bells
b. The pregnant woman swept away
c. The poets' songs
d. The cows grazing

5. Discuss how Ramanujan uses the river as a metaphor to critique traditional poets' indifference to human suffering.

6. Examine the theme of memory and continuity in "A River", focusing on how floods are remembered across generations.

7. How does Ramanujan's background as a folklorist and translator influence his depiction of local culture in the poem?

8. Analyze the structure and imagery of "A River", showing how poetic devices reinforce its themes of destruction and neglect.

Answers to Self-Assessment Questions

1. (a) Madurai
2. (b) Translator and folklorist
3. (b) Flood
4. (b) The pregnant woman swept away
5. refer to section 9.8/9.9
6. refer to section 9.9
7. refer to section 9.3/9.8

8. refer to section 9.10/9.8

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7.14. TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS

1. How Ramanujan's juxtaposition of old and new poetic traditions reveals a deeper critique of aesthetic detachment and societal indifference?
2. Discuss the symbolic role of the river in Ramanujan's poem.
3. How does Ramanujan structure the poem to expose the limitations of conventional poetic subjects, and what is the significance of the speaker's observational tone in challenging inherited narratives?
4. Discuss this statement with reference to the poem's use of irony, repetition, and specific imagery such as the drowned pregnant woman and the cows named Gopi and Brinda.
5. How do the poem's free verse form, uneven stanza lengths, enjambment, and tonal shifts contribute to its exploration of poetic responsibility, cultural critique, and the invisibility of everyday tragedies?

UNIT 8 SHIV K KUMAR "INDIAN WOMEN"

8.1. INTRODUCTION

The last unit of block two introduces you to Shiv K. Kumar, a well-known author of Indian English poetry whose works are praised for their investigation of existential concerns, philosophical depth, and lyrical beauty. As a trailblazing poet of the post-Independence era, Kumar frequently addresses themes of alienation, mortality, and the pursuit of meaning in a world that is changing quickly in his writing. His poetry offers a complex analysis of human vulnerability and resiliency by fusing introspection with astute societal observation.

"Indian Women," one of his best-known poems, is a perfect example of how he captures the subdued suffering and silent power of women in conventional social structures. Kumar depicts the emotional landscapes of daily life with restrained yet evocative imagery, shedding light on the conflict between quiet and endurance. The following unit will examine "Indian Women" in the larger framework of Kumar's poetry, emphasizing its stylistic accuracy, subject depth, and contribution to the changing conversation in Indian English literature about gender, identity, and cultural reflection.

Dear Learner,

The course comprises multiple components, with the Self-Learning Material (SLM) and counselling sessions being key elements. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the course content, it is essential that you engage with all these components in a balanced manner. As you are enrolled in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program, self-directed study plays a vital role in your academic success. Accordingly, each unit concludes with a list of suggested readings and references. You are strongly encouraged to consult these resources to enhance your comprehension and deepen your engagement with the subject matter.

8.2. OBJECTIVES

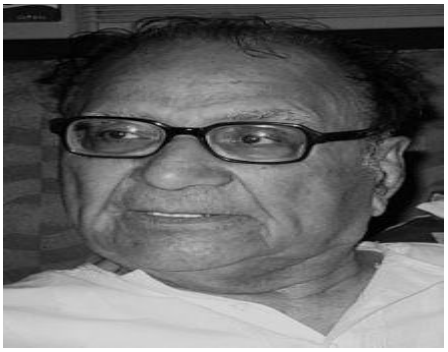
By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the themes of Shiv K. Kumar's "Indian Women", especially its portrayal of gender norms, emotional control, and domestic perseverance are portrayed in traditional Indian society.
- Examine how Kumar evokes women's silent strength and repressed suffering in patriarchal environments through understated metaphors and simple imagery.

- Explore how the poem conveys complex emotional landscapes through its use of free verse, visual symbolism, and subtle diction.
- Consider how the poem's depiction of female identity and imprisonment is influenced by the cultural and social milieu of post-independence India.
- Examine the poem's feminist undertones and its observations on the invisible nature of women's labour, inner lives, and emotional fortitude critically.
- Consider how "Indian Women" adds to the changing conversation on gender and selfhood in Indian English literature and how it fits into Shiv K. Kumar's larger poetic oeuvre.

8.3. SHIV K KUMAR: HIS LIFE AND LEGACY

Shiv K. Kumar was a prominent figure in Indian English literature, whose life reflected a strong dedication to intellectual inquiry, poetic expression, and cultural introspection. Kumar was born in Lahore on August 18, 1921, and the rich literary and philosophical traditions of



pre-Partition India influenced his early years. He had his early schooling at Forman Christian College and then went on to Cambridge University to earn a Ph.D. in English literature, where he was still grounded in Indian sensibilities but was impacted by Western literary theory. With teaching positions in India, the UK, the US, and Russia, his academic career crossed continents. He eventually served as Vice Chancellor of the University of Hyderabad, where he made a substantial contribution to literary studies and higher education.

Poetry, plays, translations, and critical essays were all part of Kumar's extensive and diverse body of work. His poetry, which frequently examines the intricacies of human feeling, mortality, and alienation, is renowned for its philosophical profundity, existential topics, and poetic restraint. He depicted the silent power and mental fortitude of women in patriarchal systems in pieces such as "Indian Women", employing understated metaphors and sparse imagery to conjure deep psychological landscapes. His poetry was both global and personal because of his ability to combine societal critique with introspection.

Beyond his original compositions, Kumar was an accomplished translator, bringing the works of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Buddhist texts like the *Dhammapada* into English, thereby

bridging linguistic and cultural divides. Kumar's contributions were recognized with prestigious awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Padma Bhushan, affirming his status as a leading voice in Indian English poetry. Elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London, Kumar's international acclaim reflected the global relevance of his work.

Kumar passed away on 1 March 2019 in Hyderabad, leaving behind a legacy that continues to inspire poets, scholars, and readers. His writings, praised for their profound introspection, stylistic accuracy, and timeless relevance to issues of gender, identity, and the human condition, continue to be an essential component of the Indian literary canon.

8.4. "INDIAN WOMEN": THE TEXT

This poignant poem appears within *Cobwebs in the Sun*, a collection that exhibits Shiv K. Kumar's empathy for Indian life and culture. The book, published in 1994, reveals Kumar's deep interest in identity, tradition, and gender issues. Indian Women depicts the daily challenges and hidden tenacity of women in Indian culture through stunning visuals and repressed emotion.

In this triple-baked continent
women don't etch angry eyebrows
on mud walls.
Patiently they sit
like empty pitchers
on the mouth of the village well
pleating hope in each braid of their mississippi-long hair
looking deep into the water's mirror
for the moisture in their eyes.
With zodiac doodlings on the sands
they guard their tattooed thighs
Waiting for their men's return
till even the shadows
roll up their contours and are gone beyond the hills.

8.5. SUMMARY OF THE POEM

Shiv K. Kumar's poem "Indian Women" vividly depicts the quiet, persistent agony of women

in the Indian subcontinent, formed by centuries of political instability and profoundly established patriarchal traditions. Within this rigid social framework, women are the most repressed and exploited, their lives defined by silent tenacity and almost mythological patience.

Kumar proposes the notion of "triple-baked sufferings"—a strong metaphor for women's physical, emotional, and economic hardships. The hot sun causes them to go vast distances to get water, burning them like clay pitchers in its unrelenting heat. In women's marital lives, they are reduced to passive vessels of male desire, subject to sexual exploitation with neither agency or reciprocity. Economically, they are the most vulnerable to poverty, bearing the burden of suffering while staying inconspicuous at home.

The poet's use of "mud walls" is particularly vivid, representing both the poverty of their dwellings and the emotional erasure of women within them. Unlike males, who might express rage and proclaim their presence by "etching their brows" on these walls, women remain mute, their feelings unmet and their identities obscured. Kumar's imagery is both harsh and poetic, as shown in the following lines:

patiently they sit like empty pitchers on the mouth of the village well
pleating hope in each braid of their Mississippi-long hair
looking deep into the water's mirror
for the moisture in their eyes.

This passage conjures the image of a typical Indian rural woman, waiting at the well like an empty vessel—both literally and metaphorically—hoping for sustenance and perhaps a moment of reflection. The "Mississippi-long hair" braided with hope represents endurance and calm optimism, even in the face of sadness. The shallow, insufficient water fails to reflect her tears, emphasizing the emotional drought she is experiencing.

Guarding their tattooed thighs
waiting for their men's return
till even the shadows
roll up their contours and are gone beyond the hills

In the final stanza, Kumar intensifies the metaphor of female subjugation through the unsettling image of "tattooed thighs," most likely displaying their husbands' names —a symbol of possession rather than devotion. These women protect their bodies not for themselves, but for the men who claim them, waiting patiently for their return even as dusk falls and shadows fade beyond the hills. Their continued vigil, even after others have departed, demonstrates their unshakable patience and internalized obligation.

Shiv K. Kumar's poem "Indian Women" is a powerful feminist critique of societal norms, using restrained language and potent imagery to illuminate the emotional and physical toll of gendered oppression. The poem is a tribute to the silent strength of Indian women, whose suffering is deeply embedded in the rhythms of daily life—a strength that endures, waits, and hopes, even when the world refuses to see it.

8.6. ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

By characterizing India as a "triple-baked continent," Shiv K. Kumar's poem "The Indian Woman" illustrates the challenging, culturally constrained, and neglected status of women in the nation. The poet uses the term "triple-baked" to describe the three repressive factors that affect Indian women's lives: poverty, gender discrimination, and the severe weather. Women's pain is exacerbated by living in a hot country, a patriarchal society, and financial difficulties. A woman cannot "etch angry eyebrows on the mud walls" in such a setting since the male head of the family has the right to express rage. In the home and in society at large, women are still mainly voiceless.

The poet emphasizes Indian women's extraordinary patience by saying, "patiently they sit." In rural areas, women maintain their homes, cook using mud pots, and save these delicate utensils for years, signifying their tenacity. Decision-making in the family is dominated by males, but women are still in charge of the home and kids, particularly when men go to work. Their difficulty is further highlighted by the lack of water, as women must wait lengthy hours to gather water for their families from the community well.

The poet highlights the length and inherent beauty of Indian women's long hair by drawing a comparison to the Mississippi River's flow. They look "deep into the water's mirror for the moisture in their eyes," a potent image that conveys both physical hunger and psychological suffering. This illustrates their longing for water, as well as metaphorically for solace and sustenance. In order to further emphasize this symbolism, the poet compares men to water and women to pitchers, suggesting that much as a pitcher is useless without water, Indian society considers a woman to be unimportant or incomplete without a male. The expectation of women's dependence is harshly criticized by this metaphor.

They are also seen to be bashful and modest in their culture. Women who are bashful make doodles in the sand as a covert way to show their lovers how much they care. Another cultural custom where a lady bears her husband's name on her thigh as a symbol of loyalty and ownership is revealed in the statement "they guard their tattooed thighs." The perception

that she is considered male property is reinforced by the expectation that she stays faithful and refrain from doing anything that would embarrass her husband.

The poem goes on to describe their emotional burden, which is defined by poverty and necessity, as they wait every evening for their men to return from work beyond the hills. This every day waiting represents not only the physical expectations but also the long-term waiting that women experience for independence, acknowledgment, and a dignified life.

Shiv K. Kumar depicts the pitiful, neglected, and constrained lives of Indian women who bear the combined burden of poverty, sexism, and climate using striking metaphors, cultural allusions, and vivid images. The poem develops into a powerful indictment of social conventions that deprive women of their uniqueness, voice, and emotional space.

8.9. THEMES OF THE POEM

The Indian Woman" is a symbolic and critical examination of the condition of womanhood in India, using the straightforward image of a woman waiting at a bus stop to express profound social facts. The poem's main metaphor is the act of waiting, which stands in for the extended endurance and patience that women are compelled to exhibit in a patriarchal society. This waiting is not merely physical; it is a reflection of the social constraint and emotional immobility that characterize their lives.

Patriarchal rule is one of the main themes. Kumar emphasizes how cultural norms influence even seemingly insignificant actions, like the woman adjusting her sari. This imagery implies that tradition controls women's identities, expressions, and actions, providing little opportunity for uniqueness. The poem criticizes how this kind of control deprives women of agency and condemns them to positions of submission, silence, and sacrifice.

Suppressed aspirations and desires are another important theme. Kumar uses the metaphor of "seeds beneath the soil" to illustrate the potential and repression of women's latent dreams. The seeds represent women's hidden uniqueness and aspirations that are concealed by social conventions. This picture is potent because it conveys the idea that women's dreams are real and just need the perfect circumstances to blossom, but they are consistently denied the chance to do so.

The poem also highlights **emotional isolation and loneliness.** The loneliness of women whose emotional lives are disregarded by society is reflected in the solitary act of waiting at the bus stop. However, Kumar recognizes their **fortitude and perseverance** in the face of this pain. The woman's patience is not just a sign of weakness; rather, it is a kind of

strength and a silent dignity that enables her to endure amid systems of oppression.

Ultimately, the bus itself comes to represent **freedom, possibility, and change**—things that are desired yet uncertain, unattainable, or delayed. By illustrating how women's ordinary lives reflect broader systems of injustice, Kumar challenges the underlying cultural constraints placed on them through this commonplace setting.

"The Indian Woman" is essentially a commentary on the collective situation faced by Indian women rather than a portrayal of a particular individual. The poem is a timeless meditation on gender inequity and cultural restriction because Kumar reveals the invisible anguish and resiliency of women by transforming an ordinary occurrence into a metaphor for repressed individuality.

8.8. STRUCTURE OF THE POEM

Free Verse Poem: "The Indian Woman" depicts the quiet perseverance and repressed uniqueness of Indian women. Its purposefully straightforward style captures the repetition and endurance that characterize women's lives under patriarchy. We may observe how Kumar uses structure not only as a stylistic choice but also as a metaphor for the state of women by looking at the poem's form, stanza arrangement, imagery progression, and tone.

The poem lacks a predetermined rhyme system and metrical framework. This lack of rigid framework highlights how typical the woman's life is and captures the organic cadences of everyday speech. By using free poetry, Kumar is also able to forgo ornamental language in favour of brutal, realistic imagery. The absence of rhyme or consistent rhythm is a reflection of women's lives, which are marked by quiet persistence rather than dramatic display.

Stanza Division: Short stanzas of the poem offer a unique metaphor or image. The poem is grounded in a realistic location by describing the act of waiting at a bus stop in the opening stanzas. Symbolic analogies, like "seeds beneath the soil," which stand for repressed impulses and unspoken ambitions, are introduced in later stanzas. The bus serves as a metaphor for both uncertain freedom and postponed opportunity in the last stanzas. The fragmented lives of women, which are characterized by recurrence, waiting, and unrealized potential, are reflected in this stanzaic framework.

Imagery Progression: The structure of the poem shifts from external actions to internal feelings. Kumar begins with common gestures, such as straightening a sari, to highlight how cultural expectations regulate women's physical movements. He then deepens the imagery

by comparing suppressed desires to seeds beneath the soil, suggesting both potential and repression. Finally, the bus comes to represent change, freedom, and opportunities that remain undetermined or out of reach. This shift from realism to symbolism gives the poem a layered quality, where surface details hide deep social critique.

Tone and Flow: The poem uses subdued language and restricted imagery to create a compassionate yet inquisitive tone. The poem has a quiet, observant rhythm that develops meaning through gradual repetition as opposed to overt revelation. The concept of quietness and patience is reinforced by the absence of dramatic punctuation or exclamations, which reflects the quiet pace of women's life. In terms of structure, the tone and flow combine to highlight perseverance, fortitude, and repressed individualism.

The structure of "The Indian Woman" plays a crucial role in shaping its meaning. Through the use of free verse, broken stanzas, and a gradual shift from everyday images to deeper symbolism, Kumar captures the routine, suppression, and resilience of women's lives. The very structure of the poem becomes a metaphor for persistence—plain, restrained, yet deeply moving. In doing so, Kumar shows how poetic form can function both as an artistic technique and as a means of social commentary, turning "The Indian Woman" into a lasting meditation on gender inequality and cultural limitations.

8.9. SUMMING UP

The poem portrays the quiet endurance of Indian women, emphasizing their suppressed emotions, monotonous routines, and silent strength. Kumar uses vivid imagery to highlight how cultural traditions and patriarchal expectations confine them, yet their resilience shines through in the way they carry on with dignity. By blending ordinary details with symbolic depth, the poem becomes not just a description of women's lives but also a critique of social structures that limit them. Ultimately, "Indian Women" stands as a timeless reflection on patience, sacrifice, and the unspoken power of women in Indian society.

8.10. SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Shiv K. Kumar was born in which city?

   (a) Delhi
   (b)Lahore
   (c) Hyderabad
   (d)Cambridge

2. The poem "Indian Women" was published in which collection?
   (a) *Trapfalls in the Sky*
   (b) *Cobwebs in the Sun*
   (c) *Subterfuges*
   (d) *Woodpeckers*

3. In the poem, the phrase "triple-baked continent" refers to women's suffering caused by:
   (a) Poverty, patriarchy, and climate
   (b) War, famine, and migration
   (c) Marriage, childbirth, and widowhood
   (d) Religion, caste, and superstition

4. Which metaphor in the poem symbolizes women's patience and endurance?
   (a) Tattooed thighs
   (b) Empty pitchers at the well
   (c) Mud walls
   (d) Shadows beyond the hills

9. Discuss Shiv K. Kumar's life and literary legacy, focusing on how his personal experiences and academic career shaped his poetry.

8. Analyze the central imagery in "Indian Women" and explain how Kumar uses metaphors to depict women's endurance and suffering.

9. Examine the themes of patience, endurance, and gender roles in the poem, connecting them to broader Indian cultural traditions.

Answers to Self-Assessment Questions

1. (b) Lahore
2. (b) *Cobwebs in the Sun*
3. (a) Poverty, patriarchy, and climate
4. (b) Empty pitchers at the well
5. refer to 8.3.
6. refer to 8.4,8.9 and 8.8.
7. refer to 8.9,8.8 and 8.9.

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8.13. TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS

1. How does Shiv K. Kumar uses imagery in “Indian Women” to highlight the monotony and suppression in women’s lives?
2. In what ways does the poem’s free verse structure contribute to its thematic portrayal of endurance and resilience?
3. Discuss how “Indian Women” reflects the cultural and patriarchal constraints imposed on women in Indian society.
4. How does “Indian Women” reflect broader issues of gender inequality in Indian society?
5. What makes “Indian Women” a timeless reflection on patience, sacrifice, and the unspoken strength of women?

Unit 9 RABINDRANATH TAGORE: *THE HUNGRY STONE &OTHER STORIES* I

9.1. INTRODUCTION

Dear Learner, in the last block we explored the rich tradition of modern Indian poetry through the works of Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Shiv K. Kumar, A. K. Ramanujan, Sri Aurobindo, and Jayanta Mahapatra. Their poems helped us appreciate how poetry condenses emotions, ideas, and cultural identity into powerful lyrical forms.

In this unit, we move from poetry to short stories, and this shift deepens our understanding of how literature captures human experience in different ways. Unlike novels, which allow for expansive plots and multiple characters, the short story is a concise prose narrative that focuses on a single event, character, or theme. It emphasizes brevity, economy of language, and unity of effect, often concluding with a sudden insight or epiphany. This genre excels at evoking emotion or atmosphere within a compact space, making it one of the most powerful forms of modern literature. With this background, the block introduces Rabindranath Tagore's celebrated collection *The Hungry Stones and Other Stories*.

The short story as a genre gained prominence in India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, influenced by both Western literary models and indigenous storytelling traditions. Indian writers began to use the form to depict everyday life, social change, and psychological depth, and in Bengal it became a particularly vibrant medium, reflecting the cultural and intellectual awakening of the period. Within this tradition, Rabindranath Tagore occupies a central position in modern Indian literature. A poet, novelist, dramatist, essayist, and short story writer, Tagore reshaped Bengali literature and gave it a global voice. His short stories are celebrated for their simplicity, humanism, and deep psychological insight. They capture the complexities of human relationships, the struggles of ordinary people, and the tension between tradition and modernity. Tagore's mastery of the short story form established him as one of the pioneers of modern Indian fiction.

Learners, the course comprises multiple components, with the Self-Learning Material (SLM) and counselling sessions being key elements. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the course content, it is essential that you engage with all these components in a balanced manner. As you are enrolled in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program, self-directed study plays a vital role in your academic success. Accordingly, each unit concludes with a list of suggested readings and references. You are strongly encouraged to consult these resources to enhance your comprehension and deepen your engagement with the subject

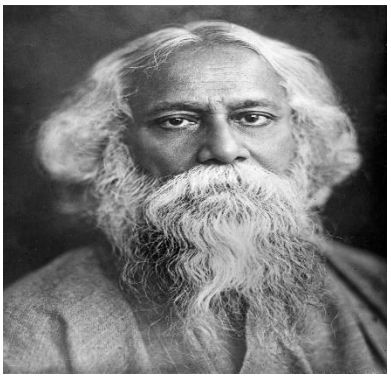
matter.

9.2. OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the historical development of the short story in India, especially in Bengal.
- Recognize Rabindranath Tagore's contribution to modern Indian literature through his short stories.
- Analyze Tagore's craft of storytelling
- Explore the characters' psychological experiences
- Examine the cultural and historical background of the story

9.3. RAVINDRANATH TAGORE: LIFE AND BACKGROUND



One of India's most influential writers and artists, Rabindranath Tagore was a poet, playwright, novelist, musician, painter, visionary, philosopher, and social reformer. Born into a wealthy Brahmo Samaj family in Calcutta on May 9, 1881, he was raised in an environment full of books, music, and thought-provoking conversations. His mother, Sarada Devi, had a strong spiritual upbringing, while his father, "Maharshi" Devendranath Tagore, was a philosopher, religious reformer and a leading figure of Brahmo Samaj. His grandfather, Dwarkanath was known as a "Prince" and had among his friends Queen Victoria and Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Tagore chose to study literature, history, music, and philosophy on his own at home because he disliked rigid formal schooling. Later, he went to London for higher education to study law, but he never finished his degree.

Tagore showed his literary talent as a writer from a young age; as a youngster, he wrote poetry, and as a teenager, he published significant works. He wrote a remarkable variety of works throughout his life, including plays, novels, essays, poetry, and more than 2,000 songs collectively referred to as Rabindra Sangeet. After translating Gitanjali into English, he became well-known throughout the world and was awarded the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature, making him the first Asian Nobel laureate. In order to encourage comprehensive and transparent education, Tagore founded Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan. He also

made important contributions to social change and education. He spoke out against social problems like caste prejudice and promoted humanism, internationalism, and unity. He travelled extensively, disseminating his beliefs throughout Asia, America, and Europe.

Tagore is perhaps one of the most versatile among Indian cultural heroes. The author of two national anthems of India "Jana Guna Mana" and Bangladesh "Amar Sinar Bangla", he was the recipient of Nobel Prize (1913), Knighthood (1919), and an Oxford D.Litt. (1940). He was a good friend of Gandhi, an active member of the National Movement and a singer of the universal spirit of humanity, deeply planted in the soil and smell of Bengal, yet far from being parochial. Until the end of his life, Tagore continued his writing, composition, and painting. He died in Kolkata on August 9, 1941.

9.4 BENGAL'S SHORT STORY TRADITION

9.4.1 Emergence of the short story in Bengal

The short story as a genre began to flourish in Bengal during the late nineteenth century, a period marked by social reform, intellectual awakening, and literary experimentation. This was the era of the Bengal Renaissance, when writers, thinkers, and reformers sought to modernize Indian society while remaining rooted in cultural traditions. In this climate, literature became a powerful tool for expressing new ideas, questioning social norms, and portraying the changing realities of life.

Earlier forms of storytelling in India had been dominated by epics, folktales, and religious narratives, which were expansive and often symbolic. The short story, however, offered something different: a compact form that could capture the essence of human experience in just a few pages. Influenced by Western literary models such as the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant, and Anton Chekhov, Bengali writers began experimenting with prose that was brief, realistic, and emotionally charged. At the same time, they drew inspiration from indigenous oral traditions, folk tales, and everyday conversations, ensuring that the new genre remained culturally authentic.

These early Bengali short stories reflected the social realities of the time—issues of caste, class, gender, and the struggles of ordinary people. Writers used the form to highlight the tensions between tradition and modernity, rural and urban life, and the personal and the social. Because of its brevity and accessibility, the short story quickly became popular among readers. It allowed writers to reach a wider audience, including those who might not have the time or resources to engage with longer novels.

Thus, the short story in Bengal emerged as both a literary innovation and a social document. It combined the economy of language with psychological depth, making it one of the most effective genres for capturing the complexities of human life during a time of rapid cultural change.

9.4.3 Influence of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and others

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (Bankim Chandra Chatterjee) is often regarded as one of the pioneers of modern Indian prose fiction. His contribution to Bengali literature was immense, as he introduced a new narrative style that combined storytelling with social and moral concerns. Although he is best remembered for his novels such as *Durgeshnandini* and *Anandamath*, his prose laid the groundwork for the short story form in Bengal. Bankim's writing demonstrated how fiction could move beyond entertainment to become a vehicle for exploring social issues, cultural identity, and national consciousness. His emphasis on realism, character development, and moral dilemmas inspired later writers to experiment with shorter, more focused narratives.

Alongside Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, other early Bengali writers also played a role in shaping the short story tradition. Dinabandhu Mitra, for instance, is remembered for his play *Nil Darpan*, which exposed the exploitation of indigo farmers. While not a short story, his socially conscious writing influenced prose writers to address contemporary realities. Later, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay carried forward this legacy with emotionally charged narratives that depicted the struggles of ordinary people, especially women and the marginalized. His works combined simplicity of language with deep empathy, qualities that became hallmarks of the Bengali short story.

Together, these writers created a fertile ground for the emergence of the short story as a serious literary genre in Bengal. Their focus on realism, social critique, and psychological depth prepared the way for Rabindranath Tagore, who would refine and elevate the form to new artistic heights.

9.4.2 Tagore's role in shaping the form

Rabindranath Tagore is widely regarded as the true architect of the Bengali short story. While earlier writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay laid the foundation of prose fiction, it was Tagore who refined the short story into a distinct literary form and gave it artistic depth. His contribution was not just in producing a large number of stories, but in demonstrating

how the short story could capture the complexities of human life with brevity, subtlety, and emotional resonance.

Tagore's genius lay in his ability to blend simplicity of language with profound psychological insight. He wrote about ordinary people—children, women, peasants, workers—giving voice to those often marginalized in literature. His stories explored universal themes such as love, memory, loss, spirituality, and the tension between tradition and modernity. By focusing on everyday situations and relationships, he revealed the extraordinary within the ordinary, showing how even small incidents could carry deep meaning.

Stylistically, Tagore introduced innovations that shaped the short story form in India. He emphasized unity of effect, ensuring that each story left a lasting impression. He often employed symbolism and allegory, but balanced these with realism and humanism. His narrative voice was empathetic and reflective, inviting readers to engage emotionally with the characters. Importantly, he avoided melodrama, preferring subtle shifts in tone and perspective that led to sudden insights or epiphanies.

Through collections such as *The Hungry Stones and Other Stories*, Tagore established the short story as a serious literary genre in Bengal and beyond. His work inspired later generations of writers to experiment with the form, proving that short fiction could be as powerful and enduring as poetry or the novel. In this way, Tagore not only shaped the Bengali short story but also secured its place in the wider tradition of modern Indian literature.

9.5 *THE HUNGRY STONES AND OTHER STORIES:* ABOUT THE COLLECTION

The Hungry Stones and Other Stories is one of Rabindranath Tagore's most well-known collections of short stories. This collection comprises translations undertaken by several individuals. The translation of "*The Victory"* is the author's own. The subsequent seven stories were translated by Mr. C. F. Andrews, in collaboration with the author. Further assistance in translation was offered by Rev. E. J. Thompson, Panna Lal Basu, Prabhat Kumar Mukherji, and Sister Nivedita.

This collection reveals the depth of his imaginative power, psychological insight, and humanistic vision. The stories included in this volume range from mystical and supernatural narratives to deeply emotional and socially reflective tales, offering readers a rich exploration

of the human mind and the world it inhabits. First published in the early twentieth century, the collection reflects Tagore's mastery over storytelling, his innovative narrative techniques, and his ability to weave together fantasy, realism, and philosophical contemplation.

Each story stands independently in its theme and tone, yet together they form a unified tapestry that highlights Tagore's unique ability to capture the complexities of human experience—its fears, desires, innocence, conflicts, and moral dilemmas. This collection not only highlights Tagore's distinct literary style but also marks his significant contribution to the evolution of the modern Indian short story.

9.5.1 Significance of the Collection in Indian Literature

The Hungry Stones and Other Stories have a special position in the canon of Indian literature for its creative fusion of realism, symbolism, and philosophical depth. Through these tales, Tagore showcases his extraordinary talent for subtly capturing human emotions while also addressing more significant social, cultural, and ethical issues. The collection is significant because it reflects a transitional phase in Indian short fiction, moving beyond conventional storytelling towards more introspective and experimental forms.

Tagore uses a variety of narrative voices, settings, and themes—ranging from the mystical and supernatural to the deeply personal and socially rooted—to examine the complexities of human nature and society. His deep awareness of identity, independence, morality, and the tension between tradition and modernity is evident in the stories. The book as a whole not only showcases Tagore's literary brilliance but also helps to shape the contemporary Indian short story, inspiring generations of writers with its uniqueness, emotional relevance, and worldwide appeal.

9.5.2 Major Stories

Learners, we will now try to understand Tagore's art of storytelling with the help of short summaries. In this section, we will read the summaries of thirteen short stories:

"The Hungry Stones" (1899), originally published as *Kshudhito Pashan*, is one of Tagore's most renowned stories and unfolds as a frame narrative in which a traveller and his companion meet Srijut, a Bengali Babu, at a train junction. Srijut recounts his time as a tax collector living in an abandoned Mughal palace near the Susta River, ignoring warnings about its curse. At night he experiences vivid visions of feasts, music, and ghostly courtesans, while

by day he grows detached from reality. Meher Ali, a half-mad servant, warns him repeatedly, and Karim Khan, his clerk, explains that the palace's stones are "hungry," filled with centuries of suppressed passions that ensnare souls. The haunting intensifies until Srijut nearly succumbs, but the tale ends unresolved as he departs abruptly, leaving the narrator and his friend debating whether his account was supernatural, psychological, or fictional, highlighting Tagore's themes of desire, illusion, and history's lingering grip.

"The Victory" tells of Shekhar, a court poet secretly in love with Princess Ajita, whom he knows only by the sound of her ankle bells. His life is brightened by visits from her maid Manjari until a rival poet, Pundarik, challenges him to a war of words and wins the king's favor. Humiliated, Shekhar destroys his manuscripts and drinks poison, but as he lies dying Ajita arrives to crown him with her wreath, declaring him the true victor. Tragically, her recognition comes too late, and the story becomes a poignant meditation on love, art, pride, and loss.

"Once There Was a King" is an amusing and reflective tale that captures the charm of childhood curiosity and the playful imagination of adults. The narrator recalls how, as a child, he would ask his grandmother to tell him stories, and she would begin with the traditional line, "Once there was a king." His endless questions about the king's name, residence, and rule irritated her, and she responded with vague or fanciful answers to quiet him. Finally, she cleverly ended the tale by saying, "Then the king died and after death, no grandmother of a grandmother could tell us all about it." The story humorously highlights the gap between a child's desire for truth and an adult's impatience, while celebrating the magic of storytelling and the blend of imagination with reality.

"The Home-Coming" portrays Phatik Chakravorti, a restless fourteen-year-old whose mischief frustrates his widowed mother. After an incident with his younger brother, his uncle takes him to Kolkata, hoping city life will discipline him. Instead, Phatik faces loneliness, rejection, and harsh treatment from his aunt and cousins, growing homesick and ill. When his mother finally arrives, he greets her joyfully with the words "Mother! The holidays have come," but dies soon after in her arms. The story captures the vulnerability of adolescence and the deep need for love and belonging.

"My Lord, the Baby" centers on Raicharan, a devoted servant who treats his master's child as his own, calling him "my lord." When the boy disappears near a river, Raicharan is consumed by guilt and leaves the household. Years later, after his wife dies, he

raises his own son Phailna with extraordinary care, believing him to be the reincarnation of the lost child. Eventually, Raicharan gives Phailna to his former master as the miraculously returned son, sacrificing his own happiness. Though the truth remains hidden, Raicharan dies in peace, convinced he has redeemed his past mistake. The story blends tenderness, guilt, and tragic devotion.

"The Kingdom of Cards" is a symbolic tale in which a prince and his companions enter a realm inhabited by card people who live rigid, mechanical lives bound by meaningless rules. Amused by their lifeless customs, the prince introduces laughter, freedom, and creativity, encouraging them to question traditions. Slowly, the kingdom awakens to individuality and joy, with even the Queen of Hearts showing emotion. The once stagnant society transforms into a vibrant one, and Tagore uses this allegory to critique blind adherence to tradition while celebrating imagination, equality, and change.

"The Devotee" satirizes blind faith and explores spiritual yearning through the narrator's encounters with a middle-aged woman devoted to the Vishnava cult. She worships him as a symbol of God's presence, offering flowers and devotion, and later reveals her tragic past: married young, she lost her child to drowning, which drove her to grief and eventually to renunciation. Her devotion is portrayed as both deeply spiritual and symbolic of humanity's craving for the Eternal Soul. Through her character, Tagore illustrates how personal loss can lead to spiritual transformation, blending symbolism, dialogue, and narrative technique to create unity of impression.

"Vision" portrays the life of Kumo, a devoted wife whose loyalty and sacrifice reflect the heavy expectations placed on women in traditional society. After marrying Abinash, a medical student, she suffers declining health and eventually blindness when he experiments on her eyes to test his medical knowledge. Despite her suffering, Kumo consoles him, choosing patience and faith over resentment. As Abinash grows professionally, his compassion fades, and family pressures push him toward remarriage, but in the end he realizes his true happiness lies with Kumo. Her blindness becomes symbolic of the silencing of women's individuality, while her resilience and dignity reveal the emotional depth of Indian wives. The story critiques patriarchal authority and social hypocrisy, offering a vision of empathy and human understanding.

"The Babus of Nayanjore" is a satirical story about the decline of aristocratic pride. It follows the narrator's visit to the once-prestigious Nayanjore family, where he meets the

proud descendant who insists on his family's grandeur despite their present poverty. The tale humorously exposes the vanity of clinging to past glory and highlights Tagore's critique of social pretensions and the emptiness of inherited status.

"Living or Dead?" tells of Kadambini, a widow who collapses and is mistakenly believed to be dead. Reviving later, she is shunned by society, which considers her existence unnatural. In despair, she ultimately takes her own life, proving through death that she was indeed alive. The story poignantly explores superstition, social stigma, and the cruel treatment of widows in traditional society.

"We Crown Thee Kings" is a symbolic tale that critiques blind obedience and the misuse of authority. Through the coronation of kings who are chosen without merit, Tagore highlights how people often surrender their freedom to empty rituals and false leaders. The story emphasizes the need for questioning tradition and valuing true wisdom over hollow ceremony.

"The Renunciation" portrays the conflict between worldly duty and spiritual aspiration. It tells of a man torn between his family responsibilities and his desire to renounce material life for spiritual fulfillment. His struggle reflects Tagore's exploration of sacrifice, detachment, and the tension between personal longing and social obligation.

"The Kabuliwala" is one of Tagore's most famous stories, narrating the bond between Rahmat, a fruit seller from Kabul, and Mini, a little Bengali girl. Their innocent friendship reflects Rahmat's longing for his own daughter left behind in Afghanistan. Years later, when he returns after imprisonment, Mini no longer recognizes him, and he is painfully reminded of time's passage. The story beautifully conveys themes of parental love, cultural connection, and the bittersweet nature of human relationships.

9.6 COMMON THEMES

9.6.1 Mysticism and the Supernatural

Mysticism and the supernatural create an atmosphere where the boundaries of the physical world dissolve and deeper truths emerge. In Tagore's stories, these elements often appear subtly—through mysterious characters, symbolic dreams, unexplained events, or spiritual

experiences that cannot be rationalized. The purpose is not to frighten but to evoke wonder and insight.

Tagore uses mysticism to explore the spiritual dimension of human life. It reflects his belief that the world is filled with forces beyond human control and understanding. The supernatural often reveals hidden emotions, moral truths, or psychological conflicts. Through mystical elements, Tagore suggests that life is not only governed by logic or visible reality but also by intuition, destiny, and the unseen connections between soul and universe. This theme encourages readers to look beyond appearances and acknowledge the mystery embedded in human existence.

9.6.2 Human Imagination and Fantasy

Imagination is central to Tagore's storytelling. It lifts characters out of routine and allows them to experience freedom, joy, and creativity. Fantasy provides a platform where rigid social rules can be questioned and transformed. In Tagore's works, imaginary realms—such as symbolic kingdoms, exaggerated scenarios, or childlike wonderlands—serve as mirrors to reality.

Through fantasy, Tagore critiques mechanical, lifeless existence and celebrates spontaneity. Imaginative experiences often lead characters to self-discovery or social awakening. Children in his stories use imagination naturally, while adults rediscover it through inspiration. Fantasy becomes an escape from repression and a vehicle for change. It is not disconnected from life; rather, it highlights what reality lacks—freedom, creativity, and emotional truth. The blend of fantasy and realism gives Tagore's stories their unique charm and philosophical depth.

9.6.3 Social and Moral Critique

Tagore was deeply sensitive to social inequalities, blind rituals, and oppressive traditions. His stories often expose the hypocrisy within social systems—whether in religion, family structures, education, or class hierarchy. He uses simple situations to reveal profound truths about society.

Social critique appears through his portrayal of false holy men, rigid customs, exploitation of the weak, outdated traditions, and blind obedience. Tagore does not preach

directly; instead, he uses irony, humour, and gentle satire to reveal social flaws. Through these stories, he encourages readers to think critically about what society demands and what individuals truly need. Moral critique emerges when characters face ethical dilemmas, showing how moral truth often conflicts with societal expectations. Tagore's stories thus aim to awaken the conscience and guide society toward compassion, equality, and wisdom.

9.6.4 Identity, Duty, and Responsibility

Many characters in Tagore's stories struggle with questions like: Who am I? What is my purpose? What responsibilities must I accept or reject? Identity becomes fluid and often shaped by relationships, social roles, and inner desires.

Duty appears in many forms: a servant's loyalty, a boy's obligation to his family, a father's role, or the expectations placed on women and children. Often, characters feel torn between what society demands and what their heart desires. Responsibility becomes meaningful only when chosen with awareness, not when blindly followed.

Tagore shows that true identity comes from understanding one's feelings, values, and inner truth. True responsibility arises when one acts with empathy, courage, and self-awareness. Characters who ignore their responsibilities face guilt or loss, whereas those who embrace responsibility with sincerity grow emotionally and morally. This theme explores the conflict between personal freedom and social duty, revealing how maturity arises from balancing both.

9.6.5 Illusion vs. Reality

Illusion and reality create powerful contrasts in Tagore's storytelling. Characters often believe in illusions—false beliefs, romantic fantasies, religious myths, or exaggerated ideals—only to confront the harshness of reality later. These illusions may come from social conditioning, personal desires, or emotional weaknesses.

Tagore uses this theme to show how easily humans deceive themselves. A false saint appears holy until his greed is revealed. A child imagines dreams that reality cannot fulfil. A society believes in rigid customs until their emptiness becomes clear. The breaking of illusions brings emotional shock but also growth. When illusions fade, reality becomes an opportunity for truth, clarity, and transformation.

This theme encourages readers to distinguish between appearance and truth, between what people pretend to be and who they really are. The tension between illusion and reality adds depth to characters' journeys and reveals the complexity of human perception.

9.6.6 Power, Authority, and Rebellion

Tagore often challenges rigid authority—whether political, social, religious, or familial. In many stories, power is shown as something that restricts freedom, enforces meaningless rules, or suppresses individuality. Those who hold authority may misuse it or cling to it blindly, believing it guarantees order.

Rebellion arises when characters refuse to accept unjust or outdated authority. It may be subtle—questioning a rule, breaking tradition, or choosing a different path—or dramatic, like transforming an entire society. Rebellion in Tagore's stories is not destructive but constructive. It brings change, awakens awareness, and restores human dignity.

This theme highlights the conflict between old systems that value control and new forces that value freedom, creativity, and equality. Tagore celebrates those who dare to think differently and challenge oppression. Through imaginative scenarios, he shows how rebellion can lead to innovation, transformation, and a more humane world.

9.7 STYLE AND TECHIQUE

9.7.1 Simplicity of language and lyrical beauty

Tagore believed that literature should speak to everyone, not just scholars. That is why his stories use simple, everyday words that even a casual reader can understand. Yet, within this simplicity, his sentences often carry a musical rhythm, almost like lines of poetry. For example, when he describes moonlight falling on an old palace in "The Hungry Stones", the words feel soft and flowing, creating a picture in the reader's mind. This lyrical quality makes his prose memorable and gives it emotional power. In distance learning, this simplicity is especially important—it allows learners to enjoy the stories without struggling with difficult vocabulary, while still experiencing the beauty of poetic language.

9.7.2 Psychological depth and humanism

Tagore's characters are not flat or one-dimensional; they feel alive because he explores their inner thoughts and emotions. He shows us how a mother worries, how a child feels misunderstood, or how a servant carries guilt for years. This is what we call psychological depth—the ability to portray the inner world of human beings. Alongside this, Tagore's writing reflects *humanism*, the belief that every person has dignity and deserves compassion. In "Kabuliwala", for instance, Rahmat's longing for his daughter is so vividly described that readers empathize with him, even though he belongs to a different culture. For learners, this means Tagore's stories are not just about events, but about understanding people and their humanity.

9.7.3 Symbolism and allegory

Tagore often uses symbols—objects or events that stand for bigger ideas. Blindness in *Vision* is not only about losing sight; it symbolizes how women's voices are silenced in society. Similarly, the "hungry stones" in "The Hungry Stones" represent unfulfilled desires and the weight of history. Allegory goes further: the entire story becomes a metaphor for something larger. In "The Kingdom of Cards", the rigid card people represent societies trapped in meaningless traditions, while the prince symbolizes freedom and creativity. These techniques allow readers to enjoy the story on two levels—first as a simple tale, and second as a deeper reflection on life and society. For distance learners, symbolism and allegory encourage critical thinking, helping them see beyond the surface of the text.

9.7.4 Narrative economy and realism

Tagore's short stories are brief but powerful. He never wastes words—every detail serves a purpose. This is called *narrative economy*. For example, in "The Home-Coming", the description of Phatik's loneliness in Kolkata is short, but it conveys his entire emotional world. At the same time, Tagore's stories are rooted in *realism*. He writes about ordinary people—children, servants, widows, poets—rather than kings and heroes. His plots are believable, drawn from everyday life, and his characters behave in ways we recognize. This realism makes his stories timeless, because the emotions and situations are universal. For learners, narrative economy ensures the stories are easy to follow, while realism makes them relatable to their own lives.

9.8 Summing Up

In this unit, we explored some of Rabindranath Tagore's most compelling short stories, each revealing his deep insight into human nature, society, and the unseen dimensions of life. Through narratives such as "The Home-Coming", "My Lord, the Baby", "The Devotee", "Once There Was a King", and "The Kingdom of Cards", Tagore presents a rich blend of emotional depth, social commentary, and imaginative storytelling.

The themes examined in these stories—mysticism and the supernatural, imagination and fantasy, social and moral critique, identity and responsibility, illusion versus reality, and the dynamics of power and rebellion—highlight Tagore's ability to merge simplicity with philosophical depth. His stories invite readers to question rigid social norms, reflect on human relationships, and appreciate the delicate balance between tradition and change.

The character analysis showed how Tagore uses different types of figures—protagonists, authority figures, children, and supernatural beings—to reveal deeper truths about human behaviour. While characters like Phatik, Anukul, Phailna and Raicharan undergo emotional or moral transformation, child characters bring innocence and honesty, and authority figures expose social hierarchies. Supernatural or imaginative elements enrich the narratives by blurring boundaries between the real and the mysterious.

Overall, the unit emphasizes Tagore's storytelling brilliance: his ability to combine empathy, critique, and imaginative power to create narratives that remain timeless and universal. These stories not only entertain but also encourage self-reflection, compassion, and a more thoughtful engagement with the world.

9.9 Self-Assessment Questions

1. Tagore's short stories often combine _____with realism to create deeper meaning.

   a. Fantasy
   b. Symbolism
   c. Allegory
   d. All of the above

2. In "The Kabuliwala", Rahmat's bond with Mini symbolizes:

   a. Parental love
   b. Social reform
   c. Political struggle
   d. Wealth and poverty

3. Which story critiques blind tradition through allegory?
    a. "The Home-Coming"
    b. "The Hungry Stones"
    c. "The Kingdom of Cards"
    d. "Vision"

4. Trace the emergence of the short story in Bengal, highlighting Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's influence and Tagore's role in elevating it to a sophisticated literary form.

5. Analyze how Tagore employs mysticism/supernatural, illusion vs. reality, symbolism/allegory, and narrative economy/realism in the collection to achieve psychological depth.

Answers to Self -Assessment Questions

1. (d) All of the above
2. (a) Parental love.
3. (c) The Kingdom of Cards.
4. refer 9.4.1, 9.4.2 and 9.4.3.
5. refer 9.8.1, 9.8.9, 9.9.2 and 9.9.3.

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9.12 TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS

1. Evaluate the theme of power, authority, and rebellion in the selected stories, highlighting Tagore's views on social reform.
2. Examine how Tagore's narrative economy and realism make his short stories timeless and relatable across generations.
3. How does Tagore's simple language style make his stories accessible to a wide range of readers?
4. Explain the role of imagination and fantasy in Tagore's selected stories and how they enrich the narrative.
5. Analyze how Tagore blends the supernatural with everyday life to reveal deeper human truths.

Unit 10 RABINDRA NATH TAGORE:

THE HUNGRY STONE &OTHER STORIES II

10.1 INTRODUCTION

After reading the previous unit, you are now well familiar with Rabindranath Tagore's art of storytelling, the common themes that run through his short stories, and the distinctive style and techniques he employed. This unit turns our attention to one of his most memorable creations— "The Kabuliwala*"* ("The Fruitseller from Kabul").

Written in 1892, "Kabuliwala*"* is not just a simple tale of a fruit seller from Kabul and a little Bengali girl named Mini. It is a deeply emotional narrative that explores the universal bond between parent and child, the pain of separation, and the way human affection can cross cultural boundaries. Through Rahmat's longing for his daughter and his tender friendship with Mini, Tagore reminds us that love and empathy are stronger than social divisions or geographical distance.

In this unit, we will study the historical context of the story, examine its plot and characters, and analyze its themes such as father–daughter relationships, memory and exile, and cross-cultural friendship. We will also look at issues of translation, the significance of the title, and why this story continues to hold a timeless place in Indian short fiction.

Dear Learner,

The course comprises multiple components, with the Self-Learning Material (SLM) and counselling sessions being key elements. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the course content, it is essential that you engage with all these components in a balanced manner. As you are enrolled in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program, self-directed study plays a vital role in your academic success. Accordingly, each unit concludes with a list of suggested readings and references. You are strongly encouraged to consult these resources to enhance your comprehension and deepen your engagement with the subject matter.

10.2 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, learners will be able to:

1. Understand the context and place of "The Kabuliwala" in Indian short fiction.
2. Summarize the plot and structure of the story.
3. Analyze the main characters and their symbolic roles.

4. Identify key themes like love, friendship, memory, and empathy.
5. Appreciate Tagore's style, simplicity, and humanism.

10.3 HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF "THE KABULIWALA"

Rabindranath Tagore was born in 1881 in Calcutta (now Kolkata), at the heart of British-ruled India. Colonial control had tightened after the 1899 Rebellion, when his own family rebelled against the East India Company, leading to direct Crown rule and Queen Victoria's proclamation as "Empress of India" in 1899. India at this time was buzzing with missionary activity, new schools, hospitals, and expanding trade. Against this backdrop, Tagore's views on nationalism were distinctive: he supported independence but warned against letting patriotism overshadow shared humanity—a stance that was controversial in his era.

During his "Sadhana" phase (1891–99), Tagore penned "Kabuliwala" (1892). Colonial Calcutta, then the empire's trade capital amid opium routes and Anglo-Afghan wars, was home to real-life Kabuliwalas—Pashtun migrants from Kabul who sold dry fruits, lent money, and struggled with poverty, prejudice, and homesickness. Observing these "exotic others" on the streets, Tagore wove their isolation into a tale of empathy, subtly challenging social biases in this cosmopolitan port city. The story reflects his broader philosophy: love your roots, but recognize the human thread that unites all people.

Tagore's vision deepened in later years. After winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 for his poetry collection *Gitanjali*, he became an international voice for cultural and moral renewal. World War I, which saw Indian troops fighting for Britain, inspired his 1921 Nobel speech calling for global unity. His conversations with Albert Einstein further sparked reflections on science, philosophy, and cosmic poetry. In "The Kabuliwala", Rahmat is not merely an Afghan raisin-seller; he embodies every father aching for his child, bridging worlds in the way Tagore dreamed.

Tagore was also the most notable literary figure of the **Bengali Renaissance**, an artistic, social, and cultural movement that flourished in Bengal from the late 19th to the early 20th century. This period was marked by intellectual awakening, social reform, and literary innovation. His works—poetry, prose, drama, and short stories—embodied the spirit of this renaissance, blending tradition with modernity and addressing pressing social issues.

He was not alone in shaping this cultural revival. **Begum Rokeya** gained fame for

her feminist speculative fiction *Sultana's Dream*, which imagined a female-dominated "Ladyland" where gender roles were reversed. **Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay**, another leading figure, wrote novels such as *Bada didi* and *Devdas*, exploring social realities and human emotions with remarkable sensitivity. Together, these writers gave voice to the aspirations and struggles of colonial Bengal.

Tagore's influence extended far beyond India. His works were translated into numerous languages, inspiring writers across the globe. **Pablo Neruda**, the Chilean poet known for "Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair", admired Tagore's poetry and short stories. **William Butler Yeats**, the Irish poet of "The Second Coming" and "Easter 1918", was one of Tagore's earliest Western admirers and helped introduce his works to European audiences.

10.4 PUBLICATION AND ADAPTATIONS OF "THE KABULIWALA"

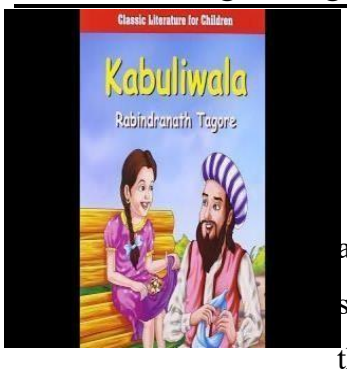
"The Kabuliwala" first appeared in the Bengali magazine *Sadhna* and was later included in Tagore's celebrated anthology *Galpaguchchha* ("Bunch of Stories"), published in 1892. This four-volume collection of 99 stories virtually invented modern Bengali short fiction, portraying everyday pathos and human struggles. "Kabuliwala" was grouped with other masterpieces such as *The Postmaster* and *Punishment*, which similarly explore themes of separation, empathy, and social realities.

The story has been widely translated. English versions include *Kabuliwala and Other Stories* (from *Selections from Galpaguchchha*, translated by Ratan Kumar Chattopadhyay), often paired with *Broken Nest*, *Manihara*, and *Stree Patra*—stories that highlight parting, relationships, and women's inner strength.

Cinematic adaptations have further popularized the story. Tapan Sinha's 1999 Bengali film *Kabuliwala* (with Chhabi Biswas as Rahmat) and Bimal Roy's 1981 Hindi version (with Balraj Sahni) brought the narrative to life on screen, expanding its emotional resonance for wider audiences. These adaptations underline the timeless appeal of Tagore's tale and its ability to move people across cultures and generations.

10.5 "THE KABULIWALA": A SUMMARY

Rabindranath Tagore's "Kabuliwala" first published in *Sadhana* in 1892, stands as one of his most beloved short stories, renowned for



its deceptively simple language, profound emotional depth, and universal resonance. Through vivid imagery and understated pathos, Tagore explores the innocence of childhood, the anguish of exile and separation, and the transcendent bond between fathers and daughters—one that transcends cultural, geographical, and social divides. Set against the bustling streets of colonial Calcutta, the narrative subtly critiques societal prejudices while celebrating shared humanity.

The Beginning: Mini and Rahmat's Unlikely Friendship

The story unfolds in the narrator's modest Calcutta home, where we meet his five-year-old daughter, Mini—a vivacious bundle of energy whose "tongue never stops for a moment.(Nivedita 135)" Her incessant chatter exasperates her mother, who views it as unbecoming, but enchants her father, who sees it as the essence of life itself: "Silence would not be natural for her." This domestic tableau sets a tone of warmth and everyday joy, contrasting sharply with the disruptions to come.

One crisp autumn morning, Mini peers from the window and spots Rahmat, a towering Kabuliwala—an Afghan dry-fruit seller from the rugged Hindu Kush mountains, far from his homeland. Laden with massive burlap sacks bulging with raisins, almonds, and pistachios, he cuts an intimidating figure. Mini's initial terror is childlike and vivid: she imagines the bags stuffed with stolen children, a fear Tagore uses to evoke the exotic "otherness" of the itinerant peddler in urban Bengal. Yet, true to her curious nature, fear swiftly yields to fascination. She bombards Rahmat with questions, and he responds with gruff humour, offering her treats and teasing her about marriage— "Are you going to the father-in-law's house?(Nivedita 140)" Their banter forges an instant, pure friendship, innocent of adult hierarchies.

For Rahmat, weathered by years away from Kabul, Mini becomes a poignant surrogate for his own daughter, Amina. He confides in the narrator about his homesickness, revealing how Mini's laughter fills the void left by his child. This bond poignantly bridges the chasm between a Bengali bhadralok (gentleman's) household and a poor Pashtun migrant, highlighting Tagore's theme of universal paternal love amid cultural alienation.

The Middle: Tragedy, Imprisonment, and the Passage of Time

Rahmat's fragile idyll shatters during the festival season, when a recalcitrant tenant cheats him out of payment. In a fit of rage—fueled by homesickness and desperation—Rahmat stabs the man, landing him in prison for an eight-year sentence (an unspecified but lengthy term in the story). His sacks gather dust, his visits cease, and the narrator reflects on the fragility of such bonds.

Mini, resilient in her youth, quickly moves on, her world expanding with new playmates and chatter. Rahmat, however, endures solitary torment, clutching memories of Mini as a talisman against despair. Tagore masterfully employs irony here: while the child forgets, the adult's longing deepens, underscoring how time erodes innocence but etches paternal devotion indelibly. This section critiques colonial Calcutta's underbelly—poverty, exploitation of migrants, and the dehumanizing grind of urban life—without overt didacticism.

The End: A Bittersweet Reunion and Epiphany of Empathy

Freed after years behind bars, Rahmat returns to Calcutta a changed man—gaunt, aged, his once-mighty frame stooped. Fate intervenes on the very day of Mini's wedding, now a demure 13-year-old bride adorned in bridal finery. Rahmat appears at the threshold, not for alms or trade, but for a final glimpse of his "little friend." The narrator, initially wary—haunted by Rahmat's violent past and superstitious fears of ill omen on this auspicious day—hesitates.

Rahmat's plea pierces this reluctance: he unfurls a faded, crumpled handprint, stained with time and grime—the tiny palm of his daughter, made years ago in vermilion paste. "This is my daughter's hand," he whispers, "just like yours with Mini." In this revelatory moment, Tagore strips away stereotypes: Rahmat is no longer the "wild" Pathan or mere peddler, but a mirror to the narrator's soul—a fellow father gripped by the same ache. Mini, glimpsing him, recoils in shy confusion, her grown poise a stark reminder to Rahmat that his own Bhola must now be a young woman, forever altered by his absence.

Overwhelmed by empathy, the narrator gifts Rahmat fare for his journey home to Kabul, sacrificing wedding feast luxuries. Yet, he muses, the ceremony glows with a "deeper, holier light"—the quiet benediction of facilitating another father's reunion. The story closes on this note of subdued transcendence, leaving readers with Tagore's enduring wisdom: true

wealth lies not in rituals, but in recognizing our shared vulnerabilities.

10.6 ANALYSING THE STORY

10.6.1 The Problems of Translation

Translating "Kabuliwala" from Bengali to English poses significant challenges due to its reliance on cultural idioms, dialect, and unspoken context. Tagore's prose thrives on Mini's hyperactive, breathless monologue— "she cannot keep silent for a moment"—which captures a vivid, rhythmic childlike energy unique to Bengali syntax; English renders it flatter, losing the playful torrent. Rahmat's dialogue, in gritty Pidgin Bengali laced with Pashto inflections (e.g., his teasing "O Mini, will you go to your father-in-law's house?(Nivedita 140)" implying marriage as confinement, conveys migrant alienation and warmth—translators like Partha Chatterjee or older ones preserve sentiment but smooth the rough edges, diluting the "foreigner" authenticity. Key symbols falter too: the crumpled handprint, stained with gerua (vermilion paste tied to Hindu rituals and longing), evokes sacred domesticity in Bengali culture, but appears merely sentimental in English without footnotes. Humour from cultural mismatches—like Mini's innocent marriage banter or Rahmat's fruit metaphors for homesickness—evaporates across languages. Multiple versions exist (e.g., "Kabuliwallah" vs. "The Fruitseller"), altering tone: some emphasize pathos, others realism. Overall, while the emotional core survives, the original's streetwise subtlety—bridging Bengal-Afghan worlds through vernacular—fades, requiring bilingual reads or annotations for full impact.

10.6.2 The Title

The title "Kabuliwala" directly translates to "the man from Kabul," pinpointing Rahmat, the towering Afghan migrant who sells dry fruits like raisins and nuts on Calcutta's streets. In 1892 colonial Bengal, this term carried layers: to urban dwellers, a Kabuliwala evoked rugged Pashtun traders from distant Afghanistan—exotic outsiders with massive burlap sacks, often viewed with a mix of curiosity, suspicion, and fear, especially by children like Mini who imagine horrors inside the bags. Tagore chooses this stark, unpoetic label deliberately, avoiding romantic flair to mirror real-life encounters. It hooks readers with the promise of otherness, then subverts it: Rahmat transforms from a stereotypical "wild Pathan" peddler—prone to violence, as his stabbing incident shows—into a universal father figure. The title thus frames the narrative's core irony—surface judgments based on labels crumble under shared human experiences like parental longing. Without it, the story loses its

immediate cultural punch, grounding Tagore's humanism in everyday colonial reality.

10.7 ANALYSING THE CHARACTERS

10.7.1 The Narrator / Mini's Father

The unnamed narrator embodies the quintessential middle-class Bengali bhadralok (educated gentleman) of 1890s colonial Calcutta, a writer or intellectual residing in a typical Sealdah neighbourhood home with his family, where the story's domestic rhythms unfold against the city's teeming backdrop. Through his intimate first-person narration—wry, observational, laced with gentle humour—Tagore crafts him as both reliable guide and evolving mirror for readers, inviting us into his psyche from the outset. He emerges as a devoted father who cherishes four-year-old Mini's irrepressible vitality: her tongue never stops for a moment, a ceaseless cascade of questions and chatter that he celebrates as life's essence— "silence would not be natural for her"—in stark contrast to his wife's traditional admonishments for girlish propriety. This paternal indulgence reveals his progressive leanings amid era-specific norms influenced by Victorian morality and Bengali orthodoxy, positioning him as empathetic yet privileged, attuned to childhood's unfiltered joy.

Initially, he observes Rahmat's arrival with amused detachment, savouring Mini's progression from wide-eyed terror—envisioning the Kabuliwala's massive burlap sacks stuffed with abducted children—to fearless camaraderie over raisins and playful banter about marriage ("O Mini, will you forget me then?"). He even engages Rahmat in quiet post-visit conversations, learning of the migrant's homesickness for his daughter, which subtly plants seeds of cross-cultural kinship. Yet, latent class prejudices simmer beneath: Rahmat registers as an entertaining "Pathan" diversion for Mini, a lower-strata curiosity in bustling colonial Calcutta, where Afghan peddlers symbolized exotic commerce amid opium trade and urban flux.

Rahmat's eruption of violence—stabbing a defaulting tenant over unpaid dues—jolts this equilibrium, exposing the narrator's unease with the peddler's raw volatility, a stereotype of the "fierce Pathan" rooted in Anglo-Afghan war lore and migrant marginalization. Time passes; Mini matures, forgetting her friend, while the narrator retreats into routine. The climax on Mini's thirteenth-birthday wedding day amplifies his complexity: now a bride in shimmering finery, Mini's departure stirs his grief, compounded by Rahmat's gaunt reappearance at the threshold. Superstition surges—he bars the ex-convict, invoking fears of

ill omen tainting sacred rituals, a nod to Bengali customs where ex-prisoners portend misfortune.

This hesitation unveils internal turmoil: rational fondness for Rahmat clashes with societal decorum, paternal loss, and ingrained hierarchies. The handprint revelation shatters barriers—a faded vermilion imprint of Rahmat's daughter's tiny palm, treasured across years and continents—evoking instant recognition: "Rahmat was no longer a mere peddler; he was a father, like me." Empathy triumphs; he disburses silver rupees for Rahmat's Kabul passage, slashing wedding feast extravagance, yet perceives the ceremony illuminated by "a deeper, holier light," prioritizing human reunion over opulent tradition.

Through this meticulously etched arc—from indulgent observer, to biased bystander, to sacrificial empath—Tagore elevates the narrator as the story's philosophical pivot. He critiques bhadralok complacency, colonial-era othering, and ritualistic nationalism, embodying Tagore's humanism: shared vulnerabilities like fatherly devotion dissolve divides of class, crime, ethnicity, and empire. His understated prose—poignant reflections on time's erosion, memory's persistence—infuses "Kabuliwala" with timeless resonance, making him not just Mini's father, but every reader's conduit to profound universality.

10.7.2 Kabuliwala (Rahmat)

Rahmat, the central Kabuliwala, emerges as Tagore's richly layered symbol of displaced humanity—a physically dominant yet emotionally vulnerable Pashtun from Afghanistan's remote Hindu Kush regions, driven to colonial Calcutta in the 1890s by economic necessity amid the Anglo-Afghan Wars' aftermath (1839–1919) and Bengal's opium-fueled trade prosperity. These real historical Kabuliwalas—seasonal migrants since the 1840s—travelled perilous mountain passes yearly, bartering dry fruits (grapes turning to raisins, almonds, pistachios, apricots) and occasionally lending money at high interest, their massive burlap sacks (up to 100-190 kg) evoking both livelihood and menace in urban imaginations. Tagore, observing them from his Jorasanko home or Sealdah streets, immortalizes Rahmat as their archetype: "mountainously large" in stature, with a "ferocious" bearded face, loose salwar-kameez, turban, and knee-high boots caked in dust, his deep voice booming across class divides. This imposing silhouette instantly marks him as the exotic "Pathan"—a term blending awe, fear, and racial othering rooted in British frontier narratives of warrior tribesmen—yet Tagore peels back to reveal profound interiority.

From his debut peering through Mini's window, Rahmat disarms with calculated

gentleness: he offers her the finest raisins ("not the dry, shriveled ones"), tolerates her initial shrieks of horror (bags as kidnapping lairs), and counters with paternal teasing— "Khuki Mini, what will you give your Kabuliwala when you're married?"—transforming terror into ritualistic friendship. Their daily exchanges—her chattering questions met by his gruff Pashto-inflected Bengali—transcend commerce; Mini becomes his "living daughter," a balm for his daughter left in Kabul under a mother's care during his multi-year absences. Evening chats with the narrator expose his soul: tales of Afghan snows, family rituals, and the ache of "eight years gone without seeing her hand," foreshadowing the handprint's power. This duality—provider and exile—humanizes him early, subverting expectations of the mercenary hawker.

The pivot arrives amid festive commerce: during Durga Puja's bustle, a wily tenant withholds payment for goods worth rupees, igniting Rahmat's volcanic temper—he draws a knife, stabs the man grievously, and faces swift colonial justice with a lengthy sentence (narrated as spanning Mini's growth from 9 to 13). This act cements stereotypes—the "savage" Pathan's impulsivity, amplified by poverty, homesickness, and cultural clash (Afghan honour codes clashing with Bengali evasion)—yet Tagore frames it sympathetically: not innate savagery, but accumulated desperation, echoing migrant exploitation in port-city underclass. Prison strips him physically and temporally; emerging "bent like a dried-up plant," gray-bearded and frail, he retains spiritual vigour, clutching Mini's memory as sustenance.

His poignant return on Mini's wedding eve crowns the arc: rebuffed by superstition (ex-convicts as omens), Rahmat pleads not for money but "one look at Mini," unveiling his sacred relic—a soiled, vermilion-smeared paper with his daughter's infant handprint, made in loving play years prior. This artifact—faded yet fervent—encapsulates his odyssey: tangible proof of fatherhood persisting through violence, incarceration, and deracination. Mini's transformed shyness (now veiled bride) doubles as Rahmat's daughter's unseen growth, evoking mutual sorrow; the narrator's gift of the return fare seals Rahmat's quiet triumph.

Tagore elevates Rahmat beyond a mere character to manifesto: he dismantles colonial ethnographies that portray Afghans as perpetual threats, recasts the peddler as a paternal figure, and indicts empire for its human costs—the toll of migration and the blindness of prejudice . His arc—from intruder to kin—embodies the story's ethic: empathy dissolves

otherness, paternal bonds defy maps, and dignity endures destitution. Rahmat's handprint lingers as *Kabuliwala*'s indelible image, a fragile bridge across empires and epochs.

10.7.3 Mini

Mini, the narrator's four-year-old daughter, bursts into the story as its radiant emblem of unadulterated childhood—a whirlwind of curiosity, fearlessness, and inexhaustible chatter that propels the narrative's emotional engine and thematic contrasts. Living in the family's modest Calcutta home near Sealdah, she embodies the unselfconscious vitality of early girlhood in 1890s Bengali middle-class life: "She cannot keep silent for a single moment," the narrator fondly notes, her tongue a perpetual motion machine firing rapid-fire questions about everything from street vendors to marriage rituals. This logorrheic energy—exasperating her mother as "shameless" and unladylike—enchants her father, who sees it as life's natural rhythm, positioning Mini as a bridge between domestic normalcy and the extraordinary encounter with Rahmat. Her world is sensory and immediate: peering from the low window ledge, she rules her tiny kingdom, transforming mundane mornings into adventures.

Mini's arc pivots on her seismic first meeting with Rahmat, the Kabuliwala, which unfolds as a masterclass in childhood psychology and cultural alchemy. Initial terror grips her—his colossal frame and bulging burlap sacks evoke primal dread: "Are there any children inside those bags?" She shrieks, her imagination peeling them with abducted playmates, a universal child trope amplifying the exotic "otherness" of Afghan migrants in colonial Bengal. Yet, true to her indomitable spirit, fear flips to fascination within moments: Rahmat's offerings of plump raisins and patient teasing ("O Mini, when you are married, will you forget the Kabuliwala?") dissolve barriers. She bombards him with queries— "Why do you wrap your head like that?"—while he nicknames her "Khuki" (little niece), establishing their cross-cultural ritual: daily chats laced with nuts, jokes about her future "father-in-law's house" (a Bengali euphemism for marital confinement she parrots innocently), and shared laughter that blurs class and ethnicity.

As the friendship deepens, Mini becomes Rahmat's unwitting surrogate for his absent daughter, her giggles echoing across the Khyber Pass. She delights in his tales of Kabul's mountains and snows, clutching almonds like treasures, her openness unmarred by adult prejudices—Tagore leverages her innocence to humanize the peddler early, her acceptance

foreshadowing the narrator's epiphany. Rahmat's arrest shatters the idyll abruptly; yet Mini's resilience shines: "Children are heartless," the narrator reflects wryly, as she swiftly pivots to new companions, her elastic memory erasing the giant friend amid growing pains and playdates. This forgetfulness underscores time's asymmetry—childhood's ephemerality versus adult endurance—her chatter redirecting to schoolmates and dolls.

Eight transformative years later (~1900), Mini reemerges on her wedding day at age twelve or thirteen, the story's poignant counterpoint. Adorned in bridal *lehenga* and *ghunghat* (veil), surrounded by Vedic chants and turmeric rituals, she is no longer the tomboy tyrant but a demure *kanya:* shy, silent, eyes downcast in *lajja* (modest shame). Rahmat's reappearance elicits bare recognition—a blush, a hurried retreat—her poise clashing with his memories of the chattering imp. This evolution devastates him, mirroring his daughter's unseen growth and crystallizing the theme of irreversible change: Mini's passage from *balika* (child) to *streekanya* (woman) signifies lost innocence, marital exile, and time's inexorable theft.

Through Mini, Tagore weaves multifaceted symbolism: psychologically, she is the Jungian *puer aeternus* (eternal child) whose fleeting presence heals the migrant's psyche; narratively, her arc bookends the story, catalyzing Rahmat's bond and epiphany; thematically, she spotlights *viraha* (separation) duality—forgotten by her, unforgettable to him—while challenging gender norms (her early freedom curtailed by puberty). Her laughter initiates empathy; her silence consummates it. Mini is no mere plot device; she is *Kabuliwala*'s beating heart—innocence incarnate, proving Tagore's humanism: from a child's unfiltered gaze, the world shrinks to shared humanity, borders be damned.

10.7.4 The Narrator's Wife/ Mini's Mother

The narrator's wife, referred to only as Mini's mother, occupies a peripheral yet symbolically charged role as the voice of conventional domesticity and gender norms in 1890s Bengali middle-class life. She appears briefly in the story's opening domestic tableau, embodying the pragmatic, tradition-bound matriarch who polices her daughter's behaviour amid the household's rhythms near Sealdah, Calcutta. Her primary function emerges through repeated admonishments of Mini's incessant chatter: "What a nuisance! She cannot keep silent even for a moment," she scolds, deeming the four-year-old's volubility "shameless" and unbecoming for a girl destined for marital propriety. This contrasts sharply with the narrator's

indulgent delight— "silence would not be natural for her"—highlighting a gendered parental divide: the father celebrates childhood freedom, while the mother enforces restraint, foreshadowing Mini's eventual transformation into a demure bride.

Tagore renders her as a foil to the male protagonists, absent from pivotal interactions with Rahmat and the story's emotional climax. She never witnesses the Kabuliwala's visits, Mini's budding friendship, or Rahmat's return—her world confined to kitchen duties, child-rearing, and upholding *grihastha* (householder) ideals influenced by Victorian-Bengali hybrid morality. This omission underscores her symbolic marginality: representing the *anusthanik* (ritualistic) feminine archetype—focused on propriety, superstition, and familial order—she polices boundaries the men transgress. Her scoldings evoke era-specific anxieties about *lajja* (modesty) for girls, prefiguring Mini's silencing at puberty and wedding, where *ghunghat* (veiling) ritualizes submission.

Psychologically, she incarnates the superego to the narrator's ego and Mini's id: her "nuisance" refrains impose social *maryada* (limits), curbing the chaos Rahmat introduces. Narratively, her absence amplifies pathos—excluded from the handprint epiphany and fatherly bond, she embodies the domestic sphere untouched by the story's humanism. Critically, Tagore subtly indicates patriarchal confines: her voice, though authoritative at home, fades entirely, mirroring women's sidelined agency in bhadralok society amid colonial reforms.

Through this understated sketch—scolding mother as norm-enforcer—she anchors the story's domestic realism, contrasting Rahmat's wild otherness and catalyzing the male empathy arc. Neither villain nor heroine, she humanizes everyday Bengal, reminding that Tagore's universalism emerges from gendered particulars. Her silence at the story's end speaks volumes: rituals she upholds yield to deeper human lights.

10.7.4 Rahmat's daughter

Rahmat's unseen daughter back in Kabul, functions as the story's absent yet omnipresent emotional linchpin—a spectral child whose intangible presence drives the narrative's profoundest themes of separation, memory, and universal fatherhood. Never physically appearing, she materializes through Rahmat's nostalgic tales and longing gazes during his visits to Mini, transforming the Kabuliwala's gruff commerce into poignant confessionals

about family left behind. As a young girl (implied around Mini's age of 4–9 at story's start) under her mother's care in distant Afghanistan, Rahmat's daughter represents the migrant's ultimate sacrifice: Rahmat's multi-year sojourns in Calcutta—spanning perilous Khyber Pass treks and urban drudgery—sever him from her daily growth, her image frozen in his mind as a talisman against exile's erosion.

Her symbolic power peaks in the story's climax through Rahmat's treasured relic: a crumpled, soiled sheet of paper bearing the faded imprint of her tiny hand, dipped in gerua (vermilion paste) during a playful childhood ritual years earlier. This handprint—earthy red stain evoking Hindu rakhi-tying or Afghan henna traditions—serves as a synesthetic bridge across cultures and continents: tangible proof of his daughter's once-small palm, now likely matured into a young woman's during Rahmat's ~8-year imprisonment. When unveiled to the narrator on Mini's wedding day, it shatters barriers, forging instant kinship— "What father would not sympathize with another father?"—equating Rahmat's ache with the narrator's impending loss of Mini to marriage.

His daughter's invisibility amplifies her role as *viraha* (love-in-separation) archetype: through Mini, Rahmat projects her laughter and curiosity, the surrogate bond healing his psychic fracture until time intervenes. Mini's transformation into a shy bride doubles as his daughter's unseen evolution, piercing Rahmat with realization—his daughter, too, has grown beyond recognition during his absence. Tagore leverages her as humanist fulcrum: no exotic Afghan detail needed; His daughter universalizes Rahmat from "Pathan peddler" to every father, her handprint eclipsing class, crime, and creed.

Narratively, she bookends Rahmat's arc—motivating his tenderness, sustaining his prison endurance, catalyzing epiphany—while thematically embodying time's cruelty (childhood stasis vs. inexorable change) and empathy's triumph (shared longing dissolves otherness). In the colonial context, Rahmat's daughter becomes an indictment of the empire's human cost, as a migrant father funds imperial trade at the expense of his family. Her absence renders her eternal—Tagore's masterstroke in simplicity, proving paternal bonds transcend visibility, borders, and even stories themselves. The handprint endures as *Kabuliwala*'s indelible motif: fragile, cross-cultural relic of innocence preserved in absence.

10.8 THEMES

10.8.1 Father-daughter bond

The father-daughter bond anchors *Kabuliwala* as its transcendent emotional force, universally humanizing characters across divides of geography, class, and criminality. Rahmat, separated from his daughter by continents and his migratory toil, discovers her living echo in Mini—her chattering curiosity and delighted giggles recreating the Kabul home he sacrificed for economic survival. This surrogate affection manifests concretely: plump raisins as surrogate *prasad,* marriage jests mirroring paternal teasing Mini once enjoyed. The narrative crescendos at the handprint revelation—Rahmat's daughter's vermilion palm print, preserved through years of prison grime—a sacred *yantra* collapsing emotional distance, compelling the narrator's epiphany: "Rahmat was no longer merely a peddler from Afghanistan; he was a father, even as I was." Mini's arc doubles this bond: her transformation from fearless playmate to veiled bride parallels Rahmat's daughter's unseen maturation during Rahmat's eight-year incarceration, mutual realizations deepening paternal anguish. The narrator's climactic sacrifice—diverting wedding feast silver rupees (~₹90–100, months of Rahmat's earnings) for Kabul passage—prioritizes this primal connection over ritual extravagance, affirming Tagore's hierarchy: biological ties yield to discovered kinship, wedding *mandap* illumination deriving from "deeper, holier light" of reunion ethics.

10.8.2 Cross-cultural friendship

Mini and Rahmat's relationship beautifully illustrates Tagore's vision of cross-cultural humanism. In colonial Calcutta, Afghan migrants like Rahmat were often viewed with suspicion and labelled as outsiders. Yet through the innocent gaze of childhood, these rigid social and imperial hierarchies dissolve. Mini's window ledge becomes a meeting ground where affection and curiosity replace prejudice.

Their friendship is sustained through small rituals: Rahmat's daily visits, his gifts of raisins and almonds, and their playful banter about marriage customs. Language itself becomes a bridge—Mini's rapid Bengali chatter meets Rahmat's Pashto-tinged phrases, creating a bond richer than mere commerce. In these exchanges, power dynamics invert: Mini dictates the terms of play, while Rahmat willingly takes on the role of a gentle uncle.

This bond foreshadows the narrator's later realization that Rahmat is not simply a foreign fruit seller but a father longing for his own child. Mini's prejudice-free acceptance

humanizes Rahmat before adult recognition, embodying Tagore's ideal of *visva-manavata* (world humanity).

Placed in historical context, their friendship challenges colonial stereotypes that painted Pathans as "fanatical" or dangerous. Instead, Tagore shows that shared emotions—especially the joy and laughter of childhood—can transcend boundaries from Kabul to Bengal, affirming the universality of human connection.

10.8.3 Memory, longing, and exile

Rahmat lives in a state of exile, cut off from his home and family. His memories become his lifeline, helping him survive the pain of separation. When he hears Mini's laughter, it reminds him of Kabul—its winters, the smell of bread, and the decorations his daughter Amina once made. But prison dries him up, leaving him bent and aged, like a dried leaf.

The handprint of his daughter is a powerful symbol: it preserves her childhood even though she has grown older, resisting the passage of time. In contrast, Mini shows how quickly children forget—her memory is flexible, while Rahmat's is fixed and unchanging. For eight years he holds on to the image of Mini as a little girl, while she grows up and moves on with her life.

When Rahmat meets Mini again on her wedding day, her silence under the bridal veil mirrors the maturity he imagines in his own daughter. This moment makes him realize how exile has stolen time from him. Tagore grounds this in real migrant experience—Afghan traders often stayed away from home for months, leading to long separations from their families. At the same time, Tagore elevates Rahmat's longing into something spiritual: his suffering becomes a kind of devotion, turning economic hardship into a deeper, almost religious endurance.

10.8.4 Social realities and empathy

Tagore highlights the tough social conditions of 1890s colonial Calcutta, where poor Afghan migrants like Rahmat faced daily struggles—cheating customers, cultural prejudice, and unfair treatment under British rule. During the busy Durga Puja festival, a sneaky tenant refuses to pay for Rahmat's dry fruits and nuts, sparking his outburst of anger; he stabs the man in frustration and ends up in prison for many years. At first, people—including the

narrator—see Rahmat as a rough "Pathan" outsider, someone exotic and untrustworthy with his big bags and foreign ways. This changes to fear when they remember his crime, and on Mini's wedding day, the narrator worries Rahmat will bring bad luck as an ex-prisoner.

But the handprint of Rahmat's daughter Amina shifts everything. The narrator suddenly understands: Rahmat is not just a criminal or peddler—he is a father missing his child, exactly like himself with Mini. This moment builds real empathy, breaking down walls of class difference (rich Bengali home vs. poor migrant life) and cultural bias (Bengali vs. Afghan). Instead of turning Rahmat away, the narrator gives him money for the long trip back to Kabul—enough to cut down on the wedding feast food and sweets. Yet he feels the wedding gains true happiness, a "deeper light" from helping another father reunite with his daughter.

Tagore uses this to teach a big lesson: judging people by their background or mistakes blocks understanding, but shared human feelings—like love for your child—connect everyone. Rahmat's story shows the real problems migrants face in busy port cities, like poverty and loneliness, while pushing readers to feel compassion over fear or superstition. Empathy wins when we see ourselves in the "other."

10.9 STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

*"*Kabuliwala" is written in deceptively simple yet lyrical prose that transforms everyday Calcutta life into emotionally charged poetry. His sentences carry a musical rhythm, capturing sensory details such as Mini's "tongue [that] never stops for a moment" or Rahmat's sack "bulging ominously" like a folk monster. Vivid metaphors and synesthetic images—wedding sunlight gleaming "like purified molten gold," clarinet strains rising "from the depths of one's being"—evoke pathos and elevate mundane scenes into universal tableaux. The intimate first-person voice of Mini's father creates psychological immediacy but also subtle unreliability, guiding readers through his evolution from amused detachment to empathetic recognition. Dialogues are sparse yet revelatory: Mini's breathless interrogations, Rahmat's Pashto-tinged pidgin, and the narrator's wry asides all contribute to realism, while humor and pauses convey unspoken depth.

Local customs such as Durga Puja credit exchanges, wedding chants, ghunghat veiling, and gerua handprint rites anchor the story in Bengal's Renaissance milieu,

contrasting with Rahmat's Afghan identity and dissolving exoticism into shared human ethos. Symbols propel allegory—Rahmat's sack as the burden of worldly existence, his daughter's handprint as a relic of love, and Mini's growth as the arrow of time. Irony enriches the narrative, with children described as "heartless" or a wedding "blessed" by austerity. The story follows a classic dramatic arc of friendship, rupture, recognition, and cathartic resolution. At roughly 4,000 words, every detail is purposeful, creating iceberg realism where meaning lies beneath the surface. Pathos accrues through Rahmat's stoic dignity and longing, proving Tagore's genius: universal truths drawn from local grit, empathy from economic realism, and transcendence from temporal flux.

10.10 SUMMING UP

In this unit, we explored Rabindranath Tagore's "The Kabuliwala", a story that continues to move readers across generations. Written in 1892 during his *Sadhana* phase, the tale reflects colonial Calcutta's diverse social fabric and Tagore's humanist vision.

We saw how the friendship between Mini, a talkative Bengali child, and Rahmat, an Afghan fruit seller, dissolves cultural and social barriers. Their bond highlights themes of innocence, empathy, memory, exile, and the universal father–daughter relationship. The plot moves from playful beginnings to Rahmat's imprisonment, and finally to his poignant reunion with Mini on her wedding day, where he realizes his own daughter must also have grown up.

The characters—Mini, Rahmat, the narrator, and Mini's mother—embody different perspectives: innocence, longing, compassion, and caution. Tagore's style, marked by simplicity, psychological insight, and emotional depth, makes the story timeless.

We also situated "Kabuliwala" in its historical and literary context: the Bengali Renaissance, Tagore's Nobel Prize, his contemporaries like Begum Rokeya and Sarat Chandra, and his global admirers such as Yeats and Neruda. The story's translations and cinematic adaptations further underline its universal appeal.

Ultimately, "Kabuliwala" is not just about one Afghan trader in Calcutta—it is about shared humanity. Through Rahmat's longing for his daughter and the narrator's empathy,

Tagore reminds us that love and compassion transcend boundaries of culture, language, and geography.

10.11 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS:

1. "Kabuliwala" was first published in the magazine _____.

   (a) Bharati
   (b) Sadhna
   (c) Galpaguchchha
   (d) Modern Review

2. The central relationship in "Kabuliwala" is between:

   (a) Rahmat and Mini
   (b) Rahmat and the narrator
   (c) Mini and her mother
   (d) Rahmat and his daughter

3. Rahmat is originally from _____.

   (a) Bengal
   (b) Kabul
   (c) Delhi
   (d) Lahore

4. Who is the narrator of the story?

   (a) Mini's mother
   (b) Mini's father
   (c) Rahmat
   (d) A neighbour

5. How does "Kabuliwala" explore the theme of parental love?

6. In what way does the story critique social prejudice and cultural stereotypes?

7. How does Mini's transformation from a talkative child to a shy bride reflect the story's message?

8. How have translations and adaptations helped "Kabuliwala" gain global recognition?

Answers to Self – Assessment Questions:

1. (b) *Sadhna*
2. (a) Rahmat and Mini
3. (b) Kabul

4. (b) Mini's father
5. Refer 8.8.1
6. Refer 8.8.2
7. Refer 8.9.3
8. Refer 8.4

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10.14. TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the themes of cultural barriers, time, and human connection in "The Kabuliwala*"*.
2. Discuss how Rahmat's relationship with Mini evolves from fear to surrogate fatherhood, highlighting Tagore's portrayal of universal bonds."
3. Examine the theme of time and separation in "The Kabuliwala", contrasting Mini's growth with Rahmat's homesickness.
4. Trace the evolving relationship between Mini and the Kabuliwala.

UNIT 11 R. K. NARAYAN: *The English Teacher - I*

11.1. INTRODUCTION

R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* is one of the most significant novels in Indian English literature, known for its simplicity, realism, and deep human concern. Unlike novels that focus on political movements or large historical events, this work explores the inner life of an ordinary individual and presents the everyday experiences of a middle-class Indian teacher during the colonial period. The novel is partly autobiographical and reflects Narayan's personal experiences as a teacher, husband, and observer of Indian society under British rule.

This unit discusses Part I of *The English Teacher* which serves as the foundation of the novel is discussed. It introduces the protagonist, Krishna, who works as a lecturer in English literature at a college in the fictional town of Malgudi. Through Krishna's professional life, Narayan offers a sharp yet gentle criticism of the British system of education imposed on Indian institutions. Krishna's dissatisfaction with teaching mechanical literary criticism and his frustration with colonial pedagogical methods highlight the conflict between imposed Western values and indigenous cultural sensibilities.

Part I is significant because it establishes the themes, characters, and narrative tone of the novel. It introduces Krishna's inner conflicts, his search for meaningful education, and his desire for emotional fulfilment. This unit helps learners understand the social, cultural, and educational background of the novel and prepares them for the emotional and philosophical developments that unfold in the later parts.

11.2. OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, the learners will be able to:

- understand the background of *The English Teacher*
- appreciate R. K. Narayan as an Indian English novelist
- appreciate the setting and narrative style of the novel
- analyse the events and themes of Part I
- understand Krishna as a representative middle-class Indian teacher

11.3. INTRODUCTION TO R.K. NARAYANA AND THE NOVEL

R. K. Narayan occupies a central position in the history of Indian English literature. Along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, he forms the foundational triad of Indian English

novelists who gave the genre a distinct identity in the early twentieth century. Narayan's contribution is remarkable not because of grand themes or experimental techniques, but because of his consistent portrayal of ordinary Indian life with simplicity, humour, and deep human understanding. His fiction reflects the everyday experiences of common people and transforms them into meaningful literary expressions. Among his many novels, *The English Teacher* stands out as a deeply personal and introspective work that blends realism with spiritual exploration.

R. K. Narayan: Life and Literary Career

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayanaswami, popularly known as R. K. Narayan, was born in 1906 in Madras (now Chennai). He spent most of his life in South India, which deeply influenced his literary imagination. Narayan was educated in English-medium institutions during the British colonial period, and this exposure shaped his outlook on education, culture, and language. His early career as a teacher and his engagement with English literature later found expression in many of his novels.

Narayan's literary career began with *Swami and Friends* (1935), a novel that introduced readers to the fictional town of Malgudi. This imaginary town became the setting for most of his novels and short stories and emerged as one of the most enduring creations in Indian English fiction. Malgudi is neither entirely rural nor fully urban; it represents a typical South Indian town where tradition and modernity coexist. Through Malgudi, Narayan presented a realistic and affectionate portrait of Indian life, making the local appear universal.

One of the distinguishing features of Narayan's writing is his use of simple and lucid English. He avoided elaborate vocabulary and complex sentence structures, preferring clarity and naturalness. His language reflects the rhythms of Indian speech while remaining accessible to a global audience. Narayan's style is also marked by gentle irony and understated humour, which he used to expose human weaknesses without bitterness or moral superiority. His characters are ordinary people—teachers, clerks, shopkeepers, students—whose lives unfold in familiar social settings.

Narayan's fiction is deeply humanistic. He is less concerned with political ideologies or social revolutions and more interested in the emotional and moral growth of individuals. Themes such as family relationships, marriage, education, tradition, modernity, suffering, and spiritual quest recur throughout his works. Unlike some of his contemporaries who depicted social injustice and political struggle in strong terms, Narayan adopted a calm and

balanced approach. His novels suggest that life, despite its struggles and contradictions, possesses an inherent order and meaning.

Education is a recurring theme in Narayan's novels, particularly in *The English Teacher*. Having himself experienced the colonial education system, Narayan was critical of its mechanical methods and its failure to nurture creativity and emotional intelligence. He believed that education should be life-centred and value-based rather than examination-oriented. This concern with education is closely connected to Narayan's broader vision of life, which emphasizes inner growth, self-awareness, and harmony.

Introduction to *The English Teacher*

The English Teacher is a novel written by R. K. Narayan and published in 1945. It belongs to the well-known Malgudi series, a group of novels and short stories set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. The novel comes after *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), and *Malgudi Days* (1943), and it is followed by *Mr. Sampath: The Printer of Malgudi*. Through this series, Narayan presents different aspects of Indian life in a simple and realistic manner. While the earlier novels focus more on youthful experiences and social adjustment, *The English Teacher* delves into the inner life of an adult protagonist facing emotional loss and spiritual awakening.

The English Teacher is dedicated to Narayan's wife, Rajam, and has a strong autobiographical background. The novel is deeply emotional and touching in its portrayal of personal loss and human suffering. It narrates the experiences of Krishna, a lecturer in English, and focuses on his inner journey after the sudden and painful death of his wife. As Krishna struggles to cope with grief, he searches for peace of mind and personal growth. The novel, therefore, is not just a story of loss but also a meaningful exploration of self-understanding and spiritual development.

The novel centres on Krishna, a lecturer in English literature at Albert Mission College in Malgudi. Krishna is an ordinary man leading a routine life, yet he is deeply reflective and sensitive. At the beginning of the novel, he is dissatisfied with his profession, especially the way English literature is taught under colonial influence. He feels that teaching students to analyse texts mechanically, without emotional or moral engagement, is meaningless. This dissatisfaction reflects Narayan's own critique of the British education system in India.

The novel is divided into three parts, each representing a distinct phase in Krishna's life. The

first part focuses on Krishna's professional frustrations and his married life with Susila. The second part deals with Susila's illness and death, presenting an intensely moving account of suffering and loss. The third part shifts towards spiritual exploration, as Krishna seeks meaning beyond grief and attempts to communicate with his deceased wife's spirit. This structural division allows Narayan to explore different dimensions of human experience—social, emotional, and spiritual.

11.3.1. R.K NARAYAN AS A WRITER OF INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

R. K. Narayan is one of the most celebrated writers of Indian English fiction. Along with Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, he laid the foundation of the Indian English novel in the early twentieth century. Narayan's greatness lies in his ability to portray ordinary Indian life with simplicity, realism, and deep human understanding. His novels do not deal with grand historical events or political movements; instead, they focus on the everyday experiences of common people, making his writing timeless and universal.

One of the most distinctive features of Narayan's fiction is his creation of the fictional town of Malgudi. Malgudi appears in most of his novels and short stories and serves as a microcosm of Indian society. Through this imaginary town, Narayan presents various aspects of Indian life—family relationships, social customs, education, marriage, and middle-class values. Malgudi is neither purely rural nor fully urban; it represents a typical Indian town where tradition and modernity exist side by side. This setting allows Narayan to depict Indian life realistically and with gentle humour.

Narayan's language and style are simple, clear, and effective. He writes in plain English, avoiding difficult vocabulary and complex sentence structures. His style reflects the natural rhythm of Indian speech, which gives his writing authenticity and charm. Gentle irony and mild humour are key elements of his narrative technique. Narayan often exposes human weaknesses, such as pride, fear, or confusion, but he does so without bitterness or harsh criticism. This sympathetic approach makes his characters believable and relatable.

The characters in Narayan's novels are mostly ordinary people—teachers, students, clerks, shopkeepers, and small-town citizens. They are not heroes in the traditional sense but individuals struggling with everyday problems. Through these characters, Narayan explores universal themes such as love, loss, suffering, self-realisation, and the search for meaning in life. His characters often undergo inner growth rather than dramatic external change, which reflects Narayan's belief in personal and spiritual development.

Another important aspect of Narayan's fiction is his treatment of education and colonial influence. Having experienced the British education system himself, Narayan was critical of its mechanical and examination-oriented nature. In novels like *The English Teacher*, he highlights the limitations of colonial education and suggests the need for a more meaningful and life-centred approach to learning. This concern reflects his broader vision of life, which values emotional and moral growth over material success.

Narayan's works are deeply rooted in Indian culture, yet they possess universal appeal. He presents Indian traditions, beliefs, and social practices in a natural and unforced manner. At the same time, his focus on basic human emotions makes his fiction accessible to readers across the world. His ability to balance Indian sensibility with the English language is one of his greatest achievements as a writer.

R. K. Narayan thus stands as a major figure in Indian English fiction because of his realistic portrayal of Indian life, simple and effective style, memorable characters, and deep human concern. His novels continue to be widely read and studied, especially at the undergraduate level, because they offer both literary value and meaningful insights into life.

11.4. BACKGROUND AND SETTING OF THE NOVEL

R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* is deeply rooted in its background and setting, which play a crucial role in shaping the narrative, characters, and themes of the novel. The novel is set during the British colonial period in India and reflects the life of the Indian middle class, especially educated professionals such as teachers. Narayan does not use a grand or exotic background; instead, he chooses familiar surroundings and everyday experiences to explore deeper emotional, social, and philosophical issues.

The background of the novel includes domestic life, professional life, educational institutions, social customs, and spiritual beliefs. These elements together create a realistic and believable world. The setting allows Narayan to present ordinary human experiences such as love, marriage, suffering, loss, and the search for meaning in life. The novel moves from external realities like college life and family life to internal realities like emotional pain and spiritual growth. Thus, the background and setting are not merely physical; they also reflect the psychological and emotional state of the protagonist, Krishna.

11.4.1. Malgudi as a Fictional World

Malgudi is one of the most important creations of R. K. Narayan and serves as the setting for

most of his novels and short stories. Though Malgudi is an imaginary town, it appears real and convincing because of Narayan's detailed and natural description. In *The English Teacher*, Malgudi functions as a living background that supports the story and characters.

Malgudi represents a typical South Indian town during the colonial period. It is neither a village nor a big city. It contains schools, colleges, temples, markets, houses, and offices. Through Malgudi, Narayan presents a balanced picture of Indian society where tradition and modernity exist together. British influence is visible in educational institutions and administrative systems, while Indian traditions are reflected in family life, religious beliefs, and social customs.

One of the major strengths of Malgudi as a fictional world is its universality. Though it is Indian in character, the experiences of the people living there are universal. Love, happiness, sorrow, fear, and hope are common human emotions, and Malgudi becomes a space where these emotions are expressed naturally. The town does not dominate the story but quietly supports it, allowing characters like Krishna and Susila to grow realistically.

In *The English Teacher*, Malgudi also reflects the inner life of the protagonist. In the early part of the novel, Malgudi appears ordinary and lively, reflecting Krishna's stable life. Later, after Susila's death, the same setting feels empty and lifeless to him, showing how external surroundings change meaning according to inner feelings. Thus, Malgudi is not just a physical setting but also an emotional landscape.

11.4.2. Social and Cultural Background

The social and cultural background of *The English Teacher* is rooted in Indian middle-class life. Narayan presents a society that values family, marriage, emotional bonding, and moral conduct. The novel reflects the customs, traditions, and attitudes of Indian society during the first half of the twentieth century.

Marriage plays a central role in the novel. Krishna's relationship with his wife Susila is based on love, understanding, and companionship. Through their married life, Narayan presents the ideal of emotional harmony rather than traditional dominance or authority. Susila is shown as a loving and supportive wife, yet she also has individuality and emotional strength. Her role reflects the position of women in middle-class Indian families—devoted to family but emotionally resilient.

The novel also reflects social attitudes towards illness and death. Susila's illness reveals the limitations of medical facilities and the emotional helplessness of families.

Relatives, doctors, and neighbours respond in ways that reflect common social behaviour—concern mixed with superstition, hope mixed with fear. Narayan presents these situations realistically, without exaggeration.

Religion and spirituality form an important part of the cultural background. Indian belief in life beyond death and spiritual continuity appears strongly in the later part of the novel. However, Narayan presents spirituality in a personal and emotional way rather than through religious rituals. The cultural background thus supports the novel's movement from material life to spiritual understanding.

11.4.3. Autobiographical Elements

One of the most significant aspects of *The English Teacher* is its autobiographical nature. Narayan himself admitted that the novel was largely based on his personal life. Like Krishna, Narayan was an English teacher, and like Susila, his wife Rajam died young after a short illness. The emotional pain and grief experienced by Krishna closely resemble Narayan's own suffering.

The authenticity of emotion in the novel comes from this personal connection. Krishna's sense of loss, loneliness, and emotional confusion is portrayed with honesty and restraint. Narayan does not dramatise grief but presents it in a quiet and deeply moving manner. This makes the novel powerful and convincing.

However, Narayan does not limit the novel to his personal story. He transforms his individual experience into a universal theme. Many readers can relate to the pain of loss and the struggle to find meaning in life. The autobiographical elements thus add emotional depth without reducing the novel to a personal memoir.

11.4.4. The Educational Milieu

The educational background of *The English Teacher* reflects the British colonial system of education in India. Krishna works as a lecturer in English literature at a college. He is deeply dissatisfied with the way English literature is taught. The focus on examinations, rote learning, and mechanical criticism makes education meaningless for him.

Narayan strongly criticises colonial education through Krishna's thoughts and experiences. English literature, instead of being a source of joy and wisdom, becomes a burden. Krishna feels that such education disconnects students from real life and human values. This criticism reflects Narayan's belief that education should help in the overall development of personality.

Later in the novel, Krishna becomes involved in an alternative educational experiment for children. This represents Narayan's vision of ideal education—simple, natural, creative, and life-centred. The educational milieu thus becomes an important thematic element, highlighting the conflict between imposed colonial systems and indigenous values.

11.4.5. Narrative Style and Language

Narayan's narrative style in *The English Teacher* is simple, clear, and effective. He uses plain English without complex vocabulary or long sentences. This simplicity makes the novel easy to read and suitable for students. His language reflects Indian speech patterns while remaining grammatically correct and natural.

One of the key features of Narayan's style is gentle humour and irony. Even in serious situations, he maintains a calm and balanced tone. Emotional scenes are handled with restraint, which increases their impact. Narayan avoids melodrama and sentimentality, allowing emotions to emerge naturally.

The narrative moves smoothly from realism to spirituality. The shift from realistic description to mystical experience is gradual and convincing because of Narayan's controlled style. His language supports the emotional and philosophical depth of the novel without becoming heavy or obscure.

11.5. DETAILED STUDY OF PART-I

Part I of R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* lays the foundation of the entire novel. It introduces the central character Krishna, presents his professional and personal life, and establishes the major themes that are developed further in Parts II and III. This section of the novel mainly focuses on Krishna's dissatisfaction with colonial education, his role as an English teacher, and his married life with Susila. Part I is relatively calm and balanced in tone, yet it is crucial for understanding Krishna's emotional and psychological makeup.

Narayan uses Part I to depict ordinary middle-class life in colonial India with realism, humour, and sensitivity. The events appear simple on the surface, but they prepare the reader for the emotional and spiritual journey that follows. This part highlights Narayan's concern with education, marriage, domestic happiness, and the search for meaning in life.

11.5.1 Summary of Part I

Part I of *The English Teacher* introduces Krishna, a lecturer in English literature at Albert Mission College in Malgudi. Krishna lives alone in a hostel room and feels dissatisfied with

his profession. He is unhappy with the way English literature is taught in colleges under the British system of education. Teaching mechanical literary criticism and preparing students for examinations gives him no intellectual or emotional satisfaction. He feels that such education has little connection with real life.

Krishna eagerly waits for his wife Susila to join him in Malgudi after their marriage. When Susila arrives, Krishna rents a house for them. Their search for a suitable house is presented with gentle humour, especially the episode involving a haunted house, which reflects Narayan's light narrative style.Once settled, Krishna and Susila begin their married life. Krishna experiences happiness and emotional fulfilment through marriage. Their relationship is based on mutual understanding, love, and companionship rather than traditional authority. Domestic life brings a sense of stability and meaning to Krishna's otherwise dull professional life.

Part I ends on a peaceful note, showing Krishna enjoying domestic happiness. However, Narayan subtly prepares the reader for future tragedy by presenting happiness as temporary and fragile. Thus, Part I establishes the background, characters, and emotional tone of the novel.

11.5.2. Krishna as an English Teacher

Krishna as an English teacher represents Narayan's critique of colonial education in India. Krishna teaches English literature at a college governed by British educational principles. He feels trapped in a system that values memorisation, examinations, and mechanical analysis over creativity, emotion, and moral growth.

Krishna often questions the usefulness of teaching English literature in an artificial and lifeless manner. He feels that students are forced to memorise critical opinions instead of understanding literature emotionally. Teaching poetry and prose becomes a burden rather than a joy. Krishna feels guilty that such education distances students from their own culture and real life.

Narayan uses Krishna's inner thoughts to expose the hollowness of colonial education. Krishna feels that he is teaching students "dead literature" in a "dead language" without any living connection. This frustration creates a sense of inner conflict in him. Though he performs his duties sincerely, he lacks emotional involvement in his profession.Krishna's dissatisfaction is not loud or revolutionary. He does not openly rebel against the system. Instead, his resistance is quiet and internal. This reflects Narayan's

realistic portrayal of educated middle-class Indians who feel helpless within colonial institutions.

Later in the novel, Krishna's dissatisfaction with education leads him towards an alternative educational vision. However, in Part I, he remains a passive participant in the system. His profession becomes a symbol of his emotional emptiness, which is filled temporarily by his married life.

Thus, Krishna as an English teacher represents the conflict between imposed Western education and the need for meaningful, life-centred learning.

11.5.3. Marriage and Domestic Life

Marriage and domestic life form the emotional centre of Part I. Narayan presents marriage not as a social obligation but as a source of emotional companionship and personal fulfilment. Krishna's relationship with Susila is portrayed with warmth, simplicity, and realism.

Susila's arrival in Malgudi transforms Krishna's life. He moves out of his lonely hostel room and begins a new phase of domestic life. The house-hunting episode, especially the fear of ghosts, adds humour and realism to the narrative. Susila's practical nature and emotional sensitivity complement Krishna's reflective personality.

Their marriage is based on mutual respect and understanding. Susila encourages Krishna, listens to him, and brings joy into his routine life. Domestic happiness gives Krishna emotional balance and a sense of purpose. He begins to see life beyond professional frustration.

Narayan's portrayal of domestic life avoids idealisation. Small disagreements, fears, and adjustments are shown naturally. Yet, the overall tone remains positive. Marriage is presented as a partnership rather than a hierarchical relationship. Susila is not shown as submissive; instead, she has individuality and emotional strength.

Through marriage, Narayan highlights the importance of emotional bonding in human life. Krishna's happiness does not come from professional success but from personal relationships. This emphasis on domestic life reflects Indian middle-class values, where family is central to emotional stability.Part I ends with Krishna enjoying domestic peace, unaware of the tragedy that lies ahead. This contrast between happiness and future suffering adds emotional depth to the novel.

11.6. SUMMING UP

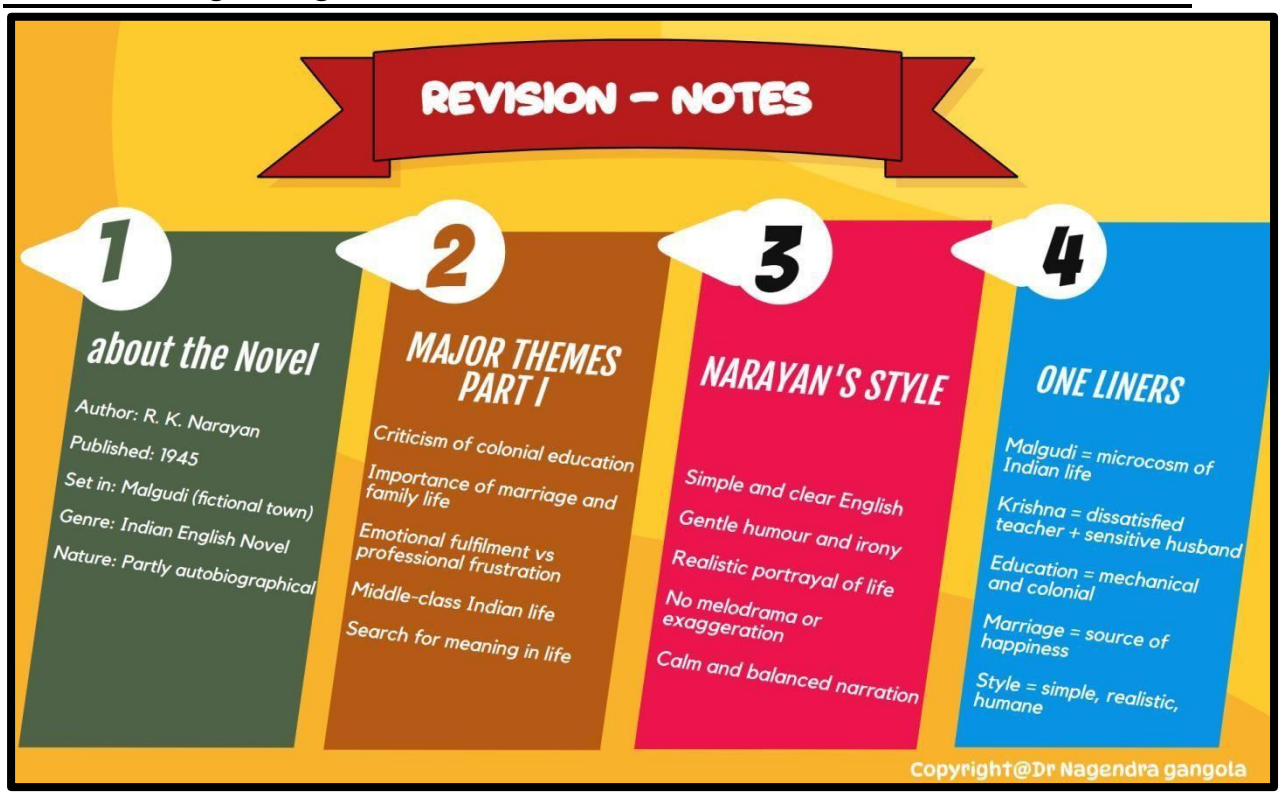
This unit offers a detailed study of Part I of R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* and lays the foundation for understanding the novel as a whole. Part I introduces the central character, Krishna, and presents the two important areas of his life—his profession as an English teacher and his domestic life after marriage. Through simple events and everyday situations, Narayan explores deeper themes related to education, marriage, and the search for meaning in life.

The unit first highlights the summary of Part I, which shows Krishna as a lecturer in English literature at a college in Malgudi. Krishna feels dissatisfied with the colonial education system that emphasises rote learning, examinations, and mechanical literary criticism. He finds little emotional or intellectual satisfaction in teaching English literature in this manner. This dissatisfaction reflects Narayan's criticism of British education in India and his belief that education should be meaningful and connected to real life.

The unit then examines Krishna as an English teacher in detail. Krishna represents the educated Indian middle class caught within an imposed colonial system. Though he performs his duties sincerely, he feels emotionally detached from his work. His frustration remains internal, reflecting the quiet helplessness of many Indian teachers under British rule. Through Krishna, Narayan exposes the limitations of colonial education and prepares the ground for his later vision of ideal, life-centred learning.

Marriage and domestic life form the emotional core of Part I. Krishna's marriage to Susila brings happiness, emotional balance, and a sense of purpose to his life. Their relationship is based on love, understanding, and companionship rather than authority or domination. Narayan presents married life with warmth and gentle humour, especially through the house-hunting episode. Domestic happiness temporarily fills the emotional emptiness created by Krishna's professional dissatisfaction.

Overall, Part I is calm in tone but rich in meaning. It establishes the characters, setting, and major themes of the novel while quietly preparing the reader for the emotional and spiritual developments that follow. For BA students, this unit helps in understanding Narayan's realistic portrayal of Indian middle-class life, his critique of colonial education, and his emphasis on human relationships as a source of true fulfilment.



EASY REVISION NOTES OF MAIN POINTS

11.7. SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Why is Krishna dissatisfied with his job as an English teacher?
2. Describe the role of Malgudi in Part I of the novel.
3. What does the house-hunting episode reveal about Krishna and Susila?
4. How does Narayan portray married life in Part I?
5. Explain the significance of domestic happiness in Krishna's life.
6. Discuss Krishna as a representative of the educated Indian middle class.
7. Examine Narayan's criticism of colonial education in Part I.
8. Analyse the importance of marriage and domestic life in Part I of the novel.
9. How does Part I prepare the reader for the later developments in the novel?

11.8. REFERENCES

1. Narayan, R. K. *The English Teacher*. Indian Thought Publications.
2. Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. Sterling Publishers.
3. Naik, M. K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. Sahitya Akademi.
4. Walsh, William. *R. K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation*. Heinemann.
5. King, Bruce. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. Oxford University Press.

11.9. TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Long Answer Questions

1. Give a detailed account of Part I of *The English Teacher*.

2. Discuss Krishna as an English teacher and examine Narayan's criticism of colonial education.

3. Describe the portrayal of marriage and domestic life in Part I of the novel.

4. Comment on the realistic depiction of Indian middle-class life in Part I.

B. Short Answer Questions

1. What is the significance of Malgudi in Part I?

2. How does Krishna view English literature teaching?

3. Write a short note on Susila's role in Part I.

4. Why is Part I important for understanding the whole novel?

C. Objective / Short Notes

Write short notes on any two:

1. Colonial education system

2. Domestic happiness

3. Krishna's professional dissatisfaction

4. Narayan's narrative style in Part I

UNIT 12 R. K. NARAYAN: *The English Teacher - II*

12.1. INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we were introduced to R. K. Narayan as one of the pioneers of Indian English fiction and to *The English Teacher* as a semi-autobiographical novel set in the fictional town of Malgudi. We examined the early part of the novel, focusing on Krishna as an English teacher, his domestic life, and his growing dissatisfaction with the rigid colonial education system. The earlier unit highlighted Narayan's critique of mechanical, examination-oriented teaching and his portrayal of the conflict between Western educational values and Indian cultural sensibilities. We also studied Krishna's relationship with his wife Susila and how Narayan presents ordinary middle-class life with simplicity, irony, and gentle humour.

This unit continues and deepens our understanding of *The English Teacher* by moving from social realism to profound emotional and spiritual exploration. In this unit, we study the later part of the novel, which marks a significant shift in tone and theme. The tragic death of Susila becomes a turning point in Krishna's life, leading him through intense grief, loneliness, and existential questioning. Narayan sensitively portrays the inner turmoil of a man struggling to find meaning beyond material life and professional routine. This unit explores how personal loss transforms Krishna's outlook on life, education, and spirituality.

We also examine Narayan's treatment of themes such as love, death, suffering, and spiritual communication. The novel's movement towards mysticism and self-realization is studied in detail, showing how Krishna seeks emotional healing through spiritual experiences rather than conventional religious practices. This unit further helps us understand Narayan's narrative technique, simplicity of language, symbolic use of Malgudi, and his ability to blend realism with metaphysical concerns.

Thus, this unit will enable learners to appreciate *The English Teacher* not merely as a domestic or autobiographical novel, but as a deeply human and philosophical work that reflects the search for harmony between worldly responsibilities and inner peace.

The course comprises multiple components, with the Self-Learning Material (SLM) and counselling sessions being key elements. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the course content, it is essential that you engage with all these components in a balanced manner. As you are enrolled in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program, self-directed study plays a vital role in your academic success. Accordingly, each unit concludes with a list of suggested readings and references. You are strongly encouraged to consult these resources to enhance your

comprehension and deepen your engagement with the subject matter.

12.2. OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, learners will be able to:

1. Understand the transformation of Krishna's character in the later part of *The English Teacher* and analyze how personal loss reshapes his outlook on life.
2. Examine the impact of Susila's death on the narrative structure and thematic development of the novel.
3. Analyze the major themes of grief, love, death, spirituality, and self-realization as presented in the second part of the novel.
4. Appreciate R. K. Narayan's blending of realism with mysticism in portraying human suffering and emotional recovery.
5. Study Narayan's narrative technique, including simplicity of style, symbolism, and use of Malgudi as a reflective backdrop.
6. Interpret the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of the novel in the context of Indian thought and values.
7. Develop critical responses to *The English Teacher* as a semi-autobiographical and humanistic work in Indian English literature.

12.3. THEMES DEVELOPED IN PART- II

The second part of R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* marks a profound thematic shift from social realism to emotional and spiritual introspection. While the first part of the novel focuses on Krishna's professional dissatisfaction and domestic happiness, Part II delves deeply into the themes of love, suffering, and human relationships, especially in the context of loss and spiritual awakening. These themes are not treated melodramatically; instead, Narayan presents them with restraint, simplicity, and deep human sensitivity. Through Krishna's personal tragedy—the death of his wife Susila—the novel explores how love becomes a source of intense suffering, yet also a path to spiritual growth and self-realization. Part II thus transforms the novel into a moving meditation on the meaning of relationships, grief, and inner peace.

12.3.1. LOVE, SUFFERING, AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

LOVE AS A CENTRAL THEME

Love in *The English Teacher* is not portrayed as romantic idealism but as a quiet, domestic,

and deeply emotional bond. Krishna's love for Susila is rooted in companionship, mutual respect, and emotional intimacy. Unlike exaggerated literary romances, Narayan presents their relationship as ordinary yet profound, reflecting the lived reality of middle-class Indian life.

In Part II, love becomes more intense because it is experienced through absence rather than presence. Susila's illness and eventual death turn love into a painful reminder of loss. Krishna's attachment to his wife does not fade with death; instead, it deepens. His inability to detach himself emotionally shows that true love transcends physical existence. Narayan suggests that love is not confined to the body but survives through memory, emotion, and spiritual connection.

The novel thus presents love as:

- A source of joy in companionship
- A cause of deep suffering in separation
- A force that leads to spiritual awareness

Through Krishna's journey, Narayan shows that love is transformative—it reshapes one's understanding of life, death, and human purpose.

Suffering as a path to self realization

Suffering is the dominant emotional experience in Part II. Krishna's life collapses after Susila's death, plunging him into loneliness, despair, and emotional confusion. Narayan portrays suffering not as meaningless pain but as a **necessary phase in human growth**.

Krishna's suffering manifests in multiple ways:

- Emotional emptiness and loneliness
- Disinterest in routine life and teaching
- A sense of alienation from society
- Constant longing for his deceased wife

Narayan avoids excessive sentimentality and instead presents suffering with realism and psychological depth. Krishna does not immediately find comfort in religion or philosophy. His grief is raw, personal, and isolating. This honest portrayal makes the novel

deeply human and relatable.

Gradually, suffering becomes a **catalyst for inner transformation**. Krishna begins to question the purpose of life, the nature of death, and the limitations of material existence. His suffering pushes him beyond intellectual knowledge towards emotional and spiritual understanding. Narayan thus aligns with the Indian philosophical belief that suffering can lead to wisdom and self-realization.

Love and Suffering: An inseparable pair

In *The English Teacher*, love and suffering are inseparably linked. Narayan suggests that the depth of suffering corresponds to the depth of love. Krishna suffers intensely because his love for Susila was genuine and complete. The novel reinforces the idea that human relationships inevitably involve pain, but this pain is not negative—it is part of the human condition.

Narayan does not propose detachment as a solution to suffering. Instead, he presents acceptance and inner growth as ways to transcend pain. Krishna does not forget Susila; rather, he learns to relate to her memory and presence in a different, more spiritual manner.

This approach distinguishes Narayan from Western existential pessimism. While suffering leads to despair in many modern novels, in *The English Teacher* it leads to calm, balance, and inner harmony.

Human relationship and their Complexity

Part II of the novel presents a nuanced understanding of human relationships. Narayan explores relationships not only between husband and wife but also between:

- Parent and child
- Individual and society
- Human beings and the spiritual world

Krishna's relationship with his daughter Leela gains importance after Susila's death. Leela becomes a source of emotional grounding and continuity. Through her innocence and routine needs, Krishna is reminded of life's ongoing responsibilities. This relationship shows that love also involves care, duty, and continuity beyond personal grief.

Krishna's relationship with society, however, weakens. He becomes emotionally

withdrawn and indifferent to social expectations. This alienation reflects how deep personal loss can isolate individuals from collective life. Narayan realistically portrays how society often fails to understand private grief.

Spiritual dimension of human relationship

One of the most distinctive aspects of Part II is the spiritual redefinition of human relationships. Krishna's interaction with the spiritual medium allows him to communicate with Susila beyond death. Whether interpreted literally or symbolically, this experience reflects Narayan's belief that love is eternal and transcends physical boundaries.

This spiritual relationship helps Krishna achieve emotional healing. He no longer feels abandoned or incomplete. The spiritual connection restores balance and allows him to accept life peacefully. Narayan does not impose religious dogma; instead, he presents spirituality as a personal and emotional experience.Through this, the novel suggests that human relationships do not end with death but evolve into new forms of emotional and spiritual presence.

Narayan's Humanistic Vision

Narayan's treatment of love, suffering, and relationships reflects his humanistic philosophy. He does not glorify suffering, nor does he dismiss it. He accepts it as an integral part of life. His characters are not heroes or rebels but ordinary people facing universal human experiences.

The simplicity of Narayan's language enhances the emotional impact of these themes. There is no dramatic exaggeration, only quiet reflection. This restrained style makes the novel deeply moving and philosophically rich.

Narayan emphasizes:

- Emotional honesty over intellectual complexity
- Acceptance over rebellion
- Inner peace over external success

Thus, *The English Teacher* becomes not just a novel about personal loss but a guide to emotional maturity and spiritual balance.

12.4. PLOT AND STRUCTURE OF PART II

The second part of *The English Teacher* represents a decisive shift in both plot and structure, moving away from social satire and professional dissatisfaction to an intense exploration of personal loss, emotional suffering, and spiritual awakening. While Part I focuses on Krishna's external world—his job, colleagues, and family life—Part II turns inward, concentrating on the psychological and emotional transformation of the protagonist. The plot becomes simpler, but its emotional depth and philosophical significance increase considerably.

Structurally, Part II is more compact and unified, revolving around a single tragic event: Susila's illness and death. From this central incident emerge several interrelated themes such as suffering, fate, love, and spiritual realization. Narayan abandons episodic narration and adopts a linear, emotionally driven structure, allowing readers to closely follow Krishna's inner journey. This part of the novel thus exemplifies Narayan's mastery in blending realism with emotional pathos and Indian spiritual thought.

12.4.1. SUMMARY OF PART II

Part II of *The English Teacher* begins with Susila's sudden illness after she moves into the new house. What initially appears to be a minor health issue gradually worsens, leading to her hospitalization. Despite Krishna's hope and desperate efforts, Susila succumbs to the illness, leaving him emotionally shattered and lonely.

After Susila's death, the focus of the narrative shifts entirely to Krishna's inner world. He experiences intense grief, isolation, and a sense of meaninglessness. His routine life as a teacher loses all significance. He withdraws from social interaction and begins questioning the purpose of existence, education, and human relationships.

Gradually, Krishna comes into contact with a spiritual medium who helps him establish communication with Susila's spirit. Through this experience, Krishna undergoes emotional healing and spiritual transformation. He realizes that love transcends physical death and that inner peace can be achieved through spiritual awareness rather than intellectual pursuits.

The novel concludes with Krishna attaining a sense of calm and balance. His grief does not disappear completely, but it is transformed into spiritual acceptance. Thus, Part II ends on a note of emotional resolution and philosophical fulfillment, rather than despair.

12.4.2. SUSILA'S ILLNESS

Susila's illness is the central turning point of Part II and the emotional core of the novel. Narayan portrays her illness with striking realism, avoiding melodrama while emphasizing the uncertainty and helplessness associated with sickness. The illness begins almost casually, highlighting how tragedy often enters human life unexpectedly.

Narayan presents the medical system with subtle irony. Doctors appear distant, treatments uncertain, and recovery unpredictable. This realistic portrayal reflects the vulnerability of middle-class families who lack both financial security and medical certainty. Krishna's anxiety, confusion, and emotional dependence on doctors underline the human tendency to cling to hope even in hopeless situations.

Susila's illness also exposes the fragility of domestic happiness. The secure, loving household built in Part I collapses abruptly. Narayan uses illness not merely as a plot device but as a symbol of life's unpredictability. It reminds readers that human control over life is limited and that suffering often arrives without warning or reason.

Most importantly, Susila's illness initiates Krishna's psychological transformation. Her gradual decline prepares both Krishna and the reader for the emotional devastation that follows, making her death deeply moving and authentic.

12.4.3. PORTRAYAL OF MIDDLE-CLASS LIFE

One of Narayan's greatest strengths lies in his realistic depiction of Indian middle-class life, and Part II continues this tradition with remarkable sensitivity. The novel presents the emotional, financial, and social constraints of middle-class existence without exaggeration or satire.

Krishna and Susila represent a typical educated middle-class couple whose happiness is modest but genuine. Their concerns—housing, health, job security, and family—are ordinary yet universal. Susila's illness places a heavy emotional and financial burden on the family, reflecting the insecurity faced by middle-class households during crises.

Narayan also portrays middle-class social behavior realistically. Neighbors, relatives, and acquaintances express sympathy, but their concern remains limited and formal. This highlights the emotional isolation experienced by individuals in times of personal tragedy. Society offers rituals and conventions, but not genuine emotional support.

Through these details, Narayan shows that middle-class life is marked by emotional restraint, quiet endurance, and silent suffering. This realism enhances the novel's emotional

credibility and allows readers to relate deeply to Krishna's experience.

12.4.4. REALISM AND PATHOS

Part II of *The English Teacher* is a fine example of Narayan's ability to combine realism with deep pathos. Realism is evident in the detailed depiction of illness, hospital life, grief, and social responses to death. Narayan does not romanticize suffering; instead, he presents it as an unavoidable aspect of human existence.

The pathos of the novel arises not from dramatic events but from Krishna's emotional responses. His loneliness, despair, and sense of emptiness are portrayed with restraint and sincerity. Narayan avoids excessive emotional language, allowing silence, reflection, and inner monologue to convey grief.

The simplicity of narration intensifies the emotional impact. Small details—Krishna returning to an empty house, caring for his daughter alone, or losing interest in his profession—evoke profound sympathy. This understated approach makes the suffering more believable and touching.

Narayan's realism grounds the novel in everyday life, while pathos elevates it to a deeply moving human document. Together, they create a balanced narrative that is emotionally powerful yet intellectually controlled.

12.4.5. ROLE OF FATE AND SUFFERING

The role of fate and suffering is central to the philosophical framework of Part II. Narayan presents suffering as inevitable and fate as mysterious, neither cruel nor kind, but simply beyond human control. Susila's death is not explained or justified; it is accepted as part of life's larger design.

Narayan's treatment of fate reflects Indian philosophical thought, where suffering is seen as a means of spiritual growth rather than meaningless pain. Krishna initially rebels against fate, feeling anger, confusion, and helplessness. However, as the narrative progresses, he learns acceptance.

Suffering acts as a transformative force. It strips Krishna of his illusions about professional success, intellectual pride, and material comfort. Through suffering, he moves towards humility, compassion, and spiritual understanding.

Narayan does not suggest that suffering should be welcomed, but he implies that it

can lead to inner maturity and self-realization. This balanced view prevents the novel from becoming pessimistic and aligns it with a humanistic and spiritual worldview.

The plot and structure of Part II of *The English Teacher* demonstrate R. K. Narayan's exceptional narrative skill and philosophical depth. Through a simple yet emotionally intense plot, Narayan explores profound themes of illness, death, suffering, fate, and spiritual awakening. The tightly structured narrative, centered on Susila's illness and Krishna's emotional journey, allows for a focused and impactful exploration of human experience.

By blending realism with pathos and middle-class life with spiritual insight, Narayan transforms a personal tragedy into a universal meditation on life and loss. Part II thus stands as the emotional and philosophical heart of the novel, offering BA students a powerful example of how literature reflects and deepens human understanding.

12.5 CHARACTERISATION IN PART II

Part II of R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* marks a major turning point in the novel. While Part I focuses on domestic happiness and professional dissatisfaction, Part II moves into deep emotional suffering and inner transformation. The sudden illness and death of Susila shatter Krishna's peaceful life and lead him into grief, loneliness, and spiritual questioning.

Characterisation in this part is intense, psychological, and emotionally rich. Narayan does not rely on dramatic actions; instead, he explores the inner world of characters, especially Krishna and Susila. Through simple language and realistic situations, Narayan presents a powerful picture of human suffering, love, loss, and emotional growth.

12.5.1 Susila as a Character

Susila as a Loving Wife

Susila is introduced in *The English Teacher* as a devoted, caring, and affectionate wife. Her relationship with Krishna is built on mutual understanding, emotional intimacy, and deep respect. She is not merely a domestic figure but a true companion who shares Krishna's joys and anxieties. Susila brings warmth, happiness, and emotional stability into Krishna's life, making his home a place of comfort and peace. Even during moments of difficulty, she remains calm and supportive, never allowing her personal discomfort to disturb their marital harmony. Through their relationship, R. K. Narayan presents his ideal of married life, where love, companionship, and emotional balance form the foundation of a harmonious domestic

world.

Susila's Illness and Suffering

Part II of the novel begins with Susila falling seriously ill after visiting a dirty and unhygienic house. Her illness is sudden, unexpected, and severe, disrupting the peaceful rhythm of her married life. Narayan presents her suffering in a realistic and restrained manner, avoiding unnecessary emotional exaggeration. Susila experiences intense physical pain and weakness, along with emotional isolation during her hospitalisation. Yet, she endures her suffering quietly and without complaint. She does not rebel against her fate or question her destiny. Her calm acceptance of pain and illness adds depth to her character and makes her suffering deeply moving and authentic.

Susila's Courage and Emotional Strength

Despite her physical weakness and emotional distress, Susila displays remarkable courage and inner strength. She tries to remain cheerful and composed, especially for Krishna's sake, so that he does not feel overwhelmed by fear and anxiety. She does not openly express her fear of death, nor does she seek sympathy. Instead, she faces her suffering with dignity and quiet determination. Her courage is not dramatic or heroic in the conventional sense; it is silent and inward. Through Susila, Narayan portrays the strength of a typical Indian woman who bears pain patiently, guided by emotional resilience rather than loud expressions of despair.

Symbolic Significance of Susila

Susila holds deep symbolic significance in the novel. She represents the fragility and impermanence of domestic happiness, showing how human joy can be suddenly destroyed by fate. Her suffering highlights human vulnerability in the face of uncontrollable forces like illness and death. Even after her death, Susila does not vanish from the narrative. She continues to live in Krishna's memory and later becomes a spiritual presence that guides him toward inner peace and emotional healing. Thus, Susila symbolises not only loss but also continuity, love beyond death, and the possibility of spiritual connection.

Autobiographical Element

Susila's character has a strong autobiographical foundation. R. K. Narayan's wife, Rajam, died of typhoid under circumstances similar to those described in the novel. Susila's illness and death closely reflect Narayan's personal tragedy, giving her character emotional authenticity and realism. The pain described in the novel is not imagined but deeply felt. By

transforming his private grief into fiction, Narayan creates a character filled with genuine pathos and emotional depth. Susila thus becomes a bridge between personal experience and universal human suffering.

Critical Evaluation

Critically viewed, Susila is neither a conventional heroine nor a passive character. She does not dominate the narrative, yet her emotional presence is powerful and lasting. She stands as a symbol of quiet strength, emotional depth, and spiritual influence. Her limited physical presence in the novel proves that a character does not need constant visibility to leave a strong impact. Through Susila, Narayan explores profound themes of love, loss, suffering, and spiritual continuity, making her one of the most memorable figures in Indian English fiction.

12.5.2 Emotional Development of Krishna

Krishna is the central consciousness of *The English Teacher*, and in Part II his character undergoes a profound emotional and psychological transformation. The sudden loss of his wife Susila forces him to confront intense grief, deep loneliness, the meaninglessness of life, and serious spiritual uncertainty. Narayan traces Krishna's emotional journey with great sensitivity and realism, making his suffering deeply human and relatable. The focus of Part II is not on external events but on Krishna's inner world, where pain, confusion, and reflection dominate his experience.

Before Susila's illness, Krishna appears as a loving and emotionally fulfilled husband. His happiness is rooted in his married life, domestic harmony, and emotional companionship with Susila. She provides him with balance, warmth, and a sense of completeness. Krishna depends greatly on her presence for emotional stability, and their relationship gives meaning to his otherwise unsatisfying professional life. His attachment to Susila is sincere and deep, making her sudden illness all the more devastating.

Susila's illness comes as a severe shock to Krishna, and his immediate response is disbelief. He refuses to accept the seriousness of her condition and moves constantly between hope and fear. At times he believes she will recover, while at other moments he is overwhelmed by anxiety. This stage of emotional turmoil is marked by confusion and helplessness. Narayan portrays this phase of grief with psychological realism, showing how the human mind struggles to accept painful reality.

After Susila's death, Krishna experiences an intense emotional breakdown. Life loses all meaning for him, and the home that once symbolised happiness now feels empty and painful. He withdraws from social life and avoids interaction with others. His grief becomes a constant burden that he carries silently. This stage reflects raw human suffering rather than philosophical acceptance. Krishna's pain is deep, personal, and overwhelming, showing the devastating impact of loss.

As his grief deepens, Krishna becomes increasingly alienated from the world around him. He feels disconnected from his colleagues, society, and even his profession. Teaching, which was already unsatisfying, now appears completely meaningless. His emotional suffering creates a sense of existential loneliness, where he feels cut off from life itself. This isolation highlights the depth of his emotional wound and his inability to relate to ordinary human activities.

Gradually, Krishna's suffering leads him toward introspection and a search for deeper meaning. He begins to question the purpose of life, the nature of death, and the possibility of spiritual continuity beyond physical existence. This inner questioning marks the beginning of his spiritual awakening. His grief slowly transforms into a journey of understanding, leading him toward spiritual communication and inner peace. This shift represents a movement from emotional despair to spiritual awareness.

Krishna's emotional development in Part II can be traced through several stages: happiness, shock, grief, isolation, and finally spiritual awakening. By the end of this part, he is still suffering, but his pain has matured into emotional strength and spiritual openness. He is no longer completely dependent on external relationships for meaning. Instead, his suffering becomes a source of inner growth rather than destruction.

Narayan's portrayal of Krishna's emotions is marked by psychological realism. The emotions are subtle, controlled, and deeply internalised. There are no dramatic outbursts or exaggerated expressions of sorrow. Krishna's suffering remains inward, making it more authentic and convincing. Narayan's simple language and restrained narration enhance the emotional impact of Krishna's inner struggle.

Critically viewed, Krishna in Part II represents universal human grief, emotional vulnerability, and inner resilience. His emotional journey forms the emotional core of *The English Teacher* and reflects Narayan's personal experience of loss. Through Krishna,

Narayan presents one of his most profound and personal explorations of suffering, love, and spiritual awakening in Indian English fiction.

12.5.3 Minor Characters

Though Part II of *The English Teacher* mainly focuses on Krishna and Susila, the minor characters play an important supportive role in the narrative. R. K. Narayan uses these characters to reflect social attitudes, highlight Krishna's emotional condition, and move the story forward in a natural and realistic manner. These characters are never exaggerated or dramatic. Instead, they appear as ordinary people performing their roles in society, thereby adding realism and emotional depth to the novel.

The doctor in Part II represents modern medical authority combined with emotional detachment. His approach toward Susila's illness is purely clinical and professional. He treats her as a medical case rather than as a suffering human being. This attitude stands in sharp contrast to Krishna's intense emotional pain and anxiety. Through the doctor, Narayan highlights the limitations of medical science and shows the helplessness of human beings in the face of death, despite scientific progress.

The hospital staff and nurses symbolise institutional routine and emotional indifference. Their behaviour is mechanical and impersonal, as they follow hospital procedures without emotional involvement. This lack of sensitivity intensifies Krishna's sense of isolation and helplessness. The hospital, instead of being a place of comfort, becomes a space where Krishna feels powerless and emotionally alone, reinforcing the theme of human suffering.

Krishna's relatives and friends represent social support and conventional forms of comfort. They express sympathy and offer words of consolation, but their efforts fail to reduce Krishna's grief. Their presence shows that social rituals and polite expressions of concern cannot heal deep personal loss. Through these characters, Narayan suggests that grief is an intensely private experience that cannot be shared or fully understood by others.

Krishna's mother represents traditional Indian values and emotional restraint. She reflects an older generation's attitude toward suffering, which emphasises patience, acceptance, and endurance. Her response to tragedy is calm and controlled, guided by faith and resignation to fate. Through her character, Narayan presents the traditional Indian approach to grief, which contrasts with Krishna's emotional turmoil.

Though Leela becomes more important in the later part of the novel, her presence in Part II is emotionally significant. She reminds Krishna of life's continuity and creates a sense of responsibility that prevents him from completely withdrawing into despair. Leela acts as a bridge between Krishna's grief and his gradual return to life and hope, offering a quiet emotional connection that keeps him grounded.

The minor characters in Part II serve important functions in the novel. They add realism, reflect the social environment, and help highlight Krishna's emotional journey. Although they remain in the background, their presence strengthens the emotional structure of the narrative and deepens the reader's understanding of Krishna's suffering.

In conclusion, characterisation in Part II of *The English Teacher* is deeply emotional, psychological, and realistic. Susila emerges as a symbol of love and silent strength, while Krishna's emotional development forms the heart of the novel. The minor characters support the narrative by reflecting social reality and emotional contrasts. Through simple language and restrained narration, R. K. Narayan transforms personal grief into a universal human experience, making Part II one of the finest examples of emotional character portrayal in Indian English fiction.

12.6. SUMMING UP

Thus this Unit focuses on the characterisation in Part II of R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*, which marks a major emotional and psychological turning point in the novel. While Part I presents domestic happiness and stability, Part II deals with suffering, loss, and inner transformation. The unit mainly examines Susila as a character, Krishna's emotional development, and the role of minor characters.

Susila emerges as a symbol of love, patience, and quiet strength. As a devoted wife, she brings emotional warmth and balance to Krishna's life. Her sudden illness and death introduce intense suffering into the narrative. Narayan portrays her pain with restraint and dignity, showing her silent courage and calm acceptance of fate. Even after her death, Susila remains emotionally and spiritually present, guiding Krishna toward inner peace. Her character also has strong autobiographical roots, reflecting Narayan's personal loss and adding authenticity and emotional depth to the novel.

Krishna's emotional journey forms the core of Part II. He moves from marital happiness to shock, intense grief, loneliness, and finally spiritual awakening. His suffering is

portrayed with psychological realism, without dramatic exaggeration. Narayan carefully traces Krishna's inner struggle as he confronts the meaninglessness of life and searches for spiritual understanding. By the end of Part II, Krishna is emotionally mature and spiritually open, showing growth through suffering.

Minor characters such as the doctor, hospital staff, relatives, and Krishna's mother play a supportive role. They reflect social attitudes, highlight Krishna's isolation, and add realism to the narrative. Together, these characters strengthen the emotional structure of the novel.

Overall, Unit 12 highlights Narayan's mastery of emotional characterisation. Through simple language and subtle narration, he transforms personal grief into a universal human experience, making Part II a powerful and moving section of the novel.

12.7. SELF ASSESSEMENT QUESTIONS

1. How does R. K. Narayan develop the theme of love and suffering in Part II of *The English Teacher* through the relationship between Krishna and Susila?

2. Give a brief summary of Part II of the novel and explain how Susila's illness changes the direction of the narrative.

3. How is middle-class life realistically portrayed in Part II of *The English Teacher*? Illustrate your answer with examples.

4. Discuss the role of fate and suffering in Part II and examine how they influence the lives of the characters.

5. Analyse Susila as a character in Part II, focusing on her suffering, courage, and symbolic significance.

6. Trace the emotional development of Krishna in Part II, highlighting the stages of his grief and spiritual awakening.

7. Examine the role of minor characters in Part II and explain how they contribute to realism and emotional depth in the novel.

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12.9. TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the role of fate and suffering in Part II and examine how they influence the lives of the characters.

2. Analyse Susila as a character in Part II, focusing on her suffering, courage, and symbolic significance.

3. Trace the emotional development of Krishna in Part II, highlighting the stages of his grief and spiritual awakening.

4. Examine the role of minor characters in Part II and explain how they contribute to realism and emotional depth in the novel.

UNIT 13 R. K. NARAYAN: *The English Teacher Part -III*

13.1. INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit (Unit 12), you studied *Part II of* R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*, which focuses on intense emotional suffering, loss, and psychological transformation. That unit examined Susila's illness and death, Krishna's deep grief, and the realistic portrayal of human suffering. The emphasis was on emotional realism and the impact of personal tragedy on an individual's inner life. By the end of Unit 12, it was understood how grief, loneliness, and despair dominate Krishna's world and how these experiences prepare him for a deeper search for meaning.

This unit moves forward from emotional suffering to spiritual understanding and philosophical reflection. *Part III of The English Teacher* represents the final and most reflective phase of Krishna's journey. In this unit, students will explore how Krishna gradually rises above grief and begins to seek peace through spiritual awareness. The focus shifts from pain and loss to questions about life, death, immortality, and the possibility of spiritual communication beyond the physical world.

This unit introduces the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of the novel. It examines Krishna's attempts at spiritual communication, his inner transformation, and his growing understanding of life's deeper purpose. Students will also study how Narayan presents the search for meaning as a quiet, personal journey rather than a dramatic or religious one.

In addition, this will also highlights Narayan's vision of education and life. Students will learn about his criticism of colonial education and his idea of an ideal education system that nurtures emotional and spiritual growth along with intellectual development. By the end of this unit, learners will gain a complete understanding of the novel's resolution and Narayan's overall message about life, suffering, and inner peace.

The course comprises multiple components, with the Self-Learning Material (SLM) and counselling sessions being key elements. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the course content, it is essential that you engage with all these components in a balanced manner. As you are enrolled in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program, self-directed study plays a vital role in your academic success. Accordingly, each unit concludes with a list of suggested readings and references. You are strongly encouraged to consult these resources to enhance your comprehension and deepen your engagement with the subject matter.

13.2. OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

1. Understand the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of *Part III* of *The English Teacher*.
2. Explain Narayan's ideas about life, death, and immortality as presented in the novel.
3. Analyse Krishna's inner transformation from grief to spiritual awareness.
4. Discuss the role of spiritual communication in Krishna's search for meaning and peace.
5. Summarise and interpret the key events and resolution of *Part III* of the novel.
6. Examine Narayan's critique of the colonial education system.
7. Understand Narayan's concept of an ideal education system based on human values and holistic development.
8. Appreciate the philosophical message and thematic unity of the novel as a whole.

13.3. PHILOSOPHICAL AND SPIRITUAL ASPECT

Part III of R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* represents the philosophical and spiritual culmination of the novel. While Part I focuses on domestic happiness and professional dissatisfaction, and Part II centres on suffering, grief, and emotional breakdown, Part III moves toward spiritual inquiry, philosophical reflection, and inner resolution. In this section of the novel, Narayan explores profound questions related to life, death, and immortality, not through abstract philosophy or religious preaching, but through the lived experience of an ordinary man.

Krishna's journey in Part III is shaped by his attempt to understand the meaning of existence after the death of his wife, Susila. Instead of ending the novel in despair, Narayan leads his protagonist toward a deeper understanding of life that transcends physical loss. The philosophical outlook presented here reflects a blend of Indian spiritual tradition, personal experience, and humanistic values. Narayan's approach remains simple, realistic, and deeply personal, making complex ideas accessible to the common reader.

13.3.1 Concept of Life, Death, and Immortality in *The English Teacher*

Concept of Life: Life as Inner Growth

In Part III of *The English Teacher*, R. K. Narayan presents life not merely as a biological or social process but as a journey of inner growth and self-realisation. Krishna gradually comes to understand that life cannot be explained only through external achievements such as career success, social status, or domestic comfort. His earlier dissatisfaction with colonial education and mechanical professional routine now develops into a deeper questioning of the purpose

of existence itself. Through Krishna's reflections, Narayan suggests that life gains true meaning through emotional awareness, moral sensitivity, and spiritual understanding. Krishna realises that suffering is not meaningless but an essential stage in personal growth. His grief becomes a turning point that pushes him inward, making life appear as a continuous process of learning in which pain and loss contribute to self-awareness.

Life Beyond Material Existence

Narayan strongly challenges the materialistic understanding of life in Part III. Krishna begins to believe that life is not limited to physical presence or sensory experience alone. His growing interest in spiritual communication suggests that life has dimensions beyond the visible and material world. This belief does not emerge suddenly; instead, it develops gradually through reflection, meditation, and emotional struggle. Life, in this broader sense, becomes more than routine duties, social roles, or mere physical survival. Narayan suggests that true life lies in understanding one's inner self and recognising one's deep connection with others, even beyond physical separation or death.

Concept of Death: Death as Transition, Not End

One of the most important philosophical ideas in Part III is Narayan's treatment of death. Instead of presenting death as a final and absolute end, he portrays it as a transition from one state of existence to another. Initially, death appears to Krishna as a source of unbearable pain, a symbol of separation, and a cause of emotional emptiness. However, as Krishna moves forward on his spiritual journey, death gradually loses its terrifying finality. He begins to accept it as a natural part of existence rather than a cruel interruption. Narayan thus transforms the idea of death from a destructive force into a meaningful stage in the cycle of life.

Emotional Acceptance of Death

Krishna's philosophical understanding of death develops through emotional acceptance rather than intellectual reasoning. He does not depend on philosophical texts or religious rituals to understand death. Instead, his understanding grows out of his deep love for Susila, his personal suffering, and silent contemplation. Narayan emphasises that acceptance of death comes through inner experience, not theoretical knowledge. Krishna realises that resisting death only increases suffering, while acceptance leads to peace and emotional balance. This emotional acceptance becomes a crucial step in his spiritual growth.

Death and Human Limitation

Narayan also presents death as a reminder of human limitation. Medical science, represented by doctors and hospitals, fails to save Susila's life. This failure highlights the limits of human control over life and exposes the weakness of scientific certainty and material progress. However, Narayan does not present this limitation in a pessimistic way. Instead, it encourages humility and spiritual awareness. Death becomes a teacher that reminds human beings of their dependence on larger forces, the temporary nature of physical existence, and the importance of inner strength over external power.

Concept of Immortality: Spiritual Continuity

The most significant philosophical idea in Part III is the concept of immortality. Narayan does not define immortality as physical survival after death. Instead, he presents it as spiritual continuity. Susila does not disappear completely after her death; her presence continues in a non-physical form. Immortality in the novel means the continuation of consciousness, the survival of love beyond death, and a spiritual connection between souls. This idea reflects traditional Indian philosophical beliefs, especially from the Upanishadic and Vedantic traditions, where the soul is considered eternal.

Spiritual Communication and Immortality

Krishna's belief in immortality is strengthened through spiritual communication. With the help of a spiritual guide, he attempts to establish contact with Susila's spirit. Narayan presents this experience not as a dramatic supernatural event but as a quiet and inward process. He carefully avoids sensationalism, religious fanaticism, and blind superstition. Instead, spiritual communication is shown as a psychological and emotional reality that helps Krishna heal. Through this experience, Krishna feels that Susila's essence continues to exist, offering him comfort, guidance, and emotional stability.

Immortality as Emotional Reality

Narayan deliberately leaves it unclear whether the spiritual communication is objectively real or psychologically imagined. He does not force the reader to accept it literally. What matters is its emotional truth. For Krishna, the experience brings peace, balance, and reassurance. In this sense, immortality functions as emotional survival, continuity of love, and inner reassurance. Narayan suggests that belief in immortality helps human beings cope with loss and suffering, making life bearable even after deep personal tragedy.

Indian Philosophical Influence

Narayan's ideas of life, death, and immortality are deeply influenced by Indian philosophy. Concepts such as the eternal soul, life as a cycle of birth and death, and spiritual liberation through understanding are subtly woven into the narrative. However, Narayan avoids heavy philosophical language and complex theoretical discussions. He simplifies these ideas by presenting them through Krishna's personal experience, making profound philosophical concepts accessible to ordinary readers.

Humanistic Spirituality

An important feature of Narayan's philosophy in Part III is its humanistic nature. Spirituality is not associated with temples, rituals, or organised religion. Krishna does not turn into a monk or religious preacher. His spirituality is inward, personal, and rooted in everyday experience. Narayan presents spirituality as emotional healing, self-understanding, and acceptance of life's uncertainties. This humanistic approach makes the novel relevant even to readers who may not follow formal religious beliefs.

Transformation Through Philosophy

Krishna's philosophical understanding leads to deep inner transformation. He moves from despair to calm acceptance, from emotional dependence to inner balance. He learns to live with loss without being destroyed by it. This transformation shows that philosophy emerges from lived experience, spiritual understanding develops gradually, and inner peace is possible even in the presence of suffering. Narayan suggests that philosophy is not abstract thought but a way of living and responding to life.

Resolution of Inner Conflict

By the end of Part III, Krishna achieves a state of inner resolution. He does not deny pain or forget his loss, but he is no longer overwhelmed by it. His understanding of life, death, and immortality gives him emotional stability, spiritual clarity, and a renewed sense of purpose. The resolution offered by Narayan is quiet and realistic rather than dramatic, reflecting acceptance rather than escape.

Universal Significance

Although *The English Teacher* is rooted in Indian culture, its philosophical themes are universal. Questions about life, death, and immortality concern all human beings. Narayan's achievement lies in presenting these universal concerns through the simple story of an ordinary man. The novel suggests that life remains meaningful despite suffering, death is not

the end of love, and immortality exists in spiritual and emotional continuity.

Critical Evaluation

Critics consider Part III one of Narayan's most mature philosophical achievements. The blending of personal grief with spiritual inquiry gives the novel emotional depth and authenticity. Narayan does not impose philosophical conclusions on the reader but allows them to arrive at their own understanding. The strength of this section lies in its emotional honesty, philosophical simplicity, and spiritual restraint.

13.4. DETAILED STUDY OF PART - III

Part III of *The English Teacher* marks the philosophical, emotional, and spiritual climax of the novel. While Parts I and II deal with social life, marriage, domestic happiness, illness, and grief, Part III moves inward, focusing on inner transformation, spiritual exploration, and the search for meaning beyond material existence. This section transforms the novel from a realistic social narrative into a deeply reflective and philosophical work, rooted in Indian spiritual thought yet presented through modern psychological realism.

Narayan uses Part III to explore how an ordinary man responds to irreversible loss and how suffering becomes a means of spiritual awakening. Krishna's journey in this part is not dramatic or heroic; it is quiet, inward, and deeply human. Through silence, contemplation, and spiritual communication, Krishna gradually moves from despair to peace. Thus, Part III provides not only the resolution of the plot but also the resolution of Krishna's inner conflict, making it the most significant section of the novel.

13.4.1. Summary of Part III

Part III begins after the death of Susila, Krishna's wife. Krishna is left emotionally shattered, spiritually empty, and psychologically disturbed. He finds it impossible to return to normal life. His professional routine as a teacher feels meaningless, and social interactions appear hollow. He withdraws from society and becomes increasingly introspective.

Krishna's grief is not loud or dramatic. Instead, it is silent, intense, and persistent. He feels a constant sense of absence and loneliness. The memory of Susila dominates his thoughts, and he feels emotionally disconnected from the physical world. His home, once a place of happiness, now reminds him of loss. This emotional state leads him to question the very purpose of life.

As Krishna struggles with grief, he begins to explore the possibility of spiritual communication. He comes into contact with a spiritual medium who claims to help people communicate with the spirits of the dead. Initially, Krishna is hesitant and sceptical. He does not blindly accept supernatural ideas, nor does he reject them completely. His approach is cautious, emotional, and exploratory.

Gradually, through meditation, silence, and inward focus, Krishna begins to feel Susila's presence. These experiences are described in a restrained and subtle manner. Narayan avoids sensationalism and keeps the experience ambiguous, allowing readers to interpret it either as spiritual reality or psychological comfort.

As Krishna continues this spiritual practice, he undergoes a deep inner transformation. His grief slowly turns into calm acceptance. He realises that life does not end with physical death and that love can survive beyond mortality. This understanding brings him peace and emotional stability.

Towards the end of Part III, Krishna resigns from his teaching job. He rejects the rigid colonial education system, which he finds lifeless and mechanical. He chooses a simpler, freer way of living that allows him inner peace and spiritual balance. The novel ends quietly, with Krishna achieving a sense of resolution rather than dramatic happiness.

Thus, Part III completes Krishna's journey from worldly involvement to spiritual awareness, making it the philosophical heart of *The English Teacher*.

13.4.2. Spiritual Communication

Spiritual communication is the central theme of Part III and one of the most debated aspects of the novel. Narayan introduces the idea not as a religious doctrine or mystical spectacle but as a deeply personal and emotional experience rooted in grief and love.

Krishna's interest in spiritual communication arises naturally from his emotional state. He is unable to accept Susila's complete absence. His love for her remains strong even after her death. This emotional attachment leads him to search for a way to maintain a connection beyond physical existence. Importantly, Krishna does not turn to traditional religious rituals or temple worship. Instead, he seeks an inward, experiential form of spirituality.

The spiritual guide Krishna meets plays a crucial role. This figure is not portrayed as a miracle-working saint or a religious preacher. He is calm, simple, and practical. He does

not impose beliefs but encourages Krishna to focus inwardly. The process of communication involves silence, concentration, and emotional discipline rather than chanting or ritual.

Narayan deliberately keeps spiritual communication ambiguous. The novel does not confirm whether Krishna truly communicates with Susila's spirit or whether these experiences are psychological responses to grief. This ambiguity is intentional and significant. It allows the novel to remain grounded in realism while still exploring metaphysical ideas.

For Krishna, the emotional impact of spiritual communication is more important than its factual truth. Through these experiences, he feels comforted, reassured, and emotionally balanced. Susila's presence, whether real or imagined, helps him overcome despair. This suggests that spirituality functions as a healing force rather than a supernatural event.

Narayan's portrayal of spiritual communication reflects Indian philosophical ideas, particularly the belief in the continuity of the soul. However, he avoids heavy philosophical language and presents spirituality as a lived experience rather than an abstract concept.

Thus, spiritual communication in Part III serves as a bridge between grief and acceptance, loss and meaning, and death and continuity**.**

13.4.3. Krishna's Inner Transformation

Krishna's inner transformation is the most important psychological development in Part III. This transformation is gradual, subtle, and deeply realistic. Narayan does not show sudden enlightenment or dramatic change. Instead, Krishna evolves slowly through suffering, reflection, and spiritual awareness.

At the beginning of Part III, Krishna is emotionally broken. He feels empty, directionless, and disconnected from life. His earlier dissatisfaction with his profession deepens into existential despair. He questions the value of education, work, and social norms. Everything appears mechanical and meaningless.

As Krishna engages in spiritual communication, his focus shifts from external reality to inner awareness. He begins to understand that suffering is not meaningless but transformative. His grief becomes a source of insight rather than destruction. Through silence and contemplation, he learns to observe his emotions instead of being controlled by them.

This inner journey leads Krishna to emotional maturity. He no longer seeks happiness through external achievements or social approval. Instead, he values inner peace and

emotional balance. His understanding of life becomes broader and deeper.

Krishna's transformation also involves a change in his attitude toward death. Initially, death appears cruel and final. Gradually, he begins to see it as a natural transition rather than a tragic end. This acceptance reduces his fear and sorrow.By the end of the novel, Krishna achieves a state of detachment without indifference. He continues to love Susila, but his love is no longer painful. It becomes calm and sustaining. This balance reflects Indian spiritual ideals, particularly the concept of inner detachment (vairagya) combined with emotional sensitivity.

Thus, Krishna's inner transformation represents the novel's message that true growth comes through suffering, reflection, and self-awareness.

13.4.4. Search for Meaning in Life

Part III presents life as a philosophical problem, not merely a social or biological fact. Krishna's personal tragedy forces him to question the meaning of existence itself. His search for meaning is not intellectual or academic; it is emotional and experiential.

Earlier in the novel, Krishna's life was structured around routine—job, family, social expectations. After Susila's death, these structures collapsed. He realises that routine alone cannot provide meaning. This realisation leads him to search for a deeper purpose.

Narayan suggests that meaning in life does not come from material success, social status, or institutional approval. Krishna finds no comfort in professional achievement or social sympathy. Instead, meaning emerges through inner understanding and emotional acceptance.

The search for meaning also involves questioning colonial education. Krishna criticises the education system for being lifeless, mechanical, and disconnected from human values. His resignation from his teaching job symbolises his rejection of a system that prioritises discipline over wisdom and information over understanding.

Narayan contrasts external education with inner learning. While formal education focuses on rules and examinations, Krishna's inner journey teaches him patience, humility, and compassion. This suggests that true education lies in understanding life rather than merely acquiring knowledge.

The search for meaning ultimately leads Krishna to spiritual awareness. He realises that life gains significance when one accepts its uncertainties, limitations, and transience.

Meaning lies not in controlling life but in understanding and accepting it.

Thus, Part III presents life as a spiritual journey rather than a material struggle, offering a deeply humanistic vision of existence.

13.4.5. Resolution of the Novel

The resolution of *The English Teacher* is quiet, reflective, and emotionally satisfying. Narayan avoids dramatic closure and instead offers inner resolution. Krishna does not achieve conventional happiness, but he gains peace and clarity.

By the end of the novel, Krishna accepts Susila's death without despair. His grief no longer dominates his existence. He learns to live with loss without being destroyed by it. This emotional balance marks the completion of his inner journey.

Krishna's resignation from his teaching job represents a symbolic resolution. It signifies his rejection of mechanical living and his acceptance of a life guided by inner values. This act is not rebellion but liberation. The novel ends with Krishna achieving a harmonious relationship with life. He does not claim absolute truth or spiritual authority. Instead, he embraces uncertainty with calm acceptance. This restrained ending reflects Narayan's artistic philosophy of subtlety and realism.

The resolution reinforces the novel's central message: life continues beyond suffering, love survives death, and inner peace is possible through understanding and acceptance.

13.5. NARAYAN'S VISION OF EDUCATION AND LIFE

R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* is not merely a personal or domestic novel; it is also a serious critique of the colonial education system and a thoughtful presentation of an ideal philosophy of education and life. Through the character of Krishna, Narayan expresses his dissatisfaction with the British-imposed education system in India and proposes an alternative vision rooted in human values, creativity, emotional development, and spiritual growth.

Narayan's views on education are deeply connected with his broader understanding of life. For him, education should not produce mechanical individuals trained only for employment, but complete human beings capable of emotional sensitivity, moral awareness, and inner balance. Thus, Narayan's vision of education is inseparable from his vision of life itself.

13.5.1. Critique of Colonial Education

Narayan's critique of colonial education is voiced mainly through Krishna's professional dissatisfaction and growing disillusionment with his role as an English teacher in a government college. The colonial education system, inherited from British rule, is portrayed as artificial, rigid, mechanical, and alien to Indian cultural realities.

Mechanical and Lifeless Nature of Colonial Education

One of the strongest criticisms Narayan makes is that colonial education is mechanical and lifeless. Teaching is reduced to routine activities such as completing syllabi, preparing students for examinations, and enforcing discipline. Krishna feels that his work lacks creativity and emotional fulfilment. He teaches English literature not as a living art but as a prescribed subject to be memorised and reproduced.

This mechanical nature strips education of joy and meaning. Students are treated as passive receivers of information rather than active learners. Teachers function like clerks following orders rather than mentors shaping young minds. Narayan shows that such an education system fails to inspire curiosity, imagination, or love for learning.

Alienation from Indian Culture and Life

Colonial education is also criticised for being culturally alien. It promotes Western values, literature, and worldviews without relating them to Indian life and experience. Krishna teaches English texts that have little relevance to the social, emotional, or spiritual realities of Indian students.

Narayan suggests that this creates a sense of alienation. Students learn to admire foreign ideals while becoming disconnected from their own traditions, languages, and cultural roots. Education thus becomes a tool of cultural imitation rather than self-understanding.

Examination-Centred System

Another major flaw of colonial education highlighted in the novel is its examination-oriented structure. Learning is measured by marks and certificates rather than understanding or growth. Students study to pass exams, not to gain wisdom.Narayan implies that such an approach encourages rote learning and suppresses originality. Teachers, too, become more

concerned with results than with nurturing students' intellectual or emotional development. This system produces conformity rather than creativity.

Neglect of Emotional and Moral Development

Colonial education, according to Narayan, focuses only on intellectual training while ignoring emotional, moral, and spiritual growth. Krishna realises that despite being educated, individuals remain emotionally immature and spiritually empty.After Susila's death, Krishna finds no comfort in his academic knowledge. His education does not help him cope with grief or understand life's deeper meaning. This highlights the failure of colonial education to prepare individuals for real human experiences such as love, suffering, and loss.

Education as a Means of Employment Only

Narayan also criticises the utilitarian approach of colonial education, which treats learning merely as a means to secure jobs. The system trains students to fit into administrative or clerical roles rather than encouraging independent thought or social responsibility. Krishna becomes increasingly aware that his teaching contributes to this narrow vision of life. His eventual resignation from his job symbolises his rejection of an education system that reduces human beings to functionaries rather than fulfilled individuals.

Psychological Impact on Teachers

Colonial education not only affects students but also damages teachers psychologically. Krishna feels frustrated, trapped, and emotionally exhausted. His profession becomes a burden rather than a vocation. This inner dissatisfaction reflects Narayan's belief that an unhealthy education system harms both learners and educators.

Thus, Narayan's critique of colonial education is comprehensive. He exposes its mechanical nature, cultural alienation, emotional emptiness, and dehumanising effects, presenting it as fundamentally incompatible with Indian life and values.

13.5.2. Ideal Education System

In contrast to his critique of colonial education, Narayan presents an ideal education system based on human values, emotional growth, creativity, and spiritual awareness. This vision is not presented as a formal theory but emerges naturally through Krishna's thoughts, actions, and transformation.

Education as Holistic Development

Narayan believes that education should aim at the holistic development of the individual. This includes intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual growth. True education should help individuals understand themselves, others, and life as a whole.

In the novel, Krishna realises that knowledge without wisdom is incomplete. Education must cultivate compassion, patience, humility, and self-awareness. Such an approach prepares individuals not only for careers but for life itself.

Learning Rooted in Life and Experience

Narayan's ideal education is closely connected to real life experiences. Learning should not be abstract or disconnected from everyday reality. Instead, it should arise from observation, reflection, and lived experience. Krishna's own transformation occurs not through books or lectures but through suffering, love, and spiritual exploration. This suggests that true education continues beyond classrooms and textbooks.

Freedom from Rigid Discipline

Narayan criticises excessive discipline and rigid authority in schools. His ideal education system values freedom, curiosity, and creativity. Students should be encouraged to ask questions, express ideas, and explore knowledge independently. Teachers should act as guides and mentors rather than authoritarian figures. Education, in this sense, becomes a cooperative process rather than a hierarchical one.

Emphasis on Emotional Intelligence

An important feature of Narayan's ideal education is the emphasis on emotional intelligence. Education should teach individuals how to handle emotions such as love, grief, fear, and uncertainty. Krishna's inability to cope with Susila's death exposes the limitations of his formal education. Through this, Narayan suggests that education must prepare individuals for emotional challenges, not just intellectual tasks.

Spiritual Awareness without Dogma

Narayan's vision of education includes spiritual awareness, but not in a religious or dogmatic sense. He does not advocate ritualistic teaching or religious instruction. Instead, spirituality is understood as inner growth, self-understanding, and acceptance of life's uncertainties. Education should help individuals reflect on fundamental questions of existence, such as the

meaning of life, suffering, and death. This spiritual dimension gives depth and balance to human life.

Education and Simple Living

Narayan associates ideal education with simplicity and balance. He rejects the idea that education should promote ambition, competition, or materialism. Instead, it should encourage contentment, humility, and social harmony. Krishna's decision to leave his teaching job and choose a simpler life reflects this philosophy. Education should lead to inner freedom, not social pressure or professional anxiety.

Teacher as a Human Being, not a Machine

In Narayan's ideal system, teachers are not mere transmitters of information. They are sensitive individuals who understand students' emotional needs. Teaching becomes a meaningful relationship rather than a mechanical duty. Narayan suggests that when teachers are emotionally fulfilled and spiritually balanced, they can truly inspire students.

13.6. SUMMING UP

Unit 13 focuses on *Part III* of R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* and brings the novel to its philosophical and emotional conclusion. This unit highlights the shift from personal grief to spiritual understanding and inner peace. While the earlier units deal mainly with domestic happiness and tragic loss, this unit shows how suffering becomes a means of self-realisation and growth.

The unit explains the philosophical and spiritual aspects of the novel, especially Narayan's ideas about life, death, and immortality. Life is presented not as mere routine or material existence but as a journey of inner growth and self-awareness. Death is shown not as a final end but as a transition that leads to deeper understanding. Immortality is understood in spiritual and emotional terms, suggesting the continuity of love and consciousness beyond physical death.

A detailed study of *Part III* reveals Krishna's gradual inner transformation. Through spiritual communication and deep reflection, he moves from despair and loneliness to acceptance and calmness. His search for meaning in life helps him overcome emotional dependence and achieve inner balance. The resolution of the novel is quiet and reflective, emphasising peace rather than dramatic closure.

The unit also discusses Narayan's vision of education and life. Narayan strongly criticises the colonial education system for being mechanical, examination-oriented, and emotionally barren. In contrast, he proposes an ideal education based on holistic development, emotional sensitivity, creativity, and spiritual awareness. Education, according to Narayan, should prepare individuals not just for careers but for life itself.

Overall, Unit 13 shows *The English Teacher* as a novel that blends personal experience with universal philosophy. It highlights Narayan's belief that suffering can lead to wisdom, education should nurture humanity, and inner peace is possible through self-understanding. This unit helps students appreciate the novel as a profound exploration of human life, loss, and spiritual renewal.

13.7. SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the philosophical significance of *Part III* of The English Teacher with special reference to Narayan's ideas on life, death, and immortality.

2. Analyse the role of spiritual communication in Krishna's inner transformation in *Part III* of the novel.

3. Trace Krishna's search for meaning in life after Susila's death and show how it leads to spiritual awakening.

4. Examine how the resolution of the novel reflects Narayan's humanistic and spiritual vision of life.

5. Critically evaluate Narayan's critique of colonial education as presented through Krishna's experiences in *The English Teacher*.

6. Explain Narayan's concept of an ideal education system and its relevance to modern life.

7. Show how *Part III* marks a transition from personal suffering to philosophical acceptance in the novel.

8. Comment on the thematic unity of *The English Teacher* by relating Part III to the earlier parts of the novel.

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13.9. TERMINAL AND MODEL QUESTIONS

Terminal Questions

1. Discuss the philosophical and spiritual aspects of *Part III* of *The English Teacher* with special reference to the concepts of life, death, and immortality.
2. Analyse Krishna's inner transformation in *Part III* and show how suffering leads him to spiritual awakening.
3. Examine the role of spiritual communication in bringing emotional peace and resolution to Krishna's life.
4. Critically evaluate Narayan's vision of education as presented in *The English Teacher*.
5. Discuss Narayan's critique of the colonial education system and suggest how he proposes an ideal education system.
6. Trace Krishna's search for meaning in life in *Part III* and explain how it leads to the resolution of the novel.
7. Comment on the significance of the ending of *The English Teacher* and its philosophical implications.
8. *The English Teacher* is as much a novel of ideas as it is a novel of emotions." Discuss this statement with reference to *Part III*.

Model Questions

1. What philosophical ideas about life and death are presented in *Part III* of *The English Teacher?*
2. How does Krishna overcome his grief and loneliness in *Part III* of the novel?
3. Explain the significance of spiritual communication in Krishna's emotional healing.
4. How does Narayan present the concept of immortality in *The English Teacher*?
5. What are Narayan's views on education as reflected in Krishna's experiences?
6. How does *Part III* complete the thematic development of the novel?
7. In what ways does Narayan combine Indian philosophy with humanistic values in *The English Teacher*?
8. Write a short note on the resolution of the novel and its message.

Unit 14: Krishna Mohan Banerjee – The Persecuted

14.1. INTRODUCTION

The following unit focuses on Krishna Mohan Banerjee's pioneering play *The Persecuted*, which is widely recognized as the **first Indian Drama written in English**. The play draws upon Banerjee's own life experiences and provides a vivid dramatization of the conflicts between orthodox Hindu society and a new generation of Western-educated, reform-minded youth. *The Persecuted* is not merely a personal narrative of exile and persecution; it is a reformist text that interrogates caste hierarchies, ritual orthodoxy, and social conformity while advocating reason, conscience, and ethical integrity. Thematically, the play explores the tensions between tradition and modernity, filial duty and personal conscience, communal authority and individual autonomy, as well as the psychological and emotional cost of social ostracism. Banerjee communicates these themes through the experiences of his protagonist, Banylal, whose moral courage and steadfast adherence to rational principles challenge the entrenched social order. The play's literary features—including its dramatic structure, dialogues, and didactic narrative style—serve not only to convey a story of persecution but also to engage the audience in debates on morality, justice, and social reform. By examining these elements, this unit seeks to highlight how Banerjee combines personal experience, social critique, and literary craft to produce a text that is historically significant, intellectually stimulating, and culturally instructive.

The course comprises multiple components, with the Self-Learning Material (SLM) and counselling sessions being key elements. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the course content, it is essential that you engage with all these components in a balanced manner. As you are enrolled in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) program, self-directed study plays a vital role in your academic success. Accordingly, each unit concludes with a list of suggested readings and references. You are strongly encouraged to consult these resources to enhance your comprehension and deepen your engagement with the subject matter.

14.2. OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

1. Identify and analyse the central themes in Krishna Mohan Banerjee's *The Persecuted*, such as tradition versus modernity, caste and ritual orthodoxy, filial duty versus individual conscience, and the psychological and social consequences of persecution.
2. Examine the key narrative and dramatic elements in the play, including excommunication, social ostracism, and familial conflict, and evaluate how these elements reflect the broader

social, cultural, and historical dimensions of early 19th-century Bengal.

3. Understand Banerjee's use of literary and dramatic devices, such as dialogue, didactic narrative, moral reflection, and characterization, and explain their significance in conveying reformist ideas and engaging the audience in debates on morality and social justice.
4. Critically assess the interaction of themes, characters, and dramatic structure in shaping the play's meaning and its critique of orthodox society, highlighting how personal experience is transformed into a socially instructive narrative.
5. Develop an academic appreciation of Banerjee's literary and social vision, recognizing how his fusion of autobiographical experience, moral argument, and English dramatic form anticipates reformist thought and contributes to the early development of Indian English literature.

14.3. KRISHNA MOHAN BANERJEE: LIFE AND LEGACY

Krishna Mohan Banerjee (1813–1885), was an intellectual, social reformer, and the author of *The Persecuted* - the first Indian play written in English. He was one of the pioneering figures of the Bengal Renaissance - a nineteenth century socio-cultural and intellectual movement in colonial Bengal, which was marked by reformist thought, engagement with Western Education, and efforts to reinterpret Indian society, religion, and literature in light of modern ideas.

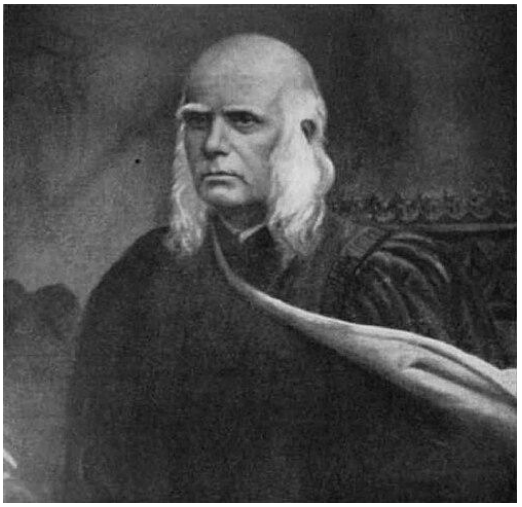
Born in Kolkata (then Calcutta) into a respectable Bengali Brahmin family, Banerjee received a traditional Hindu education before coming into contact with Western education and Christian missionary thought. This dual exposure shaped his worldview, allowing him to navigate and critically assess both indigenous religious traditions and Western rationalist ideas.

From an early age, Banerjee was drawn to questions of morality, social justice, and reform. His education in English literature, philosophy, and theology gave him a platform to engage with contemporary debates on religion, caste, and social hierarchy in Bengal. In 1831, at the age of eighteen, Banerjee faced **excommunication by the orthodox Brahminical authorities** after he reportedly consumed beef and wine, actions considered transgressions of caste purity. This personal experience of persecution profoundly influenced his intellectual and literary work, particularly *The Persecuted*, in which he dramatized his own struggles against social ostracism and moral authoritarianism. Banerjee's life was marked by his efforts to reconcile ethical conscience with religious and social reform. He became an advocate for rational religion, education, and social justice, emphasizing the need to question ritualistic

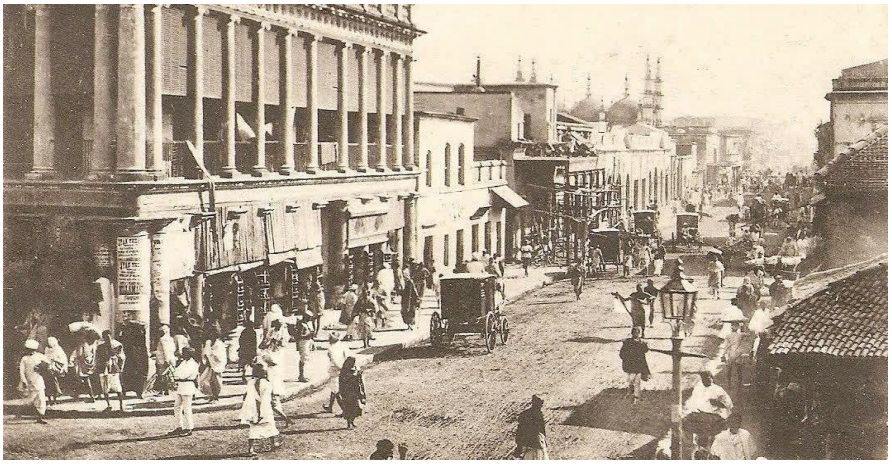
orthodoxy while preserving the moral and philosophical essence of religion. Beyond his literary contributions, Banerjee was actively involved in the **early reformist movement in Bengal**, which included advocating for education, modernization, and the questioning of oppressive social norms such as rigid caste practices.

As a literary figure, Banerjee is most remembered for *The Persecuted*, which not only reflects his personal trials but also serves as a **social manifesto for reform-minded youth** of his time. The play is significant for its exploration of themes such as tradition versus modernity, individual conscience versus societal pressure, and the costs of dissent in a conservative society. Through his work, Banerjee laid the groundwork for later Indian English writers to engage with social critique, moral philosophy, and reformist ideas within a literary framework.

Banerjee's legacy is twofold. On one hand, he is celebrated as a **founder of Indian English Drama**, introducing a medium through which social criticism and personal experience could be expressed to an English-educated readership. On the other, he is remembered as a **social reformer and moral philosopher**, whose life and writing exemplified the courage to challenge entrenched orthodoxy while advocating ethical, rational, and humane ideals. His work resonates beyond his historical context, offering insights into the dilemmas faced by individuals navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity, faith and reason, personal conscience and social expectation.



14.4. BENGAL IN THE 19TH CENTURY



The 19th century was a period of profound transformation in Bengal, marked by the intersection of colonial rule, social reform movements, and intellectual awakening. Under British colonial administration, Bengal emerged as the political, cultural, and educational epicentre of India. Calcutta (now Kolkata) became the capital of British India until 1911 and a hub of trade, governance, and education. The expansion of colonial institutions—such as schools, courts, and the civil service—brought new opportunities, particularly for those who could master English education, while simultaneously challenging the authority of traditional social and religious structures.

Bengali society in the early 19th century was rigidly hierarchical, with caste functioning as the primary determinant of social identity and mobility. Brahmins occupied the highest social positions, wielding considerable religious, social, and economic influence. Orthodox Hindu customs strictly regulated daily life, with ritual purity, dietary restrictions, and marital rules reinforcing social control. Transgression of these norms, even in private spheres, could result in **excommunication** or social ostracism—a reality that Banerjee experienced personally and dramatized in *The Persecuted*. The tension between personal choice and societal expectation was a defining feature of social life, particularly for the emerging Western-educated youth, who found themselves caught between inherited traditions and modern ideals.

The British colonial presence, especially through education and missionary activity, introduced **Western rationalist thought, Christianity, and modern science** into Bengal. Institutions such as Hindu College (established in 1817) became centres of learning for the "Young Bengal" intellectuals, who began to question orthodox practices, caste hierarchies, and ritual formalism. **Figures like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio inspired a generation of students to engage with liberal ideas, reason, and social reform.** This exposure to Western philosophy and literature created a new class of educated Indians who were simultaneously proud of their cultural heritage and critical of its oppressive practices.

The early 19th century also witnessed the rise of **social reform movements**, including campaigns against sati, child marriage, and rigid caste norms, as well as efforts to promote women's education. Reformist thinkers sought to reconcile ethical and spiritual values with reason and modernity, often drawing on both Hindu philosophy and Western moral thought. Yet, these reformers faced strong resistance from orthodox elements of society, who viewed any deviation from ritual and caste norms as a threat to social stability and moral order. This tension between reformist aspirations and conservative resistance forms the backdrop of *The Persecuted*, providing both the social conflict and the ideological

stakes of the play.

Economically, Bengal was undergoing subtle but significant changes under colonial rule. The introduction of commercial agriculture, new trade networks, and urban employment created opportunities for mobility, particularly among the emerging middle class. At the same time, these economic shifts reinforced social stratification, as traditional hierarchies were preserved through caste and ritual authority, even as Western education opened new avenues for social advancement.

Culturally, Bengal experienced a **renaissance of literature, arts, and intellectual life**, often referred to as the Bengal Renaissance. This period saw the publication of English and Bengali texts, the translation of Western classics, and the production of new literary forms that combined indigenous and European influences. *The Persecuted* belongs to this cultural moment, reflecting the experimental and reformist spirit of the time, while simultaneously addressing the social, ethical, and psychological consequences of living under rigid orthodox structures.

Nineteenth century Bengal was a society of contrasts: deeply traditional yet increasingly exposed to modern ideas; hierarchically rigid yet intellectually dynamic; socially conservative yet culturally and educationally vibrant. These contradictions shaped the lived experiences of individuals like Krishna Mohan Banerjee and provided the **social, cultural, and historical canvas** upon which *The Persecuted* dramatizes the personal and ideological conflicts of reform-minded youth in colonial Bengal. Understanding this context is essential to fully appreciate the themes of social persecution, moral courage, and the struggle between tradition and modernity that lie at the heart of the play.

14.5. YOUNG BENGAL MOVEMENT

The Young Bengal Movement was one of the most vibrant and intellectually provocative reformist currents of 19th-century Bengal. Emerging in the 1820s and 1830s around Hindu College in Calcutta, the movement consisted primarily of a group of brilliant, English-educated Bengali youth who were inspired by the radical ideas of their teacher, **Henry Louis Vivian Derozio**. These young men—later collectively known as the *Derozians*—became

early advocates of rationalism, freedom of thought, social equality, and secular values at a time when orthodox Hindu society was dominated by rigid caste hierarchies, ritual formalism, and deep conservatism. Their influence contributed significantly to the intellectual ferment of the Bengal Renaissance and shaped the ideological environment in which Krishna Mohan Banerjee lived, studied, and wrote.

At the heart of the Young Bengal Movement was the rejection of blind tradition and an emphasis on intellectual inquiry. Derozio encouraged his students to question inherited beliefs, to challenge superstitions, and to cultivate a spirit of scientific reasoning. Under his guidance, the students formed debating societies such as the *Academic Association* (1828), where they discussed topics ranging from religious freedom and women's education to political liberty and social reform. These debates fostered a culture of critical inquiry and nurtured a generation of thinkers who saw themselves not merely as students, but as active agents of social transformation.

The Derozians were also known for their bold, even provocative, actions—such as publicly dining with Europeans, discussing atheism, rejecting caste-based dining restrictions, advocating widow remarriage, and opposing orthodox practices. Their behaviour shocked conservative Hindu society, which viewed such acts as threats to the stability of the social order. As a result, members of the movement were frequently subjected to criticism, suspicion, and sometimes severe social consequences, including disruptions within their families and communities.

Krishna Mohan Banerjee, though not strictly a central figure of the Young Bengal group, was deeply influenced by its atmosphere of intellectual freedom and reformist zeal. He studied at Hindu College during the height of the movement, and the spirit of questioning, rationalism, and anti-orthodoxy that shaped the Derozians also seeped into his own thinking. His eventual excommunication, caused by accusations of violating caste rules, mirrors the real-life experiences of many young men associated with the movement. These experiences of social hostility and spiritual questioning directly informed the themes of *The Persecuted*, which dramatizes the moral and emotional conflict of a young educated man confronting the oppressive structures of traditional society.

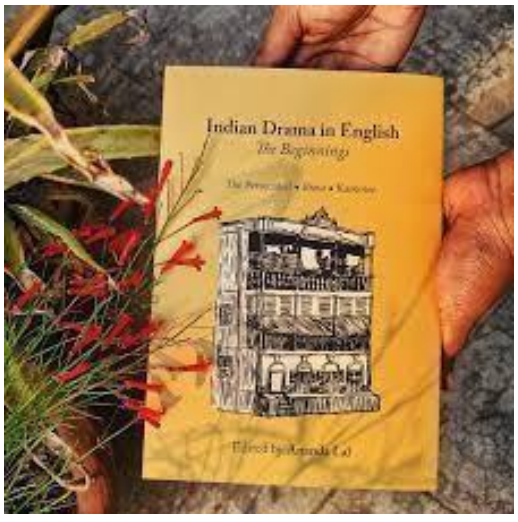
The Young Bengal Movement, however, was not without criticism. Orthodox leaders accused its members of imitating Western behaviours without fully understanding them. Even some contemporary reformers argued that the movement lacked a structured programme for practical social reform and was too focused on intellectual rebellion. Despite these critiques, the Derozians played a foundational role in breaking the mental rigidity of

the time. Their emphasis on individual autonomy, moral courage, and rational thought laid the groundwork for later reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen, and the Brahmo Samaj—movements and figures who would go on to articulate broader, systemic reforms in religion and society.

In the context of the play *The Persecuted*, the Young Bengal Movement provides an essential ideological backdrop. The play reflects the tension between tradition and modernity that defined the era: the clash between a rigid, caste-based society and a new class of educated youth inspired by Enlightenment values. The protagonist Banylal's struggles, courage, and eventual persecution echo the lived dilemmas of the Young Bengal generation, who dared to prioritize conscience over conformity. Thus, understanding the movement helps readers grasp not only the historical significance of Banerjee's drama, but also the intellectual climate that made such a work both necessary and revolutionary.

14.6. THE PERSECUTED: ACT WISE SUMMARY

Krishna Mohan Banerjee's *The Persecuted* (1831) is one of the earliest Indian English plays and provides an autobiographical glimpse into the intellectual, emotional, and social upheavals experienced by a young Hindu reform-minded thinker who comes into contact with Western education and Christian ideas. The play is divided into five acts, each representing a progressive intensification of conflict—internal, social, and spiritual. Together, they dramatize the Young Bengal experience of ideological rebellion and the violent backlash from orthodox Hindu society.



Act I – Exposition: The Seeds of Conflict

The first act introduces the central conflict of the play—the growing tension between traditional Hindu orthodoxy and the emerging class of Western-educated Bengali youth. We meet Banylal, the protagonist, who has recently returned home after receiving an English education. Through conversations between family members and neighbours, the audience becomes aware of Banylal's intellectual transformation and his increasing reluctance to conform to rigid caste rules and ritual practices. His refusal to participate in certain religious ceremonies becomes the immediate trigger for suspicion.

The act also reveals the deep anxieties of the older generation, who fear that English

education is eroding ancestral customs. Banylal's father, though affectionate, is torn between his love for his son and the pressures of the orthodox community. The act ends by highlighting the first signs of social outrage: local caste leaders begin gathering to discuss whether Banylal should be disciplined, setting the stage for the impending conflict.

Act II – Rising Action: Social Surveillance and Escalating Hostility

In the second act, the drama intensifies as the community's scrutiny over Banylal's behaviour increases. Gossip spreads rapidly, and small acts—such as Banylal speaking freely with Europeans, or showing reluctance toward caste regulations—are exaggerated into allegations of moral corruption. His peers within the emerging English-educated class attempt to support him, arguing for rationality, reform, and personal freedom.

However, the orthodox leaders see Banylal's behaviour as a direct threat to traditional social order. They convene meetings to investigate his conduct. The social environment becomes hostile and suffocating, revealing the mechanisms of caste surveillance and moral policing. Banylal, though firm in his convictions, senses the growing danger but remains committed to his principles. Themes of modernity vs. tradition, free thought vs. dogma, and individual conscience vs. social conformity become pronounced.

The act ends with hints that a formal inquiry or accusation is imminent, building momentum toward the crisis.

Act III – Crisis: Accusation and Moral Confrontation

Act III forms the emotional and dramatic centrepiece of the play. Banylal is formally charged with violating caste norms and summoned before the orthodox community leaders. The proceedings resemble a trial in which the youth's rational explanations and individual choices are dismissed as signs of rebellion. The act exposes the rigidity of the caste council, which interprets every deviation from custom as a crime against society.

Banylal's father attempts to mediate but is overpowered by the moral absolutism of the elders. In this act, Banerjee brings forward the full brutality of social pressure: threats of excommunication, loss of family honor, and withdrawal of community support. Banylal boldly defends his right to think freely, challenging blind adherence to rituals that have lost relevance.

The act ends with the verdict: Banylal is declared guilty and is to be excommunicated unless he publicly repents and returns to orthodoxy. His refusal sets the stage for the dramatic downfall and emotional turmoil of the subsequent acts.

Act IV – Falling Action: Excommunication and Social Isolation

The fourth act depicts the consequences of Banylal's refusal to submit. The community proceeds with the ritual of excommunication, effectively cutting Banylal off from social life, economic support, and familial networks. His father faces immense emotional suffering, torn between paternal love and societal expectations. The family becomes divided, and even friends hesitate to stand beside Banylal due to fear of the caste council.

This act powerfully portrays the psychological and social violence of caste ostracism, highlighting how the individual is crushed by collective orthodoxy. Banylal's internal struggle becomes more visible: though resolute, he feels the weight of loneliness, guilt over his family's suffering, and uncertainty about his future.

Simultaneously, the act introduces an undercurrent of hope, as a few sympathetic figures—English-educated reformist friends and liberal-minded observers—offer moral support, underscoring the emergence of new social ideologies in Bengal. The act ends with Banylal accepting the consequences but refusing to surrender his convictions.

Act V – Resolution: Moral Victory Amidst Social Defeat

The final act brings emotional closure to the narrative. Although Banylal remains ostracized, the play frames him as a moral victor who embodies rationality, courage, and ethical integrity. His steadfastness illuminates the oppressive nature of rigid caste structures, prompting some characters to reflect on the cruelty of the punishment and the need for reform.

The play closes not with reconciliation but with a philosophical resolution. Banylal endures personal suffering, but his sacrifice becomes symbolic of the larger struggle for intellectual freedom in 19th-century Bengal. The audience is left with the understanding that social change is painful and gradual, and that pioneers of reform often pay a personal price.

Krishna Mohan Banerjee ends the play with a clear critique of orthodoxy, suggesting that while society may temporarily silence progressive individuals, the moral force of their ideas ultimately transcends persecution. Banylal stands as a proto-modern figure—one who sows the seeds of reform through personal courage and unwavering conviction.

14.7. THEMES OF THE PLAY

Through its dramatic portrayal of Banylal's confrontation with society, the play unfolds a range of interrelated themes that illuminate the transformative yet turbulent encounter between indigenous traditions and emerging modern values.

1. Tradition vs. Modernity

One of the central themes of the play is the profound conflict between orthodox Hindu traditions and the new rationalist worldview ushered in through English education. Banylal embodies the modern subject who questions ritualistic customs, caste strictures, and inherited norms. In contrast, the caste elders and conservative figures represent the rigid structures of tradition that refuse to adapt to changing times. Banerjee dramatizes how cultural stagnation persists when traditions are upheld without reflection, and how modernity becomes threatening when it challenges the power structures rooted in custom. The play thus reflects the crisis of 19th-century Bengal, where modern education catalysed deep ideological fissures.

2. Caste Orthodoxy and Social Control

Caste operates in the play not merely as a social identity but as a mechanism of surveillance, coercion, and punishment. The leaders of the community use caste laws to regulate individual behaviour, impose moral judgments, and protect their own authority. Banylal's supposed "crimes"—his refusal to follow rituals or his association with Europeans—are turned into grounds for excommunication. Through this narrative, Banerjee exposes the tyrannical nature of caste, showing how it weaponizes religion and purity norms to suppress dissent and maintain social order. The theme highlights the injustice of a system that values orthodoxy more than human dignity.

3. Individual Conscience vs. Collective Authority

The play's dramatic tension largely rests on the opposition between Banylal's moral autonomy and the collective will of the community. Banylal insists on acting according to reason and conscience, refusing to accept customs that do not align with his ethical beliefs. The caste council, however, demands absolute conformity, expecting individuals to sacrifice personal judgment for collective tradition. Banerjee reveals how the individual's integrity becomes a site of conflict when society prioritizes obedience over introspection. By presenting Banylal as a principled yet persecuted figure, the play emphasizes the moral courage required to resist oppressive collectivism.

4. The Crisis of the Educated Bengali Youth

A significant theme of the play is the identity crisis experienced by the new generation of Western-educated Bengalis. Banylal's dilemmas—his intellectual awakening, spiritual uncertainty, and alienation from his own community—mirror the historical experiences of many students of Hindu College influenced by the Young Bengal Movement. These youths found themselves torn between two worlds: the rational, liberal values they absorbed from English education, and the conservative expectations of their families and society. The play highlights the emotional and psychological turmoil produced by this cultural duality, making it one of the earliest dramatic reflections of this generational conflict.

5. Social Persecution and Ostracism

The title *The Persecuted* captures the play's deep engagement with the theme of social punishment. Excommunication (social castration) is depicted not merely as a ritual act but as a form of social death. Banerjee shows how ostracism destroys relationships, fractures families, and leaves the victim isolated and vulnerable. Banylal's suffering—his loneliness, his father's sorrow, and the coldness of the community—illustrates the cruelty inflicted on those who challenge oppressive norms. This theme also foregrounds the emotional violence embedded within ostensibly religious practices, revealing how the community uses fear to enforce conformity.

6. Family, Duty, and Emotional Conflict

The play explores the painful conflict between filial love and social duty. Banylal's father epitomizes the elder torn between affection for his son and fear of social disgrace. His emotional turmoil demonstrates how families become unwilling instruments of oppression under the pressure of communal expectations. The domestic scenes reveal the tragic intersection of personal relationships and social coercion, emphasizing that persecution affects not only individuals but entire households. Through these tensions, Banerjee underscores the cost of blind social obedience.

7. Reform, Rationalism, and the Hope for Change

Though the play depicts intense social hostility, it also contains a reformist undercurrent. Supportive figures—often representing the Western-educated middle class—express hope for a more rational, humane society. Banylal's steadfastness becomes symbolic of the emerging reformist consciousness that would eventually reshape Bengali society. Banerjee's

emphasis on reason, dialogue, and ethical freedom aligns the play with the broader intellectual goals of the Bengal Renaissance. The theme of reform suggests that while individuals may suffer in the short term, their ideological resistance plants the seeds for long-term social transformation.

8. Hypocrisy of Religious and Social Institutions

The play portrays the caste council and orthodox leaders as protecting their power under the guise of religious purity. Their actions reveal hypocrisy, intolerance, and manipulation, as personal pride and fear of losing authority masquerade as devotion to tradition. Banerjee lays bare the contradictions within institutional orthodoxy: rituals become weapons; purity becomes a pretext for social control; and religion becomes detached from morality. This theme exposes the gap between genuine spirituality and the oppressive practices enacted in its name.

9. The Cost of Intellectual Freedom

A subtle but powerful theme is the personal price paid by those who choose truth over conformity. Banylal's suffering represents the experience of many early reformers who faced hostility for embracing modern ideas. The play thus functions as a commentary on the loneliness of pioneers—those who stand ahead of their time and must bear society's resentment. Banerjee suggests that intellectual freedom is not granted but earned through courage, sacrifice, and moral resilience.

10. Colonial Encounter and Cultural Anxiety

Although the play does not directly critique colonial rule, it examines how English education—introduced under colonial influence—becomes both a catalyst for enlightenment and a source of cultural anxiety. The orthodox community perceives Enlightenment ideals as threats to traditional identity, while the reformist youths see them as pathways to reason and progress. This ambivalence reflects the broader social tensions of colonial Bengal, where cultural transformation occurred through uneven and contested exchanges.

The themes of *The Persecuted* collectively capture a society in transition, where old certainties collapse under the weight of new ideas. Banerjee uses the personal suffering of Banylal to illuminate profound questions about freedom, morality, social justice, and the future of Indian society. By intertwining social critique with emotional drama, the play

becomes not only a work of literature but also a historical document of Bengal's intellectual awakening.

14.8. CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF THE PLAY

As one of the earliest Indian English plays, it is both a literary text and a socio-cultural document that captures the turbulent intellectual climate of 19th-century Bengal. Through the persecution of Banylal—a young man caught between traditional orthodoxy and a rising culture of rationalism—the play dramatizes Bengal's transition from a closed, ritualistic society to one grappling with the forces of modernity, reform, and colonial influence. The play's significance lies not only in its historical position but also in its bold thematic range, psychological depth, and its attempt to use drama as a medium for social critique.

A Pioneering Work in Indian English Drama

As a dramatic text written in English during the early phase of the Bengal Renaissance, *The Persecuted* is a pioneering example of how Indian writers adopted Western literary forms to critique indigenous social structures. Banerjee employs the five-act structure popular in European drama, yet the content remains deeply rooted in Indian social reality. This fusion of Western form and Indian material reflects the evolving literary consciousness of the Young Bengal generation—educated in English, yet acutely aware of their own society's oppressive practices. In this sense, Banerjee's play anticipates the later trajectory of Indian English literature, where the colonial language becomes a tool for self-reflection and social transformation.

Social Realism and the Critique of Orthodoxy

At its core, *The Persecuted* is a work of social realism. Banerjee's portrayal of caste councils, ritualistic rigidity, and the moral policing of individuals reflects the actual experiences of many Western-educated Bengali youths during the 1830s and 1840s. The play exposes the brutality of caste orthodoxy with unflinching clarity. The proceedings against Banylal—based on minor deviations from custom—reveal the irrationality and coercive power of the caste system. Banerjee's critique is not subtle; rather, it is a deliberate, reformist indictment of the hypocrisy of social institutions that punish individual thought while masquerading as protectors of tradition.

The excommunication scene in particular is a powerful portrayal of how collective authority overwhelms individual conscience. Banerjee's stark dramatization of ostracism

sheds light on the violence embedded in ritual practices, a critique that aligns him with contemporary reformers like Rammohun Roy and the Bengal Renaissance's spirit of rational inquiry.

Psychological Depth and the Tragedy of the Individual

While the play is overtly reformist, it is equally an exploration of the psychological consequences of social persecution. Banylal's inner turmoil, his father's emotional suffering, and the silent agony of the household provide the play with dramatic and emotional weight. Banerjee skilfully reveals the internal conflicts experienced by individuals caught between familial love and societal expectations. Banylal emerges as a tragic hero—not in the classical sense of a noble figure undone by fate, but as a modern protagonist destroyed by an intolerant society.

The emotional complexity of Banylal's father is another highlight. His struggle to choose between paternal affection and adherence to caste norms captures the generational anxieties of the period. Through such nuanced portrayals, Banerjee shows that social oppression does not merely victimize the rebel; it corrodes the emotional fabric of the entire family.

Representation of the Young Bengal Movement

The play serves as a dramatized reflection of the ideological aspirations and dilemmas of the Young Bengal movement. The English-educated characters in the play embody the liberal values—free thought, rationality, and skepticism toward superstition—promoted by Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and his circle. At the same time, Banerjee does not portray the modern youth as flawless heroes; they are thoughtful, conflicted individuals negotiating their identity within a rapidly changing social order. This balanced representation allows the play to serve as both an endorsement of reform and a testimony to the difficulties inherent in challenging the established norms of society.

Engagement with Colonial Modernity

One of the subtle yet important aspects of *The Persecuted* is its engagement with colonial modernity. While Banerjee does not directly critique British rule, the play captures the profound cultural anxieties generated by English education. To the orthodox community, Western learning represents a threat that destabilizes centuries-old norms. To the younger generation, it opens paths to reason, self-expression, and moral autonomy.

Through this tension, Banerjee implicitly critiques both blind adherence to tradition and uncritical imitation of the West. Instead, he advocates a middle path where reason and ethical reflection guide social progress. The play thus mirrors the broader intellectual discourse of 19th-century Bengal, where thinkers grappled with the question of how to modernize without losing cultural identity.

Dramatic Structure and Dialogue

The five-act structure follows classical dramatic progression, moving from exposition to climax and resolution. What distinguishes the play, however, is its use of dialogue as a tool for debate. Much like a social pamphlet translated into dramatic form, the conversations between characters embody arguments about religion, reform, caste, and modernity. Though some critics argue that this didacticism limits the play's dramatic vigor, it is precisely this argumentative quality that makes the text historically and intellectually compelling. Banerjee uses the stage as a public forum—a space where conservative and reformist ideologies collide.

Relevance and Legacy

Despite being written over 180 years ago, *The Persecuted* continues to resonate due to its exploration of themes that remain relevant: caste discrimination, social ostracism, the struggle for intellectual freedom, and the psychological costs of resisting oppressive systems. It also stands as an important precursor to later works that challenge social injustices in Indian society.

As one of the earliest Indian English dramas, the play paved the way for future Indian dramatists, demonstrating how the medium of theatre could be used not only for entertainment but also for reflection, critique, and social awakening. Its legacy lies in its courage to confront societal evils at a time when challenging orthodoxy invited severe consequences—even for writers themselves.

14.9. CONCLUSION

In this unit, you have examined Krishna Mohan Banerjee's *The Persecuted* as a significant early work of Indian English drama and a crucial literary document of 19th-century Bengal. You explored the historical and intellectual background of the period, including the Bengal Renaissance, the emergence of the Young Bengal movement, and the intense social anxieties triggered by Western education and modern thought. Through the act-wise summary, you

traced how the play dramatizes the psychological, familial, and social tensions experienced by individuals who dared to challenge orthodox structures.

You have also studied the central themes of the play—caste oppression, the conflict between tradition and modernity, social surveillance, generational tensions, and the moral cost of intellectual freedom. The character of Banylal stands at the heart of the narrative, symbolizing the struggles of a new class of English-educated Indians who attempted to think independently in a society resistant to reform. The critical appreciation further helped you understand how Banerjee uses drama not merely as entertainment but as a powerful medium for social critique and public debate. His use of Western dramatic form to question indigenous social structures reveals the transformative literary cultures of the time.

By engaging with this unit, you have gained a deeper awareness of how early Indian English writers responded to the complexities of colonial modernity, how literature became a site of ideological contestation, and how the personal could become political in the struggle against oppressive social systems. Ultimately, *The Persecuted* stands as both a historical testament and a timeless commentary on the human cost of adherence to unjust norms. This unit enables you to appreciate the play not only as a pioneering literary text but also as a narrative of resistance, reform, and the enduring quest for intellectual autonomy.

14.10. SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss *The Persecuted* as an early example of Indian English drama. How does the play reflect the literary and social concerns of nineteenth-century Bengal?

2. Examine the historical and intellectual background of the play with reference to the Bengal Renaissance and the Young Bengal movement.

3. Analyse the theme of caste oppression in *The Persecuted*. How does Banerjee expose the rigidity and cruelty of orthodox Hindu society?

4. Discuss the conflict between tradition and modernity in the play. How does Western education challenge established social norms?

5. Examine the character of Banylal as a representative of the new English-educated Indian middle class. What psychological and social conflicts does he embody?

6. Analyse the role of family and community in enforcing social conformity and surveillance in the play.

7. Discuss the theme of social persecution. In what ways does the play show how society punishes intellectual independence and reformist thinking?

8. Critically comment on the generational conflict portrayed in the play. How do older and younger generations differ in their values and beliefs?

9. Examine Banerjee's use of Western dramatic form to critique indigenous social practices. How effective is drama as a medium for social reform in the play?

10. Provide a critical appreciation of *The Persecuted*, commenting on its themes, characterization, social relevance, and historical significance.

14.11. SUGGESTED READING

1. Banerjee, Krishna Mohan. *The Persecuted* (original text / reprints in anthologies of Indian English drama).

2. Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*.

3. Naik, M. K. *A History of Indian English Literature*.

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7. Dasgupta, Swapan. *The Bengal Renaissance: Identity and Creativity from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore*.

8. Sen, Sudipta Kaviraj. *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse*.

9. Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments*.

10. Sisir Kumar Das (ed.). *A History of Indian Literature, 1800–1910*.

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