COURSE CODE: MAEGD 404

COURSE NAME: INDIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH II

# CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND ONLINE EDUCATION
## TEZPUR UNIVERSITY

# MASTER OF ARTS

## ENGLISH

## BLOCK II


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# BLOCK II

**MODULE II: POETRY AFTER EZEKIEL**

**EUNICE DE SOUZA: "CATHOLIC MOTHER", "DE SOUZA PRABHU", "EUNICE", "FEEING THE POOR AT CHRISTMAS"**

**ARUN KOLATKAR: *JEJURI***

**AGA SHAHID ALI: "POSTCARD FROM KASHMIR", "SNOWMEN", "CRACKED PORTRAITS"**

**UNIT 3: LOCAL LIFE AND CONTEXTS IN THE POETRY OF EUNICE DE SOUZA, ARUN KOLATKAR, AND AGA SHAHID ALI**

**UNIT 4: PLACE OF WOMEN IN DE SOUZA'S POEMS**

**UNIT 5: EXPERIMENTALISM IN KOLATKAR**

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**MODULE III: THE POSTCOLONIAL INDIAN ENGLISH NOVEL**

**SALMAN RUSHDIE: *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN***

**ARUNDHATI ROY: *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS***

**UNIT 7: GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHORS AND THE TEXTS**

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# MODULE II: POETRY AFTER EZEKIEL

## *UNIT 3: LOCAL LIFE AND CONTEXTS IN THE POETRY OF EUNICE DE SOUZA, ARUN KOLATKAR AND AGHA SHAHID ALI*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *3.0 INTRODUCTION*

Have you read any poem by Eunice de Souza? Professionally, the Head of the Department of English in St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, de Souza is acknowledged as one of the best Indian poets writing in English. She was born in Pune in 1940 to Roman Catholic parents of Goan origin. At the age of thirty, she started writing poetry, and her first relevant publication appeared in the literary journal, 'Quest'. Her verse is a modified version of her reflections on her Goan background and draws on the locale and culture of her Goan heritage.

## *3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- appreciate Eunice de Souza's poetry as a bold feminist voice that cuts across the rigid contours of the prevalent patriarchal setup.
- read these poems as a distinctive, clear documentation of a woman writer recording the angst of another.
- relate the texts with other poems by de Souza, thereby observing the discrimination faced by the speaker/ poet persona as a woman. However, one

could also make out that the discrimination is made not particularly on the basis of gender but also on grounds of community and society.

- interpret 'silence' as a powerful expression, and not just a passive submission to a given situation.
- read the ironical tone adopted by de Souza in most of her poems.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

• While reading Eunice de Souza's poetry, one is almost stricken by the absence of metaphors and imagery in her idiom. It necessitates urgency in presenting her milieu without any delay or postponement.

• Her poems are totally devoid of any conventional device which indicate mood or define emotion.

•They rely mainly on sound, rhythm of lines, on tone and the natural stress or accent created by the placement of words and phrases in her poetry.

• Her style of poetry can be called 'Imagist' in her adoption of a compact framework that encompasses profound meanings. Like the poetry of the Imagists which believed in the motto 'less is more', de Souza's poetry often indulges in a multiple issues colouring her times, but all done in a precise, and deliberately brief frame.

## Catholic Mother

### Text of the Poem:

Father X. D'Souza
Father of the year.
Here he is top left
the one smiling.
By the Grace of God he says
we've had seven children
(in seven years).

We're One Big Happy Family
God Always Provides
India will Suffer for
her Wicked Ways
(these Hindu buggers got no ethics)

Pillar of the Church
says the parish priest
Lovely Catholic Family
says Mother Superior

the pillar's wife
says nothing.

## Explanation of the Poem:

Eunice de Souza's poem, 'Catholic Mother', is an enquiry into the religious submissiveness of a community and the justification that the Catholic faith provides for the well-being and enhancement of the family. The poem, a satire on such faith, carries in it the deep-rooted, unquestioned, dogmatic view that anything and everything could be affiliated to religion and, thereby, do not require any proper explanation.

"By the Grace of God he says
we've had seven children
(in seven years)."

These lines clearly delineate the shift of responsibility of the patriarch, Francis X D' Souza, to the faith he blindly believes in. In these two short lines, the woman's voice, the one who gives birth to seven children at short intervals, is muted, and her existence is almost nullified.

**"God always provides"** is an expression that reflects the fatalistic attitude of the Indians towards faith, and how it takes roots into the psyche of the believers, and obdurate commonsense and logic. The bitterness clearly evident in the criticism

of other faiths and the perpetual strain of patriarchal structure that colours the narrative reduces the issue of motherhood in the poem.

**("These Hindu buggers got no ethics"):** This bracketed expression is evocative of a subtle communal tension that prevails among Indians. Eventually, it is the focus on faith that weighs down the issue of motherhood completely. The rhetoric of faith undermines the existence of the mother who is, nevertheless, there in the background- silent and silenced.

…the pillar's wife

says nothing.

The mother is not considered an individual at all. The patriarch earns the credit for the well-being of the family – strong-willed, 'pillar'-like, the father stands erect for the cause of the Church and his family. What others see is the 'Lovely Catholic Family', and what gets lost in the oblivion is the begetter of the family, 'the pillar's wife', who stands mute behind the 'pillar'.

**Glossary:**

**Buggers:** (slang) something unpleasant or difficult.

**Ethics:** moral principles.

**Parish:** an area with its own church and clergyman.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**I. Say 'True' or 'False':**

a. Eunice de Souza's poetry is descriptive and explanatory in nature.

b. Her poetry is a satirical comment on the repressive nature of her community, especially on women.

c. Eunice de Souza attempts at being a moral commentator of her society.

d. 'Catholic Mother' brings out the mental conditioning of a woman who is made into a passive recipient of the dictates made by her male counterpart.

**II. Choose the correct answer:**

a. One of Eunice de Souza's contemporaries was

i. Toru Dutt

ii. Melanie Silgardo

iii. Sarojini Naidu

iv. Adil Jussawala

b. The tone usually adopted by de Souza in her poems is

i. satirical

ii. comic

iii. serious

iv. tragic

c. In her adoption of a compact framework, de Souza's poetry can be likened to that of the

i. Imagists

ii. Symbolists

iii. Decadents

iv. Realists

III. Name some of the best known works of Eunice de Souza.

## De Souza Prabhu

### Text of the Poem:

No, I'm not going to
delve deep down and discover
I'm really Souza Prabhu
even if Prabhu was no fool
and got the best of both worlds.
(Catholic Brahmin!
I can hear his fat chuckle still.)

No matter that
my name is Greek
my surname Portuguese
my language alien.

There are ways
of belonging.

I belong with the lame ducks.

I heard it said
my parents wanted a boy.
I've done my best to qualify.
I hid the bloodstains
on my clothes
and let my breasts sag.
Words the weapon
to crucify.

**Explanation of the poem:** This poem is autobiographical and like most of her poems, it has a sarcastic overtone. This poem is an exploration of one's 'ways of belonging'. Having identities more than one, it has facilitated an area of interrogation that negotiates whether any of these identities offers the speaker a comfortable and advantageous position. Finally, the speaker finds solace in verse and lets this world of words become her haven or identity.

No, I'm not going to
delve deep down and discover
I'm really Souza Prabhu
even if Prabhu was no fool
and got the best of both worlds.
(Catholic Brahmin!
I can hear his fat chuckle still.)

This stanza reflects the reluctance of the speaker to associate herself with her lineage. She refuses to go into the details of her family history and the nitty-gritty of its conversion from one community to another. That she satirises this very idea of community and the hybrid identity she bears on herself itself marks her estrangement from her tangled roots. She visualises her ancestor smiling at her utter confusion arising out of a state of myriad identities.

No matter that
my name is Greek
my surname Portuguese
my language alien.

There are ways
of belonging.

I belong with the lame ducks.

The speaker negotiates alternative ways of rootedness – she tries to explore a complacent zone which she could call her own. It hardly matters to her what her name signifies as long as it cannot provide her with a sense of belonging. Even

her language that has been conferred upon her by her surroundings seems to deceive her, because probably it does not appropriate her line of thought. She probably wanders in her own realm of domesticity that allows her to be herself, unthreatened and unperturbed.

I heard it said
my parents wanted a boy.
I've done my best to qualify.
I hid the bloodstains
on my clothes
and let my breasts sag.
Words the weapon
to crucify.

This final stanza marks the pressure that the speaker has gone through in hiding her gender traits from her parents. These lines indicate that the speaker found it rather taxing on her to accept her gender as a woman, being made to feel unwanted by her own parents. The craze for a male child in an Indian family is stereotypically common here. Sometimes, a careless, indiscreet, nondescript conversation between parents of desiring a boy could have a poignant effect on the mind of the girl child. And hence her attempts at hiding the signs of girlhood! She says she had done her best 'to qualify'. This line delineates a latent tendency to regard the 'male' as a standard or a norm to which everybody aspires. But the last two lines emerge as a powerful counter to the dilemma that the speaker has suffered so far. She realises that words, and only words, could offer her with the solace and deliverance she so ardently desires. Like a weapon she equips herself with words that could console and disseminate her repressed thoughts and identity, not as a girl, not as a Catholic Brahmin, but as an individual, having her own mind, and her own identity.

## Glossary:

**Delve:** search deeply.

**Chuckle:** a quiet laugh.

**Sag:** droop or curve down in the middle.

**Crucify:** put to death by nailing or binding to a transverse bar; cause extreme pain to.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**I. Choose the correct answer:**

a. The above poem is an exploration of one's ways of

i. belonging

ii. livelihood

iii. communication

iv. expression

b. The speaker realises the existing discrimination exercised on the basis of her

i. gender

ii. skin colour

iii. language

iv. province

c. The speaker decides to take up….as her weapon

i. words

ii. arms

iii. emotions

iv. tears

## Feeding the Poor at Christmas

### Text of the Poem

Every Christmas we feed the poor.
We arrive an hour late: Poor dears,
like children waiting for a treat.
Bring your plates. Don't move.
Don't try turning up for more.
No. Even if you don't drink
you can't take your share
for your husband. Say thank you
and a rosary for us every evening.
No. Not a towel and a shirt,
even if they're old.
What's that you said?
You're a good man, Robert, yes,
beggars can't be, exactly.

**Explanation of the Poem:** This poem can be read as a brief piece of irony that ridicules the snobbery and hypocrisy of the so-called patrons of the poor during Christmas. It lays bare the un-Christian mentality of the feeders towards those who are hungry and poor. It becomes just a matter of perfunctory duty rather than a moral obligation of the patrons to feed the poor during Christmas.

Every Christmas we feed the poor.

We arrive an hour late:

These opening lines project the casual attitude of the patrons towards the poor. They are the so-called patrons of the hungry and the needy, and they can take the liberty to arrive late at the site of charity, oblivious of the hunger of the poor.

Poor dears,

like children waiting for a treat.

The patrons' sympathy towards the poor appears only as a sham. They look down upon the hungry with no real sympathy, but a counterfeit pity. They are likened to children who rejoice at the very sight of a treat. But the patrons fail to realise that while a treat for children is a luxury, for the poor, this food that they provide becomes an ultimate necessity.

Bring your plates. Don't move.

Don't try turning up for more.

These lines highlight the coercive treatment of the patrons to maintain discipline among the feeders. One should not measure one's charity at any cost. But here, whatever the feeders are providing in the name of charity is being measured out to the poor. Charity, as a virtue, should stand beyond any limit or measurement. But one sees a completely different picture as the feeders forbid the poor to ask for more, even if their hunger remains insatiate.

No. Even if you don't drink

You can't take your share

for your husband.

These lines reflect the unsympathetic attitude of the patrons towards those who are unable to present themselves on the occasion. They make it very clear that those present at the occasion cannot take home anything from their share. There is every possibility that a poor woman might have an ailing and invalid husband back at home who cannot be present for the Christmas charity, but the patrons would never allow her to take even her share of food to him.

Say thank you

and a rosary for us every evening.

True charity does not expect recognition from those to whom it was shown. But here, the patrons demand a 'thank you' from the feeders, along with an expectation to remember them during their evening prayers. Grace, gratitude and blessings cannot be demanded and the patrons fail to comprehend this simple thing. They show charity only in expectation to receive something from the poor.

No. Not a towel and a shirt,

Even if they're old.

The patrons are willing to give away either a towel or a shirt, but not both. They are rather calculative when it comes to sharing some necessary things with the poor. They are indifferent to the genuine needs of the poor and are rigid even if they are old and suffering.

What's that you said?

You're a good man, Robert, yes,

Beggars can't be, exactly.

The concluding lines lay bare the stereotypical concept of the patrons regarding the beggars. It is already ingrained in their minds that beggars cannot be good people. Whatever they do for the poor and the hungry is only an outward show. There is no real feeling for them, as it is quite obvious that the patrons detest them and look down on them with dread. Thus, the concluding lines carry an implicit question for the reader that how could anyone foster a feeling of charity towards somebody they detest? Is this really charity that the patrons show towards the poor?

**Glossary:**

**Turning up:** show up.

**Rosary:** beads counted during worship to God.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Choose the correct answer:**

a. This poem reflects the….of the society in the name of charity.

i. hypocrisy.

ii. benevolence.

iii. patronage.

iv. love.

b. That they can arrive late to the charity site shows the….of the feeders towards the poor.

i. cold indifference.

ii. utter busyness.

iii. genuine love and concern.

iv. helplessness.

c. 'Rosary' in the context of the poem means

i. the expected blessings ushered on the feeders.

ii. prayer to God as a daily ritual.

iii. blessings for the poor.

iv. blessings for the common good of the society.

## *3.4 LOCAL LIFE AND CONTEXT IN DE SOUZA'S POETRY*

Eunice De Souza's poems mark a reality in poetry for Goa beyond its oft-celebrated sea-shores and carnivals. There are constant references to the poet's nostalgic sketches figuring the summer vacations of her youth in Goa; parts of history, culture and the contemporary times of Goa are recreated within the compact framework of her poems, which de Souza's imagination fills with people, landscape and Goan customs. Two threads of memory run through her poetry- a wistful nostalgia for a lost childhood spent in Goa during vacations among the sound of churchbells, the lushness of landscape and the abodes of her ancestors;

the other thread winds the memories of Roman Catholic Goan life with its repressions, prejudice, ignorance, social injustice and the subordinate position of women. Often the anger and bitterness remain unexpressed; rather, they are given vent through scenes, conversations and description that seem more immediate and ordinary.

The poem "Feeding the Poor at Christmas", as explained above, is a sardonic commentary on the hypocrisy of the privileged section of the Goanese Christian community where, on the eve of Christmas, the rich feeds the poor as a gesture of charity. But as seen in the poem, they are keen on feeding their own ego at the cost of the poor people. The speaker adopts a sarcastic tone in exposing the dubiousness of a community exercise in the name of something as noble as charity. She shows layers of sham and selfishness in an apparently benevolent act performed during Christmas.

Similarly, De Souza's exploration of the peculiarly 'English' elite community comes to the fore in the poem 'Sweet Sixteen'. She criticizes the church atmosphere; the church space is peopled with nuns and preachers, who forbid young girls to mention periods and insist them on using words like 'bracelets' for 'brassieres'. The acquired English taste, however, could not kill the curiosity of a sixteen-year-old Phoebe who doubts that one could get 'preggers' (pregnant) while dancing at a ball with a boy. The canvas of the poem is clustered by very Christian images that hold the flavour and tone of Goanese life.

De Souza's poetry captures an old-world charm of Churches, priests and church fathers. In 'Miss Louise', the aging Miss Louise contemplates on her youth when she was attracted to a young father, Fr. Hans. But it is the same professors who wooed her in her youth but now judge her when she is no longer young.

In another poem 'Eunice', the speaker conjures up the convent-like picture where young girls are given embroidery lessons. There is also a critique of the norms specially designed to make women more 'ladylike'—a set of undocumented rules only for women to make them more desirable in the society which is actually a patriarchal setup. Her poetry is an effortless blend of realistic and satiric representation of the Goanese Christian community.

## *3.5 SUMMING UP*

This unit has discussed some of Eunice de Souza's poems as expressions of the poet's emphasis on gender and community. Her poetry is an exploration of the self as a part of the wide Goan community and the Christian setup in which she grew up as an individual. Her bold use of language and her dramatic openings are the most striking features that the reader comes across in her poetry.

## *3.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Bring out the significance of the mother in Eunice de Souza's poem 'Catholic Mother'.

2. Throw light on Eunice de Souza's use of metaphor in her poetry.

3. How does the poem explore the issue of hybridity regarding one's identity as highlighted in the second stanza of the poem?

4. Comment on Eunice de Souza's reflections on the very notion of charity as exposed in her poem, 'Feeding the Poor at Christmas'.

5. Highlight the backdrop of the Christmas spirit as a counter foil to the narrow mindedness of the feeders in the poem 'Feeding the Poor at Christmas'.

## *3.7 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENEDREADINGS*


Dharkar, Imtiaz. "English Poetry by Women from India and the Diaspora: Kamala Das- Eunice de Souza- Melanie Silgardo- Sujata Bhatt." *Poems at the Edge of Difference: Mothering in New English Poetry by Women. Ed.* Renate Papke. University of Goettingen, Goettingen, 2008.

Singh, Kanwar Dinesh. *Feminism and Post Feminism: The Context of Modern Indian Women Poets Writing in English.* New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2004.

Souza, Eunice de. ed. *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.


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## *UNIT 4: PLACE OF WOMEN IN DE SOUZA'S POEM*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *4.0 INTRODUCTION*

The Post-Independence era is a period when the nation itself was in its search for a new identity, an identity which was free of any imposition of the British. While the nation was striving to free herself from colonial projection; in social, religious and political sphere, literature of the period was also affected by this uprising. The writings of the contemporary Indian English woman poets are no more exceptions. While experience as a woman in a patriarchal society, tensions and frustration of a life imposed upon them, a woman's sensibilities issuing out of their predicament, the power of her voice in a male dominated society, their desire to get freedom all these are of general concern, some women, as poets, made rigorous attempts to map out new terrains for them and their poetry. A flow of new feminism characterised their poetry. One such Indian English woman poet is Eunice De Souza. De Souza's poetry dealt both with the conventional and new found situations of women in post-independence India.

## *4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

In the previous unit you have gone through the poems of Eunice De Souza. Reading of the poems got you acquainted with the major thematic concerns of De Souza. After reading this unit you will be able to know how the entity called 'woman' itself is a subject in her poems. This unit will also help you understand De Souza's portrayal of woman in relation to her male counterparts.

## *4.2 WOMEN IN EUNICE DE SOUZA'S POEMS*

Like her other two contemporaries, Kamala Das and Melanie Silgardo, Eunice de Souza's poetry deliberately strips away any form of self-protection, and creates a world of direct self-revelation and self-expression. The construction of poetry is also different from her male counterparts, since all three of them map a psychology of contradictions, as well as, self-assertions and triumph. In de Souza's poems, there is often a merging of the confessional and the social, so much so that the speaker in each piece becomes a mouthpiece of the community of her fellow beings. Hers is no poetry of heroics, nor does it beg for any sympathy. While it has no affiliation in politics, community, religion and idealism, it is decidedly feminist in its kind of awareness, female vision and concern for the subjects it deals with. She is a prolific writer and she has produced a consistent body of work, and her collection of verse includes *Fix* (1979), *Women in Dutch Painting* (1988) *Ways of Belonging* (1990) and *A Necklace of Skulls* (2009). The following poem picturesquely illustrates the stubborn endurance of a mother who has learnt only to give and receive nothing. The patriarch smiles contentedly at his family that has been seamlessly bound and caressed by the silent woman who stands in a corner and observes everything with tolerance.

In the poem, 'De Souza Prabhu', there is an exploration of one's belongingness or rootedness to an identity. The first stanza negotiates a hybrid identity conferred with two contradictory surnames 'Prabhu' and 'De Souza', one Brahmin, the other Catholic-

No, I'm not going to
delve deep down and discover
I'm really Souza Prabhu
even if Prabhu was no fool
and got the best of both worlds.
(Catholic Brahmin!
I can hear his fat chuckle still.)

The second stanza expresses toppled identities that get enmeshed and are extended from name, to surname and finally to language-

No matter that
my name is Greek
my surname Portuguese
my language alien.

And finally, the speaker finds herself identifying with the 'lame ducks' and the issue of belongingness finds voice in her gender-

I heard it said
my parents wanted a boy.
I've done my best to qualify.
I hid the bloodstains
on my clothes
and let my breasts sag.
Words the weapon
to crucify.

The speaker deliberately chooses to narrow down her focus from religion to gender to explore the place of woman. In her own sarcastic way, she concludes that when it is a woman in question, her community, her surname or her religion does not matter much. Because, eventually she is answerable to everybody for being a woman and that explains her dormant wrath when she chooses language as a weapon. Her desperate measures to 'qualify' as a boy to please her parents unsettle the reader and urge one to question the dialectics of gender.

In another poem, 'Catholic Mother', there is a representation of happy Catholic family whose head is the patriarch, Father X D Souza. He is the proud recipient of the award "Father of the Year". His photograph shows a 'happy' family consisting of seven children that were born in seven years. The Mother Superior comments on the contentment and prosperity of the family and the Father takes pride in the fact that he has been able to bind the family together according to his principles. However, in this happy and satisfactory scheme of things 'the pillar's wife' remains silent, posing a stark contrast to the happiness and self-satisfaction of the man who selfishly receives the credit for the well-being of his

family; while, the person behind the smooth running of the household remains silent and unnoticed in a corner of the house.

Another powerful poem by Eunice de Souza "Advice to Women" opens dramatically when the speaker advises women to keep cats to deal with the indifference of their lovers. The speaker seems well-versed in the cold neutrality of men and the indifferent treatment that they provide to their women. Therefore, according to the speaker, the green, perpetual gaze of the cats will teach the women to deal with the fact that their men are with some other partners. But like cats, they will not remain loyal even with them for a long time. Therefore, like cats that return to their 'litters', their men too shall return to them.

"Marriages are Made" is a satire on the whole business of marriage and how a girl is scrutinised as an object for any possible disease that might have been there in her family history. According to the speaker, these are normal 'formalities' that the prospective bride 'Elena' has to observe. In a sarcastic way, the speaker talks about the examination of her waist to ascertain her caste as a Brahmin. Her height, they say, is considerable and her weight will be taken care of once she delivers children. The people who are studying her appearance find her complexion compatible with the shade of her prospective groom, Francisco X. Noronha Prabhu. He has been described in one line as the 'good son of Mother Church'. The simple adjective "good son" raises a lot of question in the mind of the reader because it is not proportional to the long list of physical description that was made for the bride. The poem is a cutting commentary on the widely held belief that it is generally the girl who has to qualify in matters of appearance; whereas, for the boy, a lone adjective 'good' suffices every expectation.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Do you find portrayal of women in varying difference in the poems prescribed?

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## *4.3 SUMMING UP*

This unit gives us a clear picture of the canvas where Eunice de Souza draws her women characters. Her tone in her poems is not bitter; rather, it is a firm voice of determination and an unapologetic bluntness that reflects the women in her poems. Her poetry is a reflection of the societal expectations that are saddled on a woman. Sometimes, such expectations are fulfilled and sometimes they are refuted by women who are fearless to be counted as social deterrents. Her poetry sharply contrasts the traditional image of woman and the women who present themselves in her poems as individuals and not types. Her poems are a celebration

of the separate world inhibited by women and their different approaches family, society and life.

## *4.4 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. How does Eunice de Souza create a situation for women in post independence era

2. Critically examine De Souza's portrayal of women in her poems with special reference to the poems prescribed.

## *4.5 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


Dharkar, Imtiaz. "English Poetry by Women from India and the Diaspora: Kamala Das- Eunice de Souza- Melanie Silgardo- Sujata Bhatt." *Poems at the Edge of Difference: Mothering in New English Poetry by Women. Ed.* Renate Papke. University of Goettingen, Goettingen, 2008.

Singh, Kanwar Dinesh. *Feminism and Post Feminism: The Context of Modern Indian Women Poets Writing in English.* New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2004.

Souza, Eunice de. ed. *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.


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## *UNIT 5: EXPERIMENTALISM IN ARUN KOLATKAR*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *5.0 INTRODUCTION*

Arun Balkrishna Kolatkar was an Indian poet who wrote in both Marathi and English. He was able to make mark among the Indian writers writing in English by his very first collection of English poetry, *Jejuri* which also won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1977. The influences of European avant-garde trends like surrealism, expressionism and Beat generation poetry can be seen in his poems, specially those which were written in Marathi. These poems are oblique, whimsical and at the same time dark, sinister, and full of humour. Some of these characteristics can be seen in *Jejuri* and *Kala Ghoda* Poems in English, which were radically experimental. His poems found humor in many everyday matters. Though he was hesitant to bring out his English poems, his creations like *Jejuri* exerted profound influence on modern Indian poets and littérateurs like Nissim Ezekiel and Salman Rushdie

## *5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

In this unit, you will be introduced to Arun Kolatkar, a poet who is known for his minute observation. Reading his poems will enable you to:

• question the very existence of things ordinary.

• reread and revisit things and places that ‘seemed’ so obvious to you.

• question the very existence of God who occupies our mindset so largely.

• appreciate his style of narration as he tries to capture something as delicate and ephemeral as a butterfly.

• question the very act of ‘seeing the same things from different perspectives.’

## *5.2 ARUN KOLATKAR: LIFE AND WORKS*

Born in Kolhapur in 1932, Arun Balkrishna Kolatkar received his early education at Rajaram High School Branch in Kolhapur. He later studied in Bombay at the J.J. School of Art, and also attended art schools in Kolhapur and Pune. He finally received his Diploma in Painting from the J.J. School of Art in 1957. Although most of his poems have appeared in magazines and anthologies since 1955, Kolatkar has only two books to his credit: one, *Jejuri* (1976) in English, and the other, *Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita* (1976) in Marathi.

Being a student of painting, Kolatkar has developed a trait peculiar to his poetry, that is, an eye for detail. The work that has been prescribed, *Jejuri*, is actually a compilation of thirty-one poems, drawn against the backdrop of a temple town (Jejuri) in Western Maharashtra, near Pune. This temple has also found its illustration on the cover page of his book. Because the temple belongs to Khandoba, a particular manifestation of Siva, many would believe that these poems are expressions of the poet’s religious inclination and belief. But as one reads these poems, one would begin to question the very basics of belief and myths. *Jejuri* revolves around things ordinary; there is nothing special or significant that marks it as a unique temple site. However, it is in this very ordinariness that Kolatkar finds the extra- ordinary, the unusual, the ‘God’. The very notion of the obvious is defied in these poems, so much so that, the deity in Jejuri becomes a cultural product of the people’s imagination and faith. The very act of ‘seeing’ finds a different meaning in these poetic pieces, and what was seen as the obvious and the mundane is given special attention. Things in Jejuri remain things no more; they pulsate with life as if, each stone in Jejuri contains the presiding deity, Khandoba.

## *5.3 READING THE POEMS OF KOLATKAR*

### The Bus

### Text of the Poem:

The tarpaulin flaps are buttoned down
on the windows of the state transport bus.
all the way up to jejuri.

**Explanation:** In this poem, the speaker narrates the way to Jejuri, a journey undertaken by bus. The wind becomes harsh as the bus gathers speed and thus, the tarpaulin sheets are buttoned down on the bus windows. The beginning of the poem shows Kolatkar's keen observation when he writes

A cold wind keeps whipping
and slapping a corner of the tarpaulin
at your elbow.

This means, a passenger generally places his elbow at the edge of the bus window and this is where the wind touches him as the vehicle gathers speed. The afternoon light that finds its way through a narrow vent is artfully described by the poet,

You search for signs of daybreak in

What little light spills out of the bus.

The word 'spill' goes to mean something liquid; here, the melting of light during the afternoon is described through this verb.

As the bus moves ahead, what catches the attention of the speaker is his own split reflection reflected on an old man's glasses. The rural naivety is what you see in this old man's face and in the reflection of his glasses that hang on loyally to his nose. The movement of the bus, and the straight road ahead get reflected in his glasses, 'beyond the caste mark between his eyebrows'. The 'caste mark' becomes a metaphor for the desired destination of the speaker that carries him forward to Jejuri. The gaze of the sun gets a special mention in these lines

Outside, the sun has risen quietly.

It aims through an eyelet in the tarpaulin

and shoots at the old man's glasses.

This is where the binary between the subject and the object is defied. The old man, his glasses, his caste mark and his destination – all come under the surveillance of the sun. it follows the bus to its destination. The bus changes direction as some sunlight ('a sawed off sunbeam') falls on the right temple of the driver. And as the speaker gets down from the bus, he sees the divided reflection for the last time. However, the old man sits oblivious of being read all this while

…when you get off the bus

you don't step inside his head.

This leaves one with a lingering question, what is it that pervades the temple town of Jejuri? The myth of Khandoba and the myth of the place have seeped down to the consciousness of the people. The glasses of the old man cover his austerity and indifference to local sights; perhaps, he's grown up 'seeing' these places and therefore, this journey is not new to him. But for the speaker the journey itself is a quest. He is open to everything that comes across him. The sun, the glasses, the caste mark do not remain as mere things to him; they are attributed with a dramatic animation that carries meanings larger than life and very different from the ordinary. They move beyond from being mere things and go on to preserve the essence of Jejuri as the speaker witnesses in his journey.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What does the Bus stand for in the poem?

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2. How does the speaker perceive his journey to Jejuri?

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## The Doorstep

### Text of the Poem:

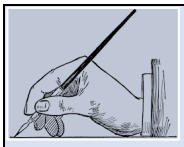
That's no doorstep.

It's a pillar on its side.

Yes.

That's what it is.

**Explanation of the poem:** One would seldom call it a poem. A poem in four short lines, in all end-stopped lines. However, the poem leaves us with a question, how many of us have really gone so near the step to observe that it is not a doorstep, rather a pillar fallen on its side? A poem in four lines perhaps had taken more than just a first glance for the speaker to observe it and come to this conclusion. *Jejuri*, being a collage of different, sometimes incoherent thematic poetic pieces, includes this poem to highlight the poet's mastery over the act of keen observation. The former poem detailed the bus journey but that is not the end of what detailing means. In fact, the poet has just begun exercising his skill of observation which is not common to most of us.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. How do you find this poem a different one?

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## An Old Woman

**About the poem:** This poem questions the authenticity of belief and sanctity that revolve around the temple in Jejuri. It has in its heart a beggar woman who stretches her hands out to the speaker in the hope of a fifty paise coin. That the place is devoid of any religiosity is what the speaker emphasises when he observes

that the beggar woman coaxing the visitor to take him to the 'horseshoe' temple in exchange of money, which he has already seen. The following lines show her desperate attempt at getting alms from the speaker:

*An old woman grabs*
*hold of your sleeve*
*and tags along. .*
She wants a fifty *paise coin.*
*She says she will take you*
*to the horseshoe shrine.*
You've seen it already.
She hobbles along anyway
and tightens her grip on your shirt
She won't let you go.
You know how old women are.
They stick to you like a burr.

There is not much reverence in her voice when she curses the 'wretched hills' that have nothing much to offer – neither hope nor material benefit. She seems to delineate what the speaker already knows:

You turn around and face her

with an air of finality

You want to end the farce.

The 'farce' referred to here is not just the woman hobbling after the speaker for alms, but something beyond that and more serious. It is the farce of a belief that looms large in the whole region. The farce of the idea of well-being and fulfillment of wishes as one approaches that holy city. The whole idea of sanctity and well-being under the benevolence of Khandoba falls on its face with the image of the beggarly woman begging for alms- her poverty is an irony of the myth of satisfaction and mental peace after arriving at that temple.

The ‘bullet shot of her eyes’ has so much to offer to the visitor – a pair of new eyes to see beyond the obvious. The ruin of her face, that time has taken toll over her constitution, is reflective of the cracks that have appeared in the temple. The onomatopoeic significance of these lines has much to show the plight and poverty of the old woman,

And the sky falls

with a plateglass clatter

around the shatter proof crone

who stands alone.

The loneliness of the ‘crone’ is brought out beautifully when the speaker realises that she has born the burden of her life as if the whole sky had broken and come crashing down on her. She is ‘shatter-proof’ because time has not yet ravaged her existence completely; she has yet to bear some more of this burden of life. The begging bowl that she carries probably made of alloy, clatters each time a coin is dropped into it.

And you are reduced

to so much small change

in her hand.

The concluding lines come down heavily as a bitter irony that poses itself before the speaker. Similar to the old man in the poem ‘The Bus’ who does not accommodate the speaker in his ‘head’, this old woman, too, does not see anything in the speaker beyond her own purpose of extracting some change from him. Her purpose is served and his existence is faded – that is all. In this whole trade of begging and visiting the temple of Khandoba, the deity is lost somewhere. Whether the speaker’s purpose is served, whether he gains whatever he had been expecting from this visit, whether he finds his ‘God’ there – are questions that are left for the reader to ponder over. The reader cannot receive these questions with a passive mind and therefore, the poet’s purpose is served as he sets the reader’s mind to ratiocinate these issues.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the farce that is mentioned in the poem?

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2. Explain the image of ‘crone’ in the poem?

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## Manohar

**About the poem:** Here comes another poem that is in the line with the previous one. The dividing line between what is sacred and what is profane, and the blurring of this thin line is brought out beautifully in this poem. The first lines of the poem suspend curiosity, as one getting deeper and deeper into the unknown:

### Text of the poem:

The door was open.

Manohar thought

it was one more temple.

The person here, Manohar, is in a mire of structures that are not much different from one another. He is anxious to know which God he would find in the structure he had recently entered. But when the wide-eyed calf looked back at him, he realised that he had entered a cowshed.

He looked inside.

Wondering

which god he was going to find.

He quickly turned away

when a wide eyed calf

looked back at him.

It isn't another temple,

he said,

it's just a cowshed.

The structure baffled him into believing the cowshed as a temple, and the occupant of the cowshed was a calf. So much for the disappointment of a devotee! But if we adopt an alternative approach to these lines, we might also say that the presiding deity was the calf there, no less important than Khandoba himself. The

calf 'looks back' at Manohar as he turns away, and this act of 'looking back' holds the key to this dilemma. It is the profane that has been elevated to the status of the sacred, but much to the disappointment of the visitor. If 'An Old woman' was a farce of the very notion of belief and what is called sacrosanct, 'Manohar' is no less than that. The calf is ordinary and Manohar is in no mind to seek the ordinary. He desires to see God, the unusual, the extra-ordinary. The speaker lends the poem his own eyes to 'see' the ordinary but from a very different, a not-so-usual, stance.

## Chaitanya I

### Text of the Poem:

come off it
said chaitanya to a stone
in stone language
wipe the red paint off your face
i don't think the colour suits you
i mean what's wrong
with being just a plain stone
i'll still bring you flowers
you like the flowers of zendu
don't you
i like them too

**Explanation of the poem:** One interesting thing about the poem is that it opens in the middle, that is, it does not open with a capital letter in the opening line. It is as though the reader had caught the Chaitanya, a Vaishnavite Bengali priest and reformer (believed to have visited Jejuri in 1510-11 in the middle of a conversation. There is another poem bearing the same title, and it comes later in the sequence. This poem opens thus:

come off it
said Chaitanya to a stone
in stone language

Here, Chaitanya is found addressing a stone. Similar to what we found in 'Manohar', this poem too defies the binary between the sacred and the profane. He wishes the red paint, believed to be sacred by the common people, to come off the surface of the stone which is worshipped as a God. The vermillion smeared stone acquires a status of the sacrosanct when Chaitanya offers to bring it an oblation of flowers:

i'll bring still bring you flowers

you like the flowers of zendu

don't you

i like them too

These lines are reflective of a very interesting twist that is added to the poem by the poet. Kolatkar uses certain devices to show how Chaitanya has reduced himself before the great deity – by using a small 'i' instead of 'I'. However, in the very next line the divine and the humane come to the same level when Chaitanya insists the deity to accept flowers of his taste, and the deity's choice is not considered at all. That he will 'still' bring the stone God flowers is a clear indicator that man operates his/her own wishes on what is believed to be the divine. Whether it is the whim of God on man, or whether it is man who creates his own God is something that this poem tries to negotiate. That God becomes a cultural construct in the collective consciousness of man. This is what this poem seeks to delineate.

## Chaitanya II

### Text of the poem:

'Sweet as grapes

Are the stones of Jejuri',

He popped a stone

in his mouth

and spat out gods.

**Explanation of the poem:** What we found in the previous poem was an oscillation between belief and disbelief, between what is divine and what is humane. This second part of 'Chaitanya' continues that trend but in a coarser manner. The Vaishnavite priest is found preaching to everybody that even the pebbles of Jejuri are sweet, and Jejuri comes here with a small 'j'. But as he pops a pebble into his mouth, he is found swearing on the Gods and cursing them. He spews the pebble out with such an aggression that one is set to question such myths whether the temple town holds any such power that makes even the stones sweet to taste. But after seeing the reaction of the priest, one is left to abandon one's belief and myth that is generated from and around this temple town.

## A Scratch

### Text of the Poem:

what is god
and what is stone
the dividing line if it exists
is very thin at Jejuri
and every other stone
is god or his cousin

**Explanation of the poem:** The poem opens in a dramatic way and immediately sets off to defy the dichotomy between the sacred and the ordinary.

The speaker looks around Jejuri and finds that even the stones are animated; each stone, each structure has a soul. It seems the place reverberates with an incantation and smudges the thin line between 'god' and 'stone'. Even the crops come alive with the toil of the peasants who harvest them every year. God, not given a proper manifestation here, is omnipresent and omnipotent in Jejuri. He is found 'round the clock'. The harvested crops are deified in the popular belief of the communities residing in and around Jejuri. Myths emerge from the collective consciousness of the people living here; they tell tales extracted from their imagination, or continue oral story-telling traditions from their ancestors:

that giant hunk of a rock

the size of a bedroom

is Khandoba's wife turned to stone

Tales emerge from even the scratches and fissures in the soil of Jejuri.

scratch a rock

and a legend springs

Even a scratch in a stone has a story behind it. The poem offers one with the fabric of tales that circulate in the ruins of Jejuri. The ruins are mere scratches in the pages of history, but each scratch comes with its own legend trailing behind it. The myths of Khandoba and his wife, his anger (equivalent to that of Siva, as he is a manifestation of Siva according to popular belief), the scar on her caused by the sword of her husband, are all myths circulating in this region. For someone, they are just ruins, for some other they are dossiers of mythical history that have been preserved in the consciousness of the local people of Jejuri.

## The Railway Station

**About the poem:** This part forms the concluding piece of *Jejuri,* which is again sub-divided into six parts- '1: the indicator', '2: the station dog', '3: the tea stall', '4: the station master', '5: vows' and '6: the setting sun'.

The first part of the poem reads divinity in an ordinary, worn-out indicator at the Jejuri railway station.

a wooden saint

in need of paint

The indicator stands there and 'swallows' all the names of the railway stations. A sense of monotone and tedium looms large at the railway station of Jejuri. Even the station clock sums up the numerical on its face, and the sum is reduced to a zero. It is a station where time freezes, where the air smells of monotone.

The same tedium sickens the station dog in the second section of the poem. It awaits its dooms day at the station. It looks as if it has been there since three hundred years; similar sights have caused the dog to yawn away his time in that

‘ancient’ station. Nothing surprises him—neither a man, ‘a demon’ nor ‘a demigod’. Its routine is tied to the routine arrivals and departures; there is no life beyond it and there is no hope after it. It leisurely awaits its death and be taken to heaven, away from this Sisyphean tedium.

The third section again brings one to face the ordinary but with a difference. The novice at the tea-stall religiously carries out his duties. Terms like ‘exorcises’, ‘ablution’, ‘certain ceremonies’ are derived from religious rituals. The novice does his work silently, and his work is his worship.

…and certain ceremonies connected

with the washing of cups and saucers

Kolatkar observes the silent novice at the tea-stall and reads his sincerity which can be likened to a form of devotion people generally nurture towards God. Many customers might have visited this dingy tea-stall, but none could have described the novice as vividly as he.

The next section sketches the figure of the station master. One might find it rather unusual when the speaker talks about the booking clerk handing out a ticket to a passenger:

he takes his tongue

hands it to you across the counter

and directs you to a superior

intelligence

The speaker’s keen observation in calling the station master as a ‘two headed’ person comes alive because he might refer to the cap of the station-master and therefore, he became ‘two-headed’. The booking clerk is subservient to the timetable of the station, but one finds no such obligation on the part of the station master. He is not tied to any timetable published after the ‘track was laid’. He considers them as poor imitations of the first timetable that have been published later. He is arrogant and would never surrender to the subsequent timetables that have come out; they, according to him, are ‘apocryphal’ that is, of doubtful authenticity, and therefore, they cannot be relied on. He belongs to a particular

'sect' and like every member of a sect he has certain rituals that he follows very religiously. He glances at the setting sun, an act of sheer habit. It is 'secret ritual' which causes the departure of the train and the setting of the sun happen simultaneously. When the speaker enquires him about the time of the train, he nods between a 'yes' and 'no', making it all the more difficult for him to understand. The two faces (perhaps, a reference to the bespectacled face of the station master) 'go red' because a sense of uncertainty has already dawned upon the railway station. He would not trust the new time-table neither would he succeed in giving the speaker a confirmation. But his 'secret ritual' would continue day after day, year after year, without any hindrance. This becomes more important than the 'apocryphal' timetables. Thus, the dependence of the station master on the sun, rather than any documented routine, takes us back to a primitive world of rituals and holy practices, when civilisation has not yet made a powerful punctuation.

The fifth part of the poem makes it all the more clear when Kolatkar adopts the title 'Vows'. Here, 'vows' refer to the deep-seated fear of religion and God that prevail among the people of Jejuri. The speaker says that no one is bothered to affirm him when the next train is coming unless one is vowed with all the stuff that constitute the vital components of a sacred ritual. The sacrificial rites,

slaughter a goat before the clock
smash a coconut on the railway track
smear the indicator with the blood of a cock
bathe the station master in milk
and promise you will give
a solid gold train to the booking clerk

are practices that are observed during a sacrifice. The mundane errand of confirming the time of a train is ironically compared to the grave religious performances observed before a sacrifice. Kolatkar adopts a sarcastic tone here to describe how the minds of the communities around a temple town function.

The last segment of the poem 'The Setting Sun' has a sun overlooking the parallel railway tracks of Jejuri. The sun, like God, overlooks the tracks and watches the two tracks as they seemingly meet at the horizon. The holy images like,

...the parallels
of a prophecy
appear to meet

the setting sun
large as a wheel

colour the poem with a sanctity quite obvious in one who has recently visited a holy site. The setting sun, like a prayer wheel, remains static and surveys the ongoing happenings at the railway station. The sun acquires a soul that pulsates with life and keeps record of every movement that takes place at the station. Jejuri, thus, is elevated to the status of a living place where the stones breathe, the sun surveys, the butterfly and flowers lilt – where Khandoba is not the only presiding deity. These things, inanimate they might be, are manifestations of the popular belief and legends that circulate in the Jejurian air.

## Glossary:

**'beyond the caste mark between his eyebrows':** the caste mark is the mark painted on the middle of the forehead either with vermillion, sandalwood paste, turmeric or ash, as a part of a religious ceremony.

**'It aims through an eyelet…glasses':** 'eyelet' is equivalent to a streamlet or a rivulet referring to an outlet that is generally narrow in width. Here, the speaker describes a narrow beam of sunlight 'sawed off' from the external light, that has found its way inside the bus through a narrow creak in the tarpaulin sheet. It gets reflected in the glasses of the old man.

**'you don't step inside the old man's head':** refers to the indifference of the old man to the common sights he comes across each day. The speaker is just a passenger and he means nothing to the old man.

**hobbles:** undignified, wobbly movement of the old woman due to old age ailments or any physical deformity.

**crone:** an ugly old woman.

**hinges:** clings to.

**pun:** a word game; a trickery.

**'in stone language':** an unknown primitive language, in this context, equivalent to an incantation.

**novice:** an inexperienced person; a probationary member of a religious order.

**exorcise:**drive out (evil spirit) by prayer.

**ablutions:** the process of washing oneself as a part of a religious ceremony.

**apocryphal:** of doubtful authenticity.

## *5.4 EXPERIMENTALISM IN KOLATKAR'S POEMS*

Experimentalism as a trend in literature first emerged in regional India poetry during the 1940s when English modernists and French Romantic poets began to exercise an influence on Indian poets. Poets like Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre and A.K. Ramanujan began to employ the modernist techniques of their western counterparts like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Their poetry was also shaped to a great extent by the works of French experimental poets like Rimbaud and Lautreamont. Kolatkar began his tryst with experimental poetry in the late 1960s, where he did not only write in English and Marathi but also began his active career as a translator.

Being a painter poet, Kolatkar has developed an eye for detail. This is reflected in *Jejuri*, a compilation of thirty-one poems, drawn against the backdrop of a temple town (Jejuri) in Western Maharastra, near Pune. *Jejuri* revolves around things ordinary; there is nothing special or significant that marks it as a unique temple site. However, it is in this very ordinariness that Kolatkar finds the extra-ordinary, the unusual, the 'God'. The very notion of the obvious is defied in these

poems, so much so that, the deity in Jejuri becomes a cultural product of the people's imagination and faith. The very act of 'seeing' finds a different meaning in these poetic pieces, and what was seen as the obvious and the mundane is given special attention. Things in Jejuri remain things no more; they pulsate with life as if, each stone in Jejuri contains the presiding deity, Khandoba. The following series of poems from his pivotal anthology *Jejuri* illustrate the poet's experimentalism with different poetic devices like transferredepithets, metaphors, oxymoron and his dry sense of humour to define something as sacred as a temple or a god and question the very binary equations like ordinary and extraordinary, sacred and profane. Each poem has been explained for easy comprehension of language and poetic technique adopted by Kolatkar. For instance, in the poem "The Bus" Kolatkar describes the afternoon light that finds its way through a narrow vent,

You search for signs of daybreak in

What little light spills out of the bus.

The word 'spill' goes to mean something fluid; here, the melting of light during the afternoon is described through this verb. This poem artfully plays with the subject-object dichotomy where the objects become alive—each with its own significance. For the speaker, the old man also becomes an object whom he reads thoroughly. But the inanimate objects acquire subjectivity when each of them reluctantly unravels one's mysteries before the speaker who has visited the temple town of Jejuri for the first time.

Another poem by Kolatkar that shows his poetic genius is "The Butterfly". In a place like Jejuri, the emergence of a butterfly seems a little out-of-place. But the butterfly takes the 'wretched hills' (remember the curse of the beggar in 'An Old Woman') under its wings and this is where the insect finds its significance. The temple comes with its own myths and legends, stories known and unknown. However, the butterfly has no such legacy behind it. It is a thing of the moment:

It has no future

It is pinned down to no past

It's a pun on the present

The 'pun on the present' is not an equivalent of the old woman's farce of the temple in 'An Old Woman', but it is a pun, nevertheless. The pun could refer to the evasive nature of the present itself; just like the butterfly, the present becomes the past in no time. The poetic line remains incomplete, so swift is the movement of the little yellow butterfly.

it opens before it closes

and closes before it o

where is it

The line never achieves completion, the word 'opens' has to stop with a single 'o'. The speaker's eyes cannot follow the swift and evasive movement of the butterfly. The wings act like reflexes and it is gone. But the pun remains that the little yellow butterfly had taken the ruins under its little wings.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Jot down the experimentalist methods used by Kolatkar?

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## *5.5 SUMMING UP*

Arun Kolatkar's poetic genius can be seen in his treatment of language and themes he chooses for his poems. Something as banal as a scratch or a butterfly gains prominence in his observation and this makes the reader question his/her own indifference to such things. In Kolatkar's view, nothing is ordinary or mundane. It is in the everyday life that one has to find meaning and significance. The ruinous town of Jejuri attains recognition in the poems of Kolatar through a range of pictures like the old man, the railway station, a dog, something as insignificant as a doorstep or a scratch—every single thing constitutes the colourful canvas of Kolatkar's poetry.

## *5.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Comment on the poetic style of Kolatkar in his work *Jejuri.*

2. What are the images that are pointers to the satirical device that Kolatkar adopts in describing the landscape and people of Jejuri.

3. What are the religious images employed by Arun Kolatkar that go beyond the obvious and assert the existence of a soul in each and every object in the temple town.

## *5.7 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


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Web Source: https://www.poemhunter.com/poem


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## *UNIT 6: EXILE AND IDENTITY IN AGHA SHAHID ALI*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *6.0 INTRODUCTION*

Have you ever imagined how English language ghazals would have sounded if they were ever written at all? Agha Shahid Ali, the eminent Kashmiri-American poet's poetry is described as drawn heavily on the lyrical poetry tradition of the ghazal while joining it with western poetic influences, including the sound and rhythm of the English language. His range of conventions, covering two very different poetic traditions, are truly multi-cultural and rich – the result being English language ghazals in which the rich musical pattern, often lost in translation, stood fully revealed. In this unit we will be discussing some of the finest poems of Agha Shahid Ali along with a critical study of the same.

## *6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

This unit will enable you to appreciate the points summarised as under:

- The compact pattern of Agha Shahid Ali's poetry that opens up to a number of possibilities.
- There is a sense of longing and hankering after in his poetry that surface in his work.
- To him, themes like loss, exile, nostalgia form the basis of his poetry.

• Even in that compact framework, one could easily locate the richness of his culture and the vividness with which he describes the landscape that forms the backdrop of his poetry.

• The constant urge to connect to his ancestral roots can be likened to that of A.K. Ramanujan; however, this urge is not overshadowed by any sense of regret or ache.

• Like any other writer from the diaspora, Ali's poetry spins within itself an oscillating tendency between what was lost and what has been recollected and preserved in the memory.

## *6.2 AGHA SHAHID ALI: LIFE AND WORKS*

Agha Shahid Ali, the eminent Kashmiri-American poet, and a self-described 'multiple-exiled', was born on February 4th, 1949 in Delhi. He grew up in Srinagar, Kashmir, and was exposed to the scenic abundance of the place which was soon imbibed by the poetic mind. He grew up in a household where poetry was recited in Persian, Urdu and Hindi, as well as in English. From this richly complex backdrop, Ali has drawn inspiration, made more poignant and alive by the bloody issues that is slowly colouring up the place of his birth. He later studied at the University of Kashmir, Srinagar, and the University of Delhi. He earned a PhD in English Literature fron Pennsylvania State University in 1984. He has authored several collections of poetry durig his stay in Western Massachusetts, including *Rooms are Never Finished, The Country Without a Post Office, The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems, A Walk Through the Yellow Pages, The Half-Inch Himalayas, In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems, Bone Sculpture* and *A Nostalgist's Map of America.*

Ali's poetry exhibits a rich blending of the Yamuna breeze and the Muslim experience inherited from Kabul and Samarkand within the framework of English language. The theme of exile, and even the subtle sense of non-belongingness- so strong in other expatriate writers, is tampered with a delicate whiff of nostalgia that neutralises the pain. What seems more remarkable is the poet's ability to fuse memories of a remote, almost idyllic homeland, with the self and the contemporary. In doing so, they become a part of himself, the ordinary, and

therefore, the attainable, and not something distant to be longed for or missed in a sentimental way. His connection with his roots is so strong that it can survive separation. Ali carries his home within him, and the flavours of his homeland seem to waft in the air he inhales. Apart from this, he seems to rejoice in a different kind of liberation through the medium of his poetry – possibly liberation brought about by his exile. No longer tied to the shackles of proximity, that makes detached judgement impossible, USA gives him the necessary distance that makes objective view of his own people, culture and home possible.

## Postcard from Kashmir

### Text of the Poem:

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
my home a near four by six inches.

I always loved neatness. Now I hold
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

This is home. And this is the closest
I'll ever be to home. When I return,
the colors won't be so brilliant.

The Jhelum's waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.

And my memory will be a little
out of focus, in it
a giant negative, black
and white, still undeveloped.

**Explanation of the Poem:** This poem is a reflection of the poet on love and longing for a lost land, a land lost due to current political issues. An interesting

point to be noticed is the likening of the memories with developed-undeveloped photographs that occupy a large portion of the speaker's subconscious.

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
my home a near four by six inches.

I always loved neatness. Now I hold
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

The beauty of these lines lies in the poet's handling of the issue of exile without getting excessively sentimental about it. The love of preciseness gets reflected when he says that he 'has always loved neatness', and now he has his home reproduced and brought nearer to him in the form of a neat postcard.

The succeeding lines project the poet's understanding of his roots along with the acceptance and knowledge that he has voluntarily given up residence there to be in a distant land, not his own:

This is home. And this is the closest

I'll ever be to home.

The poet accepts that when he returns home, things will be quite different, and his cherished memories will no longer be the authentic picture of the homeland he will return to ("the colours won't be so brilliant"). The poet is realistic enough to be sensitive to and accept this truth. Perhaps, even the love he has nurtured so long in his heart for his homeland will undergo a change:

The Jhelum's water so clean,

So ultramarine. My love

So overexposed.

The fact that he can accept the inevitable change is not just restricted to his beloved Kashmir but also in his understanding of the Kashmir he once knew. This beautiful blend of the sensitive and the sensible, and not just a lacework of over-sentimentalism, is rather rare in poetry, particularly so in diasporic writing. He

understands his own personal limitations that denies him a position of judgement of the gulf brought about by separation:

And my memory will be a little

out of focus, in it

a giant negative, black

and white, still undeveloped.

Very often one encounters in the writers of the diaspora an inability to comprehend changes in one's native land, and a tendency to be judgmental. The contrast between the vivid, effervescent postcard and his own 'black and white', 'undeveloped' memories is presented with utmost clarity and humility.

Though love and a strong urge to be with one's roots form vibrant forces fuelling the poem, yet they are positive forces, distinct and different from mere sentimental yearnings, and this marks a maturity in handling sensitive issues like exile, belongingness and home.

**Glossary:**

**"Kashmir…four by six inches":** here, the speaker refers to the postcard that bears the miniature of Kashmir. And the size of the postcard is six by four inches that has a stamp attached to it which displays the half-inch Himalayas.

**"When I return,/ the colours won't be so brilliant…So overexposed":** these lines reflect the speaker's awareness of the changes that have greatly influenced not only the landscape beauty of his homeland, but also the very inside of the land and its people. He knows that the postcard carries the picture of his homeland, but the picture in itself is nothing but a replica edited to perfection. The real colours and the real face of Kashmir have changed over the years with the socio-political issues that have been occurring in the place. The colours of Jhelum appear to be bluer than it really is, owing to the skills of the photographer and later editing that has taken place. His love of his roots, the speaker is conscious, also cannot remain

hidden. It finds its expression in the lines that vent his emotions while looking at the mere postcard, which he calls, is the closest he will 'ever be home'.

**"…in it a giant negative, black/ and white, still undeveloped.":** this last line is suggestive of the speaker's subconscious mind that is largely occupied by the memories of his homeland. These memories only capture the times he had been in his own home, the images of Kashmir he had once known. But with time, Kashmir has changed and whose picture the speaker cannot even fathom now. Therefore, this new image occupies the mind of the speaker, however, it is in an undeveloped state. Just like a photo that remains in a negative state, the memories of Kashmir remain in his mind, but only in hazy, 'undeveloped' state.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**I. Choose the correct answer:**

a. "Postcard from Kashmir" is a poem that draws its images mostly from

i. painting

ii. photography

iii. sculpture

iv. music

b. Here, the 'half-inch Himalayas' refers to

i. the postcard

ii. the stamp

iii. the envelope

iv. the telegram

c. The undeveloped memories of Kashmir have been likened to

i. a photo

ii. a negative

iii. a letter

iv. a postcard

## Snowmen

### Text of the poem:

**Explanation of the poem:** 'Snowmen' shows the split between the speaker's own awareness of his roots, and his own chosen destiny to stay away from it. There are traces of chauvinism of a patriarchal race of men who treated their women with coldness and an aching indifference. This fact emerges with a striking vividness in the opening stanza of the poem:

**...His skeleton**

**carved from glaciers, his breath**

**arctic,**

**he froze women in his embrace.**

The first few lines of the poem have already set the mood of a history that is not immediate but distant, mysterious and resonant:

**My ancestor, a man**

**of Himalayan snow,**

**came to Kashmir from Samarkand,**

**carrying a bag**

**of whale bones:**

**heirlooms from sea funerals.**

Samarkand, a place in the Middle East, conjures up the image of Oriental mystic. These lines are suggestive of the fact that the speaker's ancestors were sailors, rather, collectors of whale bones, a matter that was thought to be precious and thereb, traded. This tradition was a family possession that was handed down in their family for several generations.

The following lines bring home largely the personal, yet the general, that narrates the saga of plight that the women-folk had suffered through generations. Their old age came without warning, as if, it had become a custom to live their lives and perform their duties as wives and mothers, unnoticed and unsung:

**His wife thawed into stony water,**

**her old age a clear**

**evaporation.**

The 'heirloom' of cold bones – 'the 'relics' have found their way into the speaker's bones. 'Coldness' here is suggestive of hearts devoid of any warmth and feelings, a coldness that is almost 'arctic' in intensity. The following lines express the desperate manner in which the speaker wants to escape the tradition of his lineage:

**This heirloom,**

**his skeleton under my skin, passed**

**from son to grandson,**

**generations of snowmen on my back.**

He carries on his back the burden of lineage, the weight of his family trade, which now he wants to shed. However, the voices that are calling him back are no less intense:

**They tap every year on my window,**

**their voices hushed to ice.**

This is a perfect illustration of the speaker's awareness of his roots, his ancestral history, an awareness of hearts devoid of natural warmth and feelings, yet which causes his own heart to beat. Because, even if he ignores their entity, he cannot altogether ignore his own affiliation to them, being a descendent of their race.

While keenly aware that he himself is of the same old pedigree, the speaker, nevertheless, is resolute to break the shackles that try to tie him to a cold, indifferent race and make him a member of a restrictive history:

**No, they won't let me out of winter**

**And I've promised myself,**

**Even if I'm the last snowman,**

**That I'll ride into spring**

**On their melting shoulders.**

What is apparent here is an awareness of a restrictive past, a past that would always try to stunt the natural growth of the speaker as an individual with a unique set of tendencies and urges, and would always try to pull him to its own heartless traditions and customs. The speaker in these lines clearly abandons his roots in so far as its coldness and indifference are concerned. He strives for freedom- an independence that would offer him space to develop as an individual, and not just a cardboard cut-out or a shadow reflection of his lineage. He does not wish to carry the burden of his lineage any further. Although, the voices beckon him to come back, he has already set his mind to live his life according to his own

dictates. The expatriate position of the speaker has taught him experience which is very different from that of his ancestors, and it is this very position that has lent him the eyes to look back at his tradition objectively.

Thus, this distancing from roots has served its purpose. Experience, eventually, makes evolution possible and in this poem, the speaker's determination to evolve is obvious.

**Glossary:**

**Heirloom:** something, usually a tradition or a family business, which is passed on from one generation to another.

**Sea funerals:** here, the snowmen used to collect whale bones from dead whales from the sea bed. Since, it was possible only after the death of the mammal; the poet refers to this activity as a 'sea funeral'.

**His skeleton…glaciers:** in the imagination of the poet, the coldness of the ancestor is skin-deep. Hence, it appears that even his skeleton was carved out of glaciers.

..**his breath arctic:** the cold attitude of the ancestor is likened to the coldness of the Arctic region.

**Thawed:** make or become unfrozen.

**Hushed to ice:** in the imagination of the poet, the ancestral voices have lost their intensity with the passage of time. They have been 'hushed', if not silenced, nevertheless, carrying that peculiar chill of indifference and repression.

**Melting shoulders:** the poet refers to the loosening of the ancestors' hold on the speaker. He emerges as somebody unique and individuated, therefore, reducing the impact that the generations of snowmen once had on their immediate successors. The speaker's choice of pursuing something new shows his tendency to evolve and defy the history that his previous generations had scribbled on the pages of time.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**I. Choose the correct answer:**

a. The term ‘sea funerals’, here, refers to

i. the carcasses of whales.

ii. dead bodies of drowned sailors.

iii. ivory.

iv. glaciers.

b. Terms like ‘skeleton carved from glaciers’ and ‘his breath arctic’ are suggestive of

i. the perennial coldness of the landscape.

ii. the cold, indifferent attitude of his ancestor.

iii. the occupation of collecting whale bones.

iv. the dead whales.

c. The term ‘generations of snowmen on my back’ brings home the thought that

i. the speaker is saddled with the burden of his ancestral history

ii. the speaker is bearing the physical weight of his ancestors.

iii. the speaker has chosen the traditions and occupations of his ancestors.

iv. the speaker appreciates his ancestors.

## Cracked Portraits

**Explanation of the poem:** Agha Shahid Ali moves on to tracing his roots in 'Cracked Portraits' – a tracing that, however, is much the reverse of what a reader would anticipate. The poem can be said to be divided clearly into five parts – the first four parts narrate the mazy myriad threads of his ancestors' lives and the concluding one marks the poet's own individual identity.

The opening stanza concentrates on the poet's grandfather's grandfather, 'son of Ali', and thereby, the giver of the family name. He is believed to be the original patriarch from Kandahar from where the line begins. He seems to have left none of his special skills for his progeny, 'strange physician' that he was. However, he left them plots of land, ironically, in the family graveyard.

**He's left us plots**

**in the family graveyard.**

In a way, this single line seems to foretell some sort of doom for the family, especially, when one reads the final part of the poem that narrates how the ancestors have disappeared into oblivion. There is a sort of sophistication in Ali's 'embroidered robes 'and 'white turban', however, 'the Koran lying open on a table beside him' does not, at all, indicate his devotion in his eyes.

Next comes in the line his son, 'a sahib in breeches' who had imbibed all the superficial ways of the 'whites' and who treated humans and horses equally by whipping! His hands are missing from the portrait, perhaps, an indication that they were too brutal to be painted and cherished forever. He seems as cruel and unfeeling as the colonisers and the colonisers' vices did not leave him either. His would wound the gramophone 'to a fury' and took to drinking. He would occasionally weep at the refrain to invoke his youth which is fading away fast.

The third part of the poem captures the poet's grandfather. He is captured as a handsome young boy, but the poet also recalls a wasted youth where his grandfather is seen smoking 'hashish'. He is inclined towards a string of

incoherent things – Sufi mystics, the philosophy of Plato and Napoleon. 'In his cup, / Socrates swirled' leads one to visualise heavy discussions on philosophy over numerous cups of wine.

The next stanza recalls Ali's father, a 'modern' man with his 'modern' tastes. His inclination towards tennis and his charm over women mark him as a deviation from the obscurity of his ancestors. Agha Shahid Ali believes that he resembles his father in his love for Lenin and Beethoven, however, his love for Gandhi is something that Ali cannot associate himself with. Silverfish, like time, has ravaged his 'youthful face'.

The closing part is a powerful invoking of the fading of memories and time, here, stands as a potent metaphor forcing these memories to fade away in 'creaking corridors.' 'Cobwebs' are invocative of the passage of time and unused places that house memories. He asserts that no one would ever come from Kandahar to strike roots in Kashmir and begin their lineage afresh. No one, according to him, would claim to be the direct descendent of the 'holy prophet' (Prophet Mohammad) all the way from Kandahar. The hinges of the doors opening to the vistas and corridors of memory would remain unattended, un-oiled and thereby, creaking. The portrait would be the only remnant to recall a past that has already started been forgotten. The portrait now lies in a corridor no longer frequented. The assertion here is of the independent and unique self of the poet – unfettered from the confining chains of ancestry and hostile traditions.

**Glossary:**

**I look for…in Arabic':** the speaker tries to trace some devotion in the eyes of his ancestor.

**Breeches:** trousers reaching to just below the knees.

**'…the needles grazing…I still am young.' :**the speaker recalls his temperamental great- grandfather as he spent his evening listening to the songs of Malika Pukhraj. The gramophone needle would touch the record and hence, the song would waft in the evening air, making the listener remember his youth.

**Hashish:** an intoxicant.

**'In his cup…swirled' :** reference to endless philosophical discussions over cups of wine

**Silverfish:** a kind of insect found in old books.

**'..ready to score with women' :** the speaker recalls his father as somebody who would woo the women with his smartness.

**'Cobwebs cling…ancestors':** refers to the passage of time and how it causes younger generation to forget old ancestors. Their memories are now hazy with the cobwebs of time.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**I. Choose the correct answer:**

a. The poet is quite involved and emotional when he recalls his ancestors.

i. True

ii. False

b. 'Snowmen' and 'Cracked Portraits' show his ancestors to be very rigid and hostile in their attitudes.

i. True

ii. False

c. The poem verges on the theme of ….as it progresses.

a. forgetfulness with the passage of time.

b. emotional attachment of the speaker with his past.

c. regret of the speaker as he traces his roots.

d. choice of the speaker's occupation.

## *6.4 THEME OF EXILE AND IDENTITY IN AGHA SAHID ALI'S POETRY*

Agha Sahid Ali's poetry exhibits a rich blending of the Yamuna breeze and the Muslim experience inherited from Kabuland Samarkand within the framework of English language. The theme of exile, and even the subtle sense of non-belongingness – so strong in other expatriate writers, is tampered with a delicate whiff of nostalgia that neutralises the pain. What seems more remarkable is the poet's ability to fuse memories of a remote, almost idyllic homeland, with the self and the contemporary. In doing so, they become a part of himself, the ordinary, and therefore, the attainable, and not something distant to be longed for or missed in a sentimental way. His connection with his roots is so strong that it can survive separation. Ali carries his home within him, and the flavours of his homeland seem to waft in the air he inhales. Apart from this, he seems to rejoice in a different kind of liberation through the medium of his poetry – possibly a liberation brought about by his exile. No longer tied to the shackles of proximity, that makes objective observation impossible, USA gives him the necessary distance that makes neutral view of his own people, culture and home possible. The following poems show the poet's response to his exile and his quest for identity.

"Postcard from Kashmir" is a picturesque poem that reflects the poet's genius and his eye for details. The poem is pure nostalgia in verse. The four-by-six inched postcard reminds him of his hometown, Kashmir. But he also acknowledges the fact that this is the 'closest he could ever be home'. The distance from his hometown serves him with the much-needed objectivity of a poet and this enables him to see a different picture of his once-familiar Kashmir.

In the poem "Season of the Plains", the speaker reminisces his mother's childhood and youth in the colourful city of Lucknow, which has 'four clear seasons'. He has heard his mother talk about the monsoons in her town which was a welcome season for the lovers and children. Silent messages would pass between

lovers, and young women would light incense sticks in memory of their lovers and the 'blue god' that is, Krishna. However, the last two lines of the poem are prosaic, reflecting the woman's disappointment at the fact that the monsoons could never cross the mountain range into Kashmir.

In "Cracked Portraits", the speaker elaborately discusses generations of his forefathers who were of varied temperaments. They are all descendants of Ali, an old ancestor from Kandahar. Their photos hang on the wall of an isolated corridor, surrounded by cobwebs. And in sharp contrast to them stands the speaker, bearing their identity yet preserving his self as a distinct individual.

The poem "Snowmen" is a powerful evocation of the ancestors of the speaker who were whale bone collectors from the sea bed. The climate and the profession had turned them cold in their approach to life. Their wives were treated with a cold indifference. But the speaker ascertains in the concluding lines that he cannot answer the voices from the past and he willfully chooses a different profession to carve his identity as an individual—distinct and different from his ancestors. This poem is reverberant of Seamus Heaney's "Digging" where the speaker ruminates on the memory of his father digging the ground with a spade. The speaker, however, chooses a different profession when he says that he digs his past with a pen, that is, he chooses to carve his identity as a poet.

## *6.5 SUMMING UP*

The above poems hold the poet's approach towards his self-imposed exile and his search for identity. The poems clearly show that there is a lingering nostalgia in the poet and he has carried his familiar picture of Kashmir everywhere, but there is also objectivity in his approach which is very necessary to prevent him from involving in unnecessary and overt sentimentalism. Agha Shahid Ali's decision to carve a niche for himself as a poet and deviate from the line of his cold ancestors strongly establishes him as an individual who has decided to move away from a lineage; but this is done in a subtle and graceful way and there is no question of complete abandonment of his identity. On the contrary, the poet effortlessly draws materials from his past and his memory and composes verses that objectively describe his ancestors and his identity.

## *6.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Discuss the images used by the speaker in bringing alive the memory of Kashmir in 'Postcard from Kashmir'.

2. Comment on Agha Shahid Ali's tone in handling issues like memory and forgetfulness in his poem 'Postcard from Kashmir'.

3. Bring out the significance of the landscape and images that explain something beyond the climactic perennial coldness of the Himalayan region.

4. Comment on Agha Shahid Ali's position as an expatriate in the poem 'Snowmen'.

5. Comment on Agha Shahid Ali's use of memory in tracing back his roots in 'Cracked Portraits'.

6. Is there any tendency in the poet to seek refuge in his past? Give reasons for your answer.

## *6.7 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


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# MODULE III: SALMAN RUSHDIE AND ARUNDHATI ROY

## *UNIT 7: GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHORS AND THE TEXTS*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *7.0 INTRODUCTION*

In this module on the Postcolonial Indian English novel, we are going to closely look at two outstanding works of Indian English fiction – Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and see how these two Indian narratives address the postcolonial issues in their unique ways. Before we address these specific aspects of the prescribed texts, it would be important to have an elementary knowledge of the authors and the texts in the first place. In the present unit you are going to get an

overview of the lives and works of the two authors and get a brief summary of the plots of the novels. In addition, you would also be introduced to some of the major thematic concerns, stylistic features and linguistic experimentations present in the texts. This unit, in brief, is intended to set the necessary backdrop for your entry into the reading of the texts and rest of the Module.

## *7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

After reading this introductory unit on the two authors and the texts prescribed in this module, you would be able to:

- comprehend the connections between the authors (Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy) and their works;
- comfortably read and understand the two novels prescribed in your syllabus;
- track the socio-political critique presented in these texts;
- appreciate the aesthetic experimentations accomplished in the two narratives

## *7.2 SALMAN RUSHDIE: LIFE AND WORKS*

Salman Rushdie, one of the most celebrated and controversial British-Indian novelists of our times, was born on 19 June, 1947 in the city of Bombay to an affluent Muslim family. The Rushdie family was initially from Delhi. However, just before the Partition, they took a practical decision of shifting to Bombay, a city known for its "multiplicity of commingled faiths and cultures" (Rushdie 2010). The vitality and heterogeneity of the city of Bombay, with its secular, multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan culture formed the consciousness of young Salman Rushdie and this culture continues to represent the location of ideal culture in most of his fictions. In the year 1964, however, because of the growing religious intolerance in Bombay, the Rushdie family decided to move to Pakistan. By this time Salman Rushdie had already been sent to London for his studies, but the shift meant the loss of home forever to him. In Pakistan, he got a first-hand knowledge of the oppressive regime and the tyranny of religious fundamentalism. By the age of fifteen he lost his faith and increasingly saw religious orthodoxy as an enemy

of free thought. Thus, Rushdie had a personal experience of homelessness and alienation early in life, two themes which would keep haunting his works. Even in London initially he felt out of place. It was only when he entered Cambridge University on a scholarship, that he could feel settled. In Cambridge he studied history and became familiar with the current debates and theories in the discipline of History, specially the constructed nature of History. You would find many of these details from the author's personal life relevant in your study of *Midnight's Children.*

After finishing his education, in 1968, Rushdie left for Pakistan, but encountering the intolerance there, soon returned to London, and took British citizenship. He shortly started his career as a copywriter and only after the immense success of his second novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981) he became a full-time writer. Since then he has published works in diverse genres with special focus on the themes such as nationalism, home, immigrations, multiculturalism, diaspora, religious orthodoxy, plurality of existence and reality, etc. Some of his most significant novels along with the one prescribed in your syllabus are: *Shame* (1983), *The Satanic Verses* (1988), *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), *Fury* (2001), *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), *The Golden House* (2017) and *Quichotte* (2019). He also has a collection of short stories titled *East, West* (1994), essay collections *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) and *Step Across This Line* (2002), and his autobiography, *Joseph Anton* (2012) to his credit. Salman Rushdie has been conferred many prestigious awards in addition to the Booker (1981), and the Booker of Bookers (1993), the Best of the Booker (2008), Writers Guild Award, James Tait Black Prize, the Whitbread Award, to name just a few. He was knighted in 2007 for his service to literature. Currently he lives in New York.

## *7.3 READING MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

### 7.3.1 Introduction

Published in the year 1981, Midnight's Children (referred to as MC henceforth) by Salman Rushdie created hullabaloo in the English speaking literary world because of its novelty, enormity and subversive quality at the level of both the form and the content. The book was nominated for the Booker Prize in the

same year and immediately made an entry into critical discourses as well as bestseller charts. The relevance of this text can easily be measured from the fact that in the year 1993 and 2008, it was awarded the Best of the Bookers as the best novel to have received the prize during the first twenty-five and forty years of the history of the award. The novel continues to intrigue the readers even now and has become an indispensable part of the curriculum on postcolonial literatures across the world. As you are already familiar with the conventional Indian English novels by Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan, the remarkable change that Salman Rushdie brought to the Indian English literary scenario would be quite obvious to you. Anita Desai (1995) in her "Introduction" to the novel has aptly stated that this novel ushered in an era which gave the postcolonial literature a unique identity of its own.

### 7.3.2 A Brief Synopsis

MC is a fictionalized autobiography of Saleem Sinai, who is nearing his thirty-first birthday and is under the threat of imminent disintegration (death) as he feels that his body has developed serious cracks and would soon crumble down. Before falling apart, he wants to tell the story of his life, and by putting it on paper he needs to impose some form and meaning on it. For most part of the narrative, our narrator has a listener Padma, who regularly punctuates the extravagant narrative style of Saleem. The story is told in a retrospective mode. Saleem is one of the thousand and one midnight's children, born around the time of the birth of India, and because of the special time of birth, he feels that "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" (7). As the story progresses, you will see how the destinies of this man and India are interlinked in all sorts of plausible and implausible manners. In addition, you must note that this fictionalized autobiography is not the story of just one person Saleem Sinai. He claims right in the beginning of his narrative that he has been "a swallower of lives" and to know him, we must know the lot (8). Thus, we find that this autobiographical novel is basically the tale of a family and saga of a nation. But interestingly and close to their real nature, both the family and the nation and their histories that Saleem narrates are more of an imaginary

nature than 'real,' where people are tied to each other mainly because of emotions and imagined connections, rather than reason or blood relations.

The novel is divided into three books, and each book is divided into several chapters. Each book deals with one specific phase of the protagonist's life and the phases have been arranged more or less chronologically. Though the narration is full of digressions and twists and turns of events, flashbacks and flash-forwards, and, thereby, resists any attempt of capturing a faithful summary, some sort of continuity and plot development can still be deciphered in the text.

The first Book mainly deals with the genealogy (though imagined and 'adopted' rather than real) of Saleem Sinai who at length describes interesting episodes from the lives of his grandparents and parents. The plot of the novel commences some thirty-two years before the birth of Saleem, on "one Kashmiri morning in the early spring of 1915" (8). Here, we are introduced to Saleem's grandfather Aadam Aziz trying to come to terms with life in the valley after his return from Germany with a medical degree. The plot moves fast and narrates episodes of Aadam Aziz's loss of religious faith, his marriage to Naseem, their shift to Agra in 1919 and the many children they have. As you read all this, you would also notice Adam's tryst with some of the significant events from the history of India, and the first glimpse of the interconnection between individual re/actions and public events in the narrative. What follows is a long dramatic story of the Aziz family specially their young daughters, how Mumtaz, one of his daughters comes to marry Ahmed Sinai after her first clandestine marriage with Nadir Khan, changes her name to Amina and the Sinai couple shifts to Delhi. Not much after, Amina finds herself pregnant, and comes across an enigmatic prophecy about her unborn child which declares that her boy "will never be older than his motherland – neither older nor younger."

After an extremist organization burns down Ahmed's factory, the Sinai couple relocates to Bombay. They buy a house from a departing Englishman, William Methwold, who owns an estate at the top of a hillock. A little later an announcement comes in the Times of India that it would give an award to any Bombay mother who would manage to deliver a baby exactly at the time of the birth of the nation. Amina Sinai expects to win the award. At this point we are

introduced to Wee Willie Winky, a poor man who entertains the families of Methwold's Estate. He says that his wife, Vanita, is also expecting a child around the same time. Wee Willie Winky is unaware of the fact that Vanita had an affair with William Methwold and that he is not the true father of her unborn child. Amina and Vanita both go into labour around the same time and exactly at the stroke of midnight on 15th August, 1947, each delivers a son in the same hospital. Meanwhile, Mary Pereira, a nurse under the fervor of some radicalism switches the nametags of the two newborn babies, thereby giving the poor baby a life of privilege and the rich baby a life of poverty (147). Driven by a sense of guilt afterward, she becomes a nanny to Saleem. Because of coinciding with India's independence, the press heralds Saleem's birth as hugely significant and even the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru sends a personal letter to Baby Saleem where he calls the baby "the newest bearer of the ancient face of India" whose life in a sense will be "the mirror of our own" (155). The first book ends with the birth of our narrator, Saleem Sinai who reveals to us, the readers and Padma, that in reality, he is not Saleem Sinai and has no blood relationship with any of the Sinai family members, whose story he has been so scrupulously telling us since the beginning.

Book Two covers the early years of Saleem's life in Mumbai. Not much after his birth, his father's assets are 'freezed' by the government for reasons which prove New India's religious intolerance and conservative outlook. Mother Amina takes up the task of correcting the situation and starts gambling. At the same time, she also starts fantasizing about her first husband Nadir Khan regularly and somehow imagines Saleem to be Nadir Khan's son. Many things happen in the meantime: Amina is pregnant again; baby Saleem suffers from severe typhoid and is saved only with the help of the king cobra poison; Amina gives birth to Brass Monkey and Ahmed Sinai's assets get release. The narrative swiftly shifts to 1956, when Saleem is "nearly nine." One day Saleem is punished to one day of silence for some mischief. Unable to speak, for the first time, he hears a babble of voices in his head and realizes he has the power of telepathy and can enter into anyone's thoughts. In another peculiar turn of events he becomes "directly responsible" for the partition of an Indian state. As a result of another accident, Saleem begins to hear the thoughts of other children born during the first hour of

independence, i.e. on 15th August, 1947. All the thousand and one midnight's children—a number reduced to 581 by their tenth birthday—have magical powers, which vary according to how close to midnight they were born. Saleem discovers that Shiva, the boy with whom he was switched at birth, was born with a pair of enormous, powerful knees and a gift for combat. In the due course of time, Saleem takes the initiative of providing a platform to all the midnight's children in his mind. With the formation of Midnight Children' Conference (MCC) he tries hard to put the power of the midnight's children to some good use. However, the children hardly have consensus regarding the structure and goals of the conference and Shiva emerges as a strong opponent to Salem's idealistic framework. In between, when Saleem is about eleven, he loses a portion of his finger in an accident and is taken to the hospital, where his parents are told that Saleem couldn't possibly be their biological son. However, this hardly changes Saleem's position in the family. Many more accidents and incidents around the Sinai family happen which make Ahmed an intolerant and violent man, thus forcing Amina to take her children to Pakistan, where she moves in with her sister Emerald.

Once in Pakistan, Saleem's telepathic powers are jammed and he can no longer access midnight's children. There also he, in a way, becomes his uncle Zulfikar's son and with and through him, plays an active role in the volatile political scenario of Pakistan. As per our narrator not much happens in the intermediary period of about four years after which Ahmed suffers a heart failure and Amina and the children move back to Bombay. Once again, Saleem is with his midnight children group, but the things have changed for good. In the year 1962, as India gets into war with China, Saleem's perpetually congested nose undergoes a medical operation. As a result of having a clear nose now, he loses his telepathic powers forever, but, in return gains an incredible sense of smell, with which he can detect emotions. The father decides to move to Pakistan permanently just after a few months of the event. In the last part of the book, we are told that in 1965 Saleem's entire family—save Brass Monkey, now known as Jamila the Singer and himself—dies in various bomb attacks within the span of a single day during the war between India and Pakistan. During air-raids even Saleem gets hit in the head by his grandfather's silver spittoon, which leads to his

amnesia.

In the beginning of Book Three time shifts to early 1970s. We find that relieved of his memory, Saleem is now reduced to an animalistic state. He finds himself enlisted into military service as his keen sense of smell makes him an excellent tracker. While in the army, Saleem helps to control the independence movement in Bangladesh and through the metaphorical modes of connection, holds himself responsible for the awful events of 1971. He and three of his companions witness inhuman atrocities during the partition time and eventually are sent on an absurd mission of pursuing an elusive foe. This takes them to Sunderbans. The wild spirit of the jungle soon overtakes them and in this forest of illusions, Saleem regains his memory as a result of a snake bite. After leaving the jungle he is reunited with Parvati-the-witch, one of the many powerful midnight's children. She with her magical powers even helps him to get back to India and he starts living with her in the magicians' ghetto, along with a snake charmer named Picture Singh.

Disappointed that Saleem will not marry her, Parvati-the-witch gets involved with Shiva, now a famous war hero. Nevertheless, Parvati and Shiva very soon fall apart, and she returns to the magicians' ghetto, pregnant and still unmarried. To save Pavrati from disgrace, Saleem agrees to marry her. Meanwhile, Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India, on the prediction of her personal astrologer gets suspicious of the powers of Midnight's children, and declares the state of Emergency whose sole motif, according to Saleem is "the smashing, the pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight" (544). A few months after the birth of Aadam Sinai, the government destroys the magician's ghetto, Parvati dies and Shiva captures Saleem and brings him to a forced sterilization camp in Benares. Under pressure, Saleem divulges the names of the other midnight's children. One by one, the midnight's children are caught and sterilized, effectively relieving the prime minister of her worries. Later, however, Indira Gandhi ironically loses the first national election she holds.

In March, 1977, all the midnight's children, including Saleem, are set free. Saleem goes to Delhi in search of Parvati's son, Aadam, who has been living with

Picture Singh. Once united, the three take a trip to Bombay, and by chance he finally locates the chutney factory that Mary, the only mother that Saleem now is left with, now owns. Mary welcomes the long lost "baba Saleem" and he is made the in-charge of the "creative aspects" of the pickle factory. Here Saleem meets Padma for the first time, the woman who would be the sole narratee of his life story. With this, Saleem's story comes full circle. As he reaches the end of his long-winded autobiography, Saleem decides to marry Padma, his dedicated lover, on his coming-soon thirty-first birthday, which falls on the thirty-first anniversary of India's independence. Saleem prophesies that he will disintegrate into millions of specks of dust on that day. Yet, there will still be Aadam Sinai, the (foster) son, for whom Saleem has written the story of his life and the one who would perhaps keep the pickled memories of his father alive.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. List some of the early influences in Salman Rushdie' life which taught him the lessons in tolerance of differences?

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2. What kind of narrator is Saleem Sinai?

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3. How many sets of parents has Saleem Sinai got? Who are they?

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4. Who is Parvati the witch?

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5. How old is Saleem Sinai at the time of this narration?

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### 7.3.3 Major Themes

As the above summary of the three books of the novel must have indicated, this is a complicated work of fiction, and deals with innumerable issues and concerns. However, some of the most dominant themes that the novel deliberates upon are:

- Nation, nationalism and narration
- Public history vs individual story

- Memory and the re/un/making of the past
- Fragmented nature of the self and reality
- The plurality of truths, and
- Continuities between the past and the present

### 7.3.4 Salient features of Rushdie's Narrative Techniques

The narrative techniques used in *MC* are eclectic and full of subversions and playfulness. Some of the noteworthy aspects in this context are:

- First person narration with a highly intrusive and unreliable narrator
- Non-linear narrative form with innumerable episodes of digressions
- Self-reflexivity and intertextual references
- Frequent use of suspense, repetitions and summaries, and
- Application of various cinematic techniques

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

**The Genre of the Novel**

It is next to impossible to categorize *MC* in distinct generic categories. In this context, Meenakshi Mukherjee writes, "The very opening paragraph of *Midnight's Children* sets up three levels of narration – fairy tale ("once upon a time"), autobiography ("I was born in Dr. Narlikar's Nursing Home") and history ("India's arrival at independence"). The interplay among the generic conventions of each mode is sustained throughout the three parts and thirty chapters of the novel" (19-20). A close reading of the text reveals the aptness of this statement. In addition to Mukherjee's observation, various critics have pointed out the following five major affiliations of *MC*:

- The Indian oral epic conventions
- the postmodern practices

- the postcolonial narration
- the historiographic metafictional mode, and
- the magico- realist tradition

### 7.3.5 The Language of the Novel

If the form and the content of *MC* are unconventional, their weight is borne perfectly by the language of the text. With this text, Rushdie gave a new meaning and form to the colonizers' language and popularised the concept of 'chutnified' language. Some of the radical experimentations executed by Rushdie in this novel which challenge the possibility of purity are:

- the use the mongrel street language of the Indian cities
- translation of Indian idioms and metaphors with audacious literalness
- indulgence in bilingual puns without apology, footnote or glossary
- deliberate application of the rules of Indian grammar,
- Seamless use of words and phrases from Hindi, Urdu, Konkani, Marathi, Gujarati, and various dialects
- too much or too less use of punctuation marks to carry the load of the nonconformist narration

## *7.4 ARUNDHATI ROY: LIFE AND WORKS*

Arundhati Roy is one of the most remarkable and controversial figures of contemporary Indian intellectual scenario. Her full name is Suzanna Arundhati Roy. She was born on 24th November, 1961 in Shillong, Meghalaya to a Keralite Syrian Christian mother and a Bengali Hindu father, who was a tea planter. She spent her childhood in Kerala, the southeastern state of India which is not only home to a fairly large Syrian Christian community, but which also boasts of being world's first democratically elected communist government. Her hometown Ayemenem with its interesting fusion of varied religious and political orientations (Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Communist) was a major force that shaped the psyche of young Roy. As you read the novel you will come across many parallels between the fictive world of *The God of Small Things* and the author's personal life. Not

only is the novel set in Ayemenem, and refers to many real political events and represents not so uncommon socio-cultural practices, critics have identified multiple parallels between lives and personalities of one of Ammu and Roy's mother, the twins Rahel and Estha and Roy herself and her brother.

Roy left home for Delhi at the tender age of sixteen and embraced a life of a difficulties and challenges. Living in a slum area of Delhi, she went on to study architecture in Delhi School of Architecture. Though she hardly ever made use of this degree, training in architecture has significantly influenced her works as a writer, specially *The God of Small Things*. Another major influence on her fictive works has come from her exposure to and experience in the film and television industry. She has acted in a number of films and written scripts for several film and television projects. However, she become famous with the superb success of *The God of Small Things* which not only received the Man Booker Prize for fiction in 1997, but also become the best-selling book by a non-expatriate Indian writer in a very little time. Since then she has mostly written non-fiction expressing her radical views on various social-political and environmental concerns. In addition to the articles published worldwide, she has a number of books to her credit some of which are: *The End of Imagination* (1998), *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), *War Talk* (2003), *The Shape of the Beast: Conversations with Arundhati Roy* (2008) to name just a few. It was exactly after twenty years of her first novel, her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) was published.

Roy is a dynamic political activist, vocal spokesperson of the anti-globalization movement and a vehement critic of neo-imperialism and of the global policies of the United States. For her radical stance she has also been criticised by a number of politicians, the media, fellow authors, and intellectuals and on several occasions had been at the receiving end of law. However, her contributions as a social activist have been appreciated as well. In 2002, she won the Lannan Foundation's Cultural Freedom Award for her work "about civil societies that are adversely affected by the world's most powerful governments and corporations." In 2003, she was awarded 'special recognition' as a Woman of Peace at the Global Exchange Human Rights Awards. In 2004, Roy was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize for her work in social campaigns and her advocacy of non-violence. At present she lives in Delhi.

## *7.5 READING THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

### 7.5.1 Introduction

*The God of Small Things* (referred to as *TGST* henceforth) is the work which placed Arundhati Roy in international literary scenario. The 1997 Booker Prize that it was awarded with was a first for a female Indian writer. The novel invited immense media attention as she had, in fact, received a lucrative advance of $2.2 million for this work. Soon after its publications it was translated in several languages across the world and turned out to be a bestseller. However, an equally good number of readers found the book distasteful and disrespectful. There were objections regarding her representation of communist party leaders, Syrian Christians and India in general in a negative light. Some found the plot to be too convoluted and others complained of excess in her experimentations with language. In fact, there has also been a lawsuit against her on the grounds of public immorality. However, just like *MC*, *TGTS* is undoubtedly one of the significant works in contemporary Indian English literature and has made its way into the syllabi across the world.

### 7.5.2 A Brief Synopsis

*The God of Small Things* is a beautifully written intricate novel that depicts the intersection of the "big history" of postcolonial India and the "small histories" of individual lives. The novel sharply critiques the continued stratification of society by a caste consciousness which renders some individuals "privileged" and others "untouchable" depending on some predetermined ideas of purity and superiority, and a gendered code which essentially relegates women to a position of subservience to men. The rise of Marxism in Kerala had promised an equality that would transcend the barriers of class, caste and gender. However, the novel presents an opposite picture. It is seen that the "Big" characters like Comrade Pillai and Chacko have only abused this new ideology to exploit the underprivileged and justify and fulfil their "men's needs." In addition is the trail left behind by British colonialism, which creates a submissive reverence for the colonial culture and language and hatred for everything indigenous and local as is

found in Chacko, Pappachi, Baba, and Baby Kochamma. Moreover, and most crucially are the "Love Laws" which dictate "who should be loved, and how. And how much" that put strictures on human lives and the exercise of freedom. And the victims of these political, gendered and cultural forces are "small" characters like Rahel, Estha, Ammu and Velutha who dare to stand against the codes of the society. These conflicts between the Big and the Small people, social codes and individual desires are what constitute this narrative which comes to us in bits and pieces as Roy here masterfully uses memories, flashbacks and images to record the complex web of feelings and emotions experienced by various characters in the past and the present. The novel is divided into twenty-one chapters, and it is not till the last chapter that the story emerges in full.

The storyline of the novel when put together is, however, not very complicated. The narrative runs along two timelines: the present set in the early 1990s and the past relating the events of the late 1960s which get intertwined through memories and images. The story is mainly presented through the perspective of Roy's twinned child protagonists Estha and Rahel. The novel opens in the present with 31-yea- old Rahel's return to Ayemenem, Kerala in 1993, upon learning that Estha has "re-returned" to live there after their separation some twenty-three years earlier. As they meet and try to relate to each other through memories, the past unravels itself and it is this past which provides the conditions for their separation and the shape of their present lives.

This part of the story which is again scattered all over the narrative and emerges only in chunks, tells us about a wealthy, landowning Syrian Christian Ipe family of Ayemenem, Kerala. In 1966, the seven-year-old twins Estha and Rahel along with their twenty-four-year-old mother Ammu, came to live in their maternal grandparents' house in Ayemenem following Ammu's divorce. Various reported incidents prove that the mother and the kids are denied any rights and love by most of the Ipe family members, the patriarch Pappachi, the commanding Mammachi, hypocrite Chacko and self-centred Baby Kochamma. For most of them, Ammu and her children are a matter of shame and liability only. However, the twins and their mother manage to survive indulging in "small" pleasures. The turning point in the story comes with the arrival of Sophie Mol, a little girl who has come from England with her mother Margaret, Chacko's ex-wife. While the

grand welcome of Sophie Mol once again makes the twin realise their secondary status in the family, the tragedy strikes them from multiple fronts. Ammu had been having an affair with an untouchable carpenter named Velutha for some time. While the whole Ipe family had ignored and side-lined Ammu and her children, it was with Velutha that Estha and Rahel and Ammu felt loved and cared for. In a dramatic turn of the events, on a fateful December night in 1969, Mammachi discovers her daughter Ammu's clandestine affair with low-caste Velutha. She locks Ammu in her room. The frightened children decide to row across the river to an abandoned colonial house, and their newly arrived cousin Sophie Mol tags along. The boat capsizes and while Estha and Rahel make it to the other side, Sophie Mol drowns. In the colonial "History House" the twins find Velutha who is handed over to police after learning that his own father had informed Mammachi about his and Ammu's affair. The police soon comes and Velutha is beaten almost to death and the children "rescued". In an attempt to salvage the family reputation, Baby Kochamma files a false case against Velutha with the charges of rape, kidnapping, and murder. Despite being a faithful member of the Communist party, because of his low caste, Velutha is denied any kind of support. On the other hand, Estha is manipulated by baby Kochamma into giving a false statement against Velutha. The police enraged by the audacity of the untouchable Velutha beats him up mercilessly and he eventually succumbs to the injuries. After the funeral of Sophie Mol, Estha is sent to his father in Madras, and Ammu is forced to leave the house. In short, everything changes for the mother and the twins. Denied her children and dignity, "at a viable die-able age" of 31 Ammu dies. Estha relegates into an inscrutable silence forever. And Rahel, as rebellious as Ammu in spirit, turns into a social misfit who only drifts through different stages of life. Eventually though Rahel marries an American and moves to the US, she suffers from a permanent sense of detachment, and cannot continue with the marriage. As she returns to Ayemenem upon getting the news of Estha's return, now it is her responsibility to heal the psychic wounds of her twin. And this is how the two narrative levels of the story from the past and the present relate to each other.

### 7.5.3 Major Themes

*TGST* is a multilayered novel which touches upon many socio-political issues. Some of the major themes that unite the whole narrative are:

- Transgressions of socio-cultural norms
- Endless circular conflicts between the powerful and the powerless
- Caste, class and gendered politics
- Big and Small Things and Narratives
- Interrelations between the past and the present, and
- Memory and Identity

### 7.5.4 Salient Stylistic Features

Undoubtedly, *TGST* is an embellished work of art and it does require a little effort to settle down with the style of narration. As you read this novel shaped by memories, you may note the following stylistic features which make it an unconventional one:

- Fragmented structure and dual time scheme
- Deliberate and extensive use of repetition of both phrases and episodes
- Frequent use of the devices of flash-forwards (prolepsis) and flashbacks (analepsis)
- Self-reflexivity and innumerable intertextual references
- Use of free indirect speech to put forth children's experiences and perspective, and
- Circular structure of the novel with its repeated motifs, flowing images and counterpoint techniques almost in the model of *ecriture feminine*

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

**On Metafiction**

A you are reading two postcolonial postmodern works in this Module, it may be useful to be familiar with the concept of metafiction theoretically. In her most lucid definition of the term, Patricia Waugh writes, "*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-

consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (2).

When observe closely, you will find many instances of metafictional references in the novels that you are reading now. Prepare a list of some of the prominent ones from both the texts.

### 7.5.5 The Language of the Novel

Arundhati Roy once described her language as "the skin of" her "thought" and this aspect of *TGST* has received much critical attention. Her lyrical language works perfectly in conjunction with the thematic concerns of the text such as Anglophone authorship, cultural hybridity, migrations etc. A few linguistic features that are significantly noticeable are:

- A sensual pleasure in wordplay, such as neologism, anagrams, puns, emphatic capitalizations and rhymes
- A strong sense of regionalism and inventiveness
- Frequent undermining of the rules of grammar, spelling and syntax
- Use of children centred language to focalize their point of view

## *7.6 SUMMING UP*

Despite their chronological distance and differences in thematic and political orientation, *MC* and *TGST* share a lot. These together represent the face of the large body of contemporary Indian English fiction. Working along the parallel themes of memory, nation, identity and history, highly experimental in language and hybrid in form these novels are epitomes of undermining colonial discourses, language and genre. This brief introductory unit is intended to arouse your interest in the works and only after reading the texts you would be able to appreciate these fully.

## *7.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

i. David Lodge has pointed out five techniques typical to postmodern fiction: contradiction (presence of opposing views); permutation (incorporating alternative narrative lines in the same text); discontinuity (disrupting the continuity of discourse by techniques like unpredictable swerves of tone, metafictional asides to the readers, digressions etc); randomness (proceeding without any clear logic) and excess (spilling over in form, content as well as language). Attempt a comprehensive essay on the postmodernist features of *MC* keeping in mind these five techniques.

ii. Write a critical essay on the narrative structure and style of the novel *MC.*

iii. What do you know of Saleem Sinai's Genealogy? Write a comprehensive essay on the issue.

iv. Provide a detailed note on the linguistic experimentations attempted by Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy in the novels prescribed in your syllabus.

v. Deliberate upon the themes of transgressions and betrayals in *TGST.*

vi. Write a comprehensive essay on the treatment of time in *TGST*.

## *7.8 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS*


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## *UNIT 8: POSTCOLONIALISM IN RUSHDIE AND ROY*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *8.0 INTRODUCTION*

Indian English literature that started its proper journey in the nineteenth century is said to have come of age only in the 1980s and particularly in the genre of fiction, Indian authors have won international accolades in the last few decades. While it would be wrong to call Indian English literature only postcolonial in nature, as there is much more to this literary field, there is no doubt about the significant presence of postcolonial concerns in contemporary fiction. In this unit, you are going to get familiar with the concept of postcolonialism in general, and postcolonial literary approach in particular. The unit also provides detailed discussions on the postcolonial dimensions of *MC* and *TGST*, the two texts prescribed in this Module.

## *8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

After reading this unit on Postcolonialism in Rushdie and Roy, you would be able to:

- have a basic idea of the discourse of postcolonialism
- understand the general concerns of postcolonial literature
- recognise the major thematic and stylistic features of postcolonial fiction
- identify and appreciate some of the major postcolonial features of *MC* and *TGST*

## *8.2 POSTCOLONIALISM: A GENERAL OVERVIEW*

It is imperative for anyone trying to understand postcolonialism to have some basic idea of colonialism. Historically, colonialism refers to the political control and economic exploitation of Asian, African and South American regions by the European powers in eighteenth and nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One must, but, remember that colonialism was not only about political or economic control. It was also a powerful cultural and ideological subjugation of the native non-white population, whose cultures and knowledge systems were methodically either destroyed or 'disciplined' by the colonial rulers. These colonial practices were legitimised by the anthropological theories which increasingly projected the natives as inferior, childlike and feminine. In their orientalist discourses, the western intellectuals presented the natives as having no sense of history, no decent culture and as incapable of looking after themselves and in the need of paternal rule from the West for their own interest. All these theories were simply rooted in racism, a discourse where only whites were regarded as the representatives of reason, morality, religions, law, language and arts.

Postcolonialism as a theory and discourse challenges these colonial ways of representation and knowledge circulation. Though, politically colonization has almost disappeared in the traditional sense, colonial ways and values have not magically disappeared from the world scenario. Besides, neo-colonialism is still very much around us. Under such conditions, postcolonialism attempts to shift the dominant ways in which the relationships between western and non-western people and their worlds are viewed. In other words, it contests the imperialist ways of being and seeing. Here you must notice the formation of the term "postcolonialism" where "post" implies both continuity and change. Finally, while postcolonialism acknowledges the prevalence of colonial practices around

us even till date, it asserts the possibility and necessity of change by underlining the fissures in colonial ideologies. Pramod K. Nayar in his book *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* lists a few issues pertinent to the Postcolonial theory which clearly point out its large scope:

- Colonialism's strategies of representation of the native
- The epistemological underpinnings of colonial projects (colonial histories, anthropology, area studies, cartography)
- The feminization, marginalization and dehumanization of the native
- The rise of the nationalist/nativist discourse that resisted colonialism and other forms of resistance
- The psychological effects of colonialism on both the colonizers and colonised, and
- The role of apparatuses such as education, English literature, historiography, and art and architecture in the 'execution' of the colonial project.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

**Neo-colonialism**

Though most of the former colonies have achieved political independence by now, the nominally free nation-states continue to suffer economic exploitation by European powers, that still can be called imperial in nature. Neo-colonialism, thus, refers to the continuing economic exploitation of Asian and African nations states by the European and American powers. Whereas the physical force (military or police) may not be immediate event in neo-colonialism, trade transactions by former colonial masters are invariably accompanied by the threat or imminence of military action against erring Asian/African nation states. The international aid and development policies also are controlled by the same old masters and these deny any proper opportunity to the third world countries to become economically independent. Thus, neo-colonialism is an insidious form of colonialism. (Nayar 2008, 5-6)

## *8.3 POSTCOLONIALISM AND LITERATURE*

Just like feminism, when applied to literature, postcolonial theory unveils the political nature of literature and exposes how colonial ideology, strategies of representation and racial prejudices have been encoded into the literary texts. As

pointed out by John McLead, postcolonial literary theory, despite its rich ambit of complex and often contradictory orientations, in general involves one or more of these practices:

- Reading texts produced by the writers from the countries with a history of colonialism, primarily those texts concerned with the working and legacy of colonialism in either past or present.
- Reading texts produced by those that have migrated from countries with a history of colonialism, or those descended from migrant families, which deal in the main with diaspora experience and its many consequences.
- In the light of theories of colonial discourses re-reading texts produced during colonialism, both by the colonizers and the colonised; both those that directly address the experiences of Empire, and those that apparently do not. (33)

Thus, postcolonial literary critics do not only re-read the literary texts to underline the methods of representation, assumptions and prejudices that reinforce imperial power relations, but also focus on the literary examples and evidences of the ways in which colonial subjects "wrote back" i.e. responded, resisted and overturned the imperial power relations to the empire. As you can see, in all these points, the core idea is to read and reread. The bottom line is this that in postcolonial theory, neither writing nor reading literature is assumed to be a neutral activity. Rethinking conventional modes of reading is fundamental to postcolonialism.

## *8.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVES*

Postcolonial literature, though difficult to define precisely may be roughly termed as the literature produced by the writers of former colonies. It often addresses the problems and consequences of the decolonization of a country, specially questions relating to the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated people and themes such as racism and colonialism. It addresses the role of literature in perpetuating and challenging cultural imperialism. While postcolonialism is a theoretical discourse, and provides a framework of reading, postcolonial literature is generally informed by these theoretical positions. The two fictional texts by Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy that you are reading in this Module are examples of postcolonial fiction. In his student friendly book

*Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*, Pramod K Nayar refers to the major thematic concerns and stylistic features of postcolonial literature. Some of the major thematic concerns are:

- **History**: Postcolonial writers seek to expose the appropriation of history by colonial masters and attempt to retrieve and rewrite their own histories from the perspective of the marginalised and oppressed in the colonial project.
- **Nation, nationhood and nationalism**: Many postcolonial narratives deal with the modes of constructing imagining and representing the nations and also expose how the new nations states continue with the imperialist practices where certain communities and identities within the postcolonial societies are still marginalized.
- **Gender, Sexuality, Ethnicity**: Postcolonial authors have frequently written about the intersections of racism, imperialism, sexism, ethnicity and sexual identities. The themes of body, desire and sexuality and thereby marriage and motherhood and their link with national and cultural identity are common issues in postcolonial narratives.
- **Diaspora**: Many of the postcolonial novels also deal with diasporic identities and the themes of homelessness, individual and collective memories of the homeland, and a double bind of asserting one's roots and cultural differences while simultaneously seeking acceptance/ assimilation in the new cultures.

In terms of form and style also, postcolonial narratives have some distinctive features. The writers frequently have recourse to their indigenous narrative forms and traditions in order to counter, oppose or rewrite canonical Euro-American literary traditions and forms. A few points to be kept in mind are:

- Many postcolonial writers have borrowed heavily from **native oral traditions** which defy the idea of single authorship and fixed text and incorporated oral conventions in their written works.
- Most postcolonial writers have also turned towards **local and indigenous myths** and folk tales even as they write in the western genre of Novel. Here, myths, local legends and folklore come to play an important political role of interrogating and undermining the control of Western forms. This return to

roots can also be interpreted as an effort at decontamination, a process of freeing their cultures from colonialism's pervasive influence.

- **Magic realism** is another defining formal feature of many postcolonial narratives where the distinction between the real and the magical gets suspended and the reader finds it difficult to separate fantasy from the described reality. With the incorporation of indigenous belief, superstitions, rumours etc alongside real events these narratives retrieve the local, native, non-European, non-rationalist, precolonial practices and modes of being and knowing.
- **Decanonization through rewriting** of the canonical literary texts with imperialist ideology has been another popular practice among the postcolonial writers. Through their recasting and adaptation of the great English texts postcolonial writers have tried to correct the westernised versions of the East and the non-whites and have exposed the complicity of canonical literature right from Shakespeare till the postmodernists.

Finally, as language and empire always have worked together, any discussion on postcolonial narratives would be incomplete without reference to how postcolonial writers writing in English have dealt with the language issue. The postcolonial narratives frequently explore the role of language in the colonial process. They address questions such as: what language must the postcolonial writer write in? What cultural and social factors are involved in the choice of a language of articulation? Does the use of the former coloniser's language imply a continuing colonization? Is or can there be a distinct indigenised version of the coloniser's language? Can resistance, cultural affirmation/autonomy and identity be articulated in a foreign language? Or how does one locate oneself within the global geo- and cultural politics without recourse to a global language? And as can easily be surmised, there are no easy answers to any of these questions. As a result of such concerns and debates, in the postcolonial narratives English has been multiplied, fragmented, hybridized, bowdlerized and indigenised. Thus, now, we have 'englishes' proliferating all over the world as a mark of postcolonial resistance to and adaptation of the elite colonial language.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Mention few features of Colonialism.

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2. What do you understand by neo-colonialism?

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**3. What are the major concerns of postcolonial literary theory?**

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**4. Write a short note on the common thematic concerns of postcolonial literature.**

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**5. List some of the major stylistic features of postcolonial narratives.**

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## *8.5 POSTCOLONIALISM IN SALMAN RUSHDIE AND ARUNDHATI ROY*

In the following sections you are going to learn about some of the postcolonial dimensions of the two texts prescribed in your syllabus. As you go through these, please keep in mind that both the novels are extremely rich in nature and the following details are just pointers towards their fertile ground. These details are not exhaustive in nature and are intended to only help you read the novels with a proper postcolonial orientation.

### 8.5.1 Postcolonial Dimensions in Rushdie' *Midnight's Children*

*MC* has been claimed as an exemplary postcolonial text subverting the notions of received historiography and indigenizing both the language and the narrative mode of the colonizing culture. One can comfortably assert the presence of postcolonial leanings in the text at the level of content, form as well as language. However, one important fact to be kept in mind about this Rushdie text is that it is not a simplistic postcolonial text like that of Chinua Achebe or Nguigi wa Thiong'o. Heavily influenced by poststructuralist theories and postmodernist cultural discourses this novel is too playful and subversive to be just critical of and resistant to the colonial project. In the sections which follow, however, we are going to focus mainly on the postcolonial dimensions of the novel.

**Heterogeneous Sources and Influences**

Postcolonial narratives are hybrid products just like the identity of any postcolonial subject. The native and the colonial traditions invariably intersect in these narratives and this confluence has been identified as one of the hallmarks of postcolonial fiction. *MC* is no exception. In this novel Rushdie has borrowed considerably from the Western and non-native sources like Cervantes's *Don Quixote,* Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Gunter Grass's *Tin Drum*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Hundred Years of Solitude*, Jorge Luis Borges's writings and Italo Claivino's use of folk tales and fables. All these seem to have helped Rushdie to overcome the rules of chronology, continuity and probability in narrative and formulate an alternative realism that would be able to capture the complex nature of Indian reality in our times. In addition, the novel displays an equally impressive array of strategies and ideas coming from indigenous sources. For example, with its reference to Ganesha the scribe, the epic conventions of tracing genealogy, the narrative encompassing the destiny of a great nation – its politics and perversions including fratricide, the influence of *The Mahabharata* are unmissable. There are also echoes of *Katha Sarit Sagar*, literally the sea of stories and *Panchatantra*, the endless compendium of stories within stories. Most obvious, however, is the influence of *The Arabian Nights,* with Saleem Sinai, like Scheherazade, narrating stories against the threat of approaching death, the necessity to seduce the listeners/ readers by building up suspense, the nature of the linked narratives, frequent interruptions and digression and the fantastic nature of the narratives

related. Thus, in a typical postcolonial gesture, the novel takes inspiration from both indigenous and non-indigenous sources.

**Direct critique of Colonial Regime**

With its time span of about sixty-three years from 1915 till 1977, the novel covers decades of colonial and postcolonial times in India. In the first half of the novel there are explicit references to the colonial regime and its brutal working, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre being of utmost importance. The novel gives a vivid description of the holy city of Amritsar in the month of April, 1919. One just needs to read the ironical accounts of colonial masters like Methwold to understand how the narrative derides the colonial rulers and their actions. The colonial stereotypes are turned upside down and their façade is evident. In short, as you read the first book of the novel you will come across many instances and episodes leading up to the independence of the country and in all such cases the story is told from the Indian perspective. In fact, more than a story of what British did to India, it is basically a narrative of what Indians went through before and after partition. The conflict between faith and politics, religious identity and national identity, local affiliations and larger interests mark the lives of Aadam Aziz, Tai the boatman and the entire Sinai family. These issues undermine the simplistic western narratives of India and India's struggle for Freedom.

**Metafictional Elements**

One of the significant techniques of postcolonial fictions has been to contest the grand narratives of the colonial masters and subvert them by underlining their constructed nature and exposing their underlying ideology. Metafictional elements are frequently used to achieve this goal. In *MC*, the lack of the unreliable narrator, absence of totality in the narrative, erroneous facts and dates and the overtly biased nature of Saleem together underline the constructed nature of narratives. The way Saleem challenges the distinction between fact and fiction, objective truth and subjective perception, history and myth, reason and superstitions, reality and fantasy repeatedly in the novel undercuts the received notion of western enlightenment and modernity, the very rationale of the colonial

projects. In a typically postcolonial gesture Rushdie allows polyphony and contesting perspectives conflict with each other without settling the scores between positions.

**Alternative Discourses**

Another technique frequently used by postcolonial writers has been to give space to the alternative discourses, existences and experiences other than those that have been perceived and acknowledged in the western culture. Thus, when Saleem insists upon the great powers of his grandfather's nose, his acute sense of smell and transmitting power, the miraculous powers of the midnight's children, the magical tricks of the Parvati-the-witch, etc. he is challenging the imaginative faculties of modern readers. In addition, these also expose the prejudices we have imbibed against indigenous forms of existence. Saleem's arguments in favour of the authenticity of his descriptions such as ", "Do not think … that because I had a fever, the things I told you were not completely true. Everything happened just as I described" (265) in a way attest to the postcolonial orientations of the text.

**A Critique of the Indian Nation State**

Postcolonial fictions do not only deal with the cruelties and hypocrisy of the colonial regime, but also often expose and critique the corruption of the new world which betrayed the dreams of the newly independent nations. In *MC*, this is underlined with reference to the sordid case of the Emergency, the dark phase of India which in many ways was worse than the colonial system. In the storyline, the sterilization of the midnight's children, the symbols of the infinite hopes and dreams of the new nation, shows how political sleaze destroyed the promising future of India.

**Hybrid Genre**

*MC* is not just heterogeneous in its sources, but also hybrid in terms of its genre. At once being a novel and a saga, a historical fiction and a fantasy, an autobiography and an epic, this novel defies easy classification. The form of the

novel which is a distinctly European product of serious nature having a set of rules gets modified in the hands of Salman Rushdie. He blends it with indigenous saga, Bollywood formulas, folk tales, oral narratives, and popular myths. Thus, spilling over all the formal boundaries *MC* has become an epitome of postcolonial excesses and surplus.

**Magic Realism**

Magical realism through its mixed mode facilitates the destabilizing of the binaries like reality and magic, natural and supernatural, and by extension, colonizers and colonized, knowledge and superstitions, the West and the East, upon which the whole colonial project relied. In *MC,* Rushdie uses this narrative technique largely to subvert the master codes of traditional perception and rationality. Aadam Aziz's itching nose giving premonition of danger, his blood droplets turning into rubies, the magical powers of the midnight's children, the supernatural powers of Saleem, his pickling of history, the role of the Sinai family in shaping the history of the Indian subcontinent are just a few examples of the blurring of the boundaries between the natural and the fantastic. The accuracy of the prediction of Saleem's future, the manner in which he is transferred from one country to the other in "the basket of invisibility" (440) with the help of magic, the way he can enter the consciousness of the people are no less magical or fantastic concepts in nature. However, equally powerful are the realistic description of the geographical locations like Kashmir, Amritsar and Bombay and their cultural contours. Besides, there are numerous references to real historical facts and figures in the text not just as backdrop but active elements. In short, it can be said that in this novel Rushdie spices up the realistic ingredients with magical potions so strong that it becomes difficult to distinguish one from the other.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

**Literalization of Metaphors in *MC***

While there are obviously unnatural or fantastic elements introduced in the text in different ways, according to Neil Tel Kortenaar (2003), the most charming technique of the novel is literalization of metaphors. The most common figures of speech are turned literal in the novel. For example, the historians of secularism employ the

figure of space left empty by the loss of religious faith, to be filled with the new faith of nationalism. Rushdie makes this space literal and his character Aadam Aziz is hollow inside (30). Similarly, the metaphor of the flood of words after a period of silence is literalized in the incident when three years of word pouring out of the grandmother leave the house full of puddles. History often talks of Indians who received western education as turning white. Rushdie literalizes this by whitening the skin of such people. The example of Ahmed Sinai's icy testicles, the consequence of the freezing of his assets, is one of the most humorous one in the text. However, the most sustained literalized metaphor comes in the cracking body of Saleem, who is a symbol of the new nation India. As you read the novel, make note of similar cases in the text.

**The 'Chutnified' Language of *MC***

Postcolonial narratives written in colonizer's languages have a definite agenda of appropriating the master's language. Blending of English language with spices from all sorts of indigenous languages, literal translations of Indian proverbs, imposition of grammatical rules and colloquial flavours of Indian languages on English are some of the conscious devices used by Rushdie as a part of chutnification. For example, Filkins writes, "whether it be Reverend Mother's repeated use of "whatsitsname" [50] as a verbal tick, or Padma's complaint about Saleem's incessant need for "all this writing-shiting" [26] or Saleem's compressed response of "ouchmynose" to his geography teacher's crazed tug on Saleems's nose while exclaiming " thees is human geography" [294], Rushdie's idiom revitalized English and was triumphant in handing back to the colonized the dignity and power of speech in a tongue that was recognizably their own" (Filkins 611). One can also add the examples of Padma's request to Saleem, "eat na, food is spoiling," (26) and the rutputty joint which advertises, "Lovely Lassi, Fantabulous Faluda and Bhelpuri Bombay Fashion" (274) to this list. On many occasions, rules of Indian grammar are followed, for example, "why are you getting married so sudden sudden?" (584). This sort of usage shows Rushdie's debt to not only the spoken language, but also to that of the contemporary world of comics and cartoon, newspapers and tabloids, advertisements and posters. The charm of Rushdie's language is not in the sophisticated artistic experiments, but

in portraying how rather than being enslaved by the colonial language Indians have Indianized English.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

This section on the postcolonial dimensions of the text deliberately avoids giving many textual examples. After reading this unit and the text, identify the passages which can fit into the ideas proposed in this section. For example, think of the larger implications of Saleem's statements as given below:

1. "So that the story I am going to tell … is as likely to be true as anything; as anything, that is to say, except what we were officially told." (425)
2. "It is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred." (564)
3. "It's a dangerous business to try and impose one's view of things on others. (269)
4. "All the best people are white under the skin. (228)
5. "There are as many versions of India as Indians." (341)

## 8.5.2 Postcolonial Dimensions in *God of Small Things*

*TGST* is a convoluted text with multiple themes interwoven into its plot. While most obviously, it is a critique of the rigid caste system and patriarchy prevalent in our contemporary society, many critics have also focused on the postcolonial aspects of the novel. Unlike *MC*, but, this novel does not explicitly recount incidents and events from the colonial past, nor do the narrators or characters here claim to be of any national significance. Rather, this is a story of small people and how in the hands of the big forces their lives change forever. This novel is postcolonial, however, because of its critique of the legacy of colonialism, themes of hybridity and homelessness, its harsh criticism of the Indian nation state and Communist politics, its subversive structure, and the treatment of English language both at the level of narration and the storyline. In

addition, its flaunting intertextuality and mixed generic mode also contribute towards it postcolonial politics. In the following sections, some of the major postcolonial aspects of the novel have been discussed.

**The Colonial Legacy**

Set in Kerela of late sixties *TGST* explicitly deals with the postcolonial issues through its depiction of the repressive and at times absurd colonial legacies. As you are well aware of the fact, the end of foreign political control does not necessarily mean the end of colonization. Cultural colonialism often remains powerful in the most insidious ways where the once colonized people continue to feel uncomfortable about their own indigenous language, culture and traditions and take pride in the emulation of the colonial masters and their ways. The Ipe family of *TGST* is an exemplary case here. In fact, Chacko at one point in the text pertinently tells the twins that the colonized people like their own family are like "Prisoners of war", whose dreams have been doctored and they "belong nowhere". According to him, it is a war that they "have won and lost.... A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves" (Roy 53). As we go through the narrative, we come across numerous examples which attest to this unsettling fact. One can easily see this in the celebrity treatment that is given to Chacko's half English daughter Sophie Mol. Not just the family, even people around are fascinated by Sophie Mol because of her English identity. Also, we have the case of Pappachi, who having worked for many years as an Imperial Entomologist in Delhi, continue to imitate English dressing style in provincial Ayemenem. According to Ammu "Pappachi was an incurable British CCP, which was short for chhi chhi poach and in Hindi meant shit-wiper" (51). In Chako's terms Pappachi was Anglophile which in simple words "meant that Pappachi's mind had been *brought into a state* which made him like the English" (emphasis original 52). Of the innumerable other incidents, one also notices the way Ipe family wants Estha and Rahel to perfect the English language and manners at the cost of their own language and traditions. In fact, when Sophie Mol comes down from London, Mammachi is extremely apprehensive about her grandchildren's ability to speak English fluently. She eavesdrops on the twins and punished them if they indulge in Malayalam or if they make mistakes while speaking in English. Such an

obsession with the imperial language indicates the continuation of cultural imperialism.

**Hybridity**

'Hybridity' is a concept popularised by Homi Bhabha, hybridity implies a condition when identities are adapted from multiple sources and not just purely from a singular past. In the context of postcolonialism, it frequently refers to the split selves of the colonized who get habituated to considering the colonial ways as universal, normative and superior to their own local indigenous culture, but can never fully give up their indigenous identities. Theoretically something that blurs laws, transgresses rules and defies classification, hybridity is one of the major the unifying themes and motifs in *TGST*. Not only do we have the symbolic illegal jam-jelly mixtures of mammachi and the unclassifiable moth that haunts pappachi's dreams, the narrative presents some concrete cases of hybrid existence. Here we have the twins as a type of transgressive two-egg hybrid who are destined to be hybrids given their cultural setting and upbringing. Born of a Bengali Hindu father and Syrian Christian Malayali mother and growing up in Provincial Kerala, Estha and Rahel, share their existence with Elvis Presley, Broadway musicals, peppermint candies, Love-in-Tokyo hair bands, Rhodes scholarships, Chinese Marxism, and English language, literature and manners one the one hand and very local pickle factory, Malayalam and kathakali on the other. Besides, we have Pappachi and Chacko, the two patriarchs who suffer from the split cultural identity of the colonized in their admiration of the colonial ways and their inescapable indigenous origin and mannerism. In fact, the narrative projects most of the Ipe family members in this light where they try to emulate the Western rationalist ways but continue to be caught up in local cultural practices. Last but not the least, the Syrian Christian Ipe family's caste bias is exemplary of this hybrid existence.

**The Theme of Homelessness/rootlessness**

The theme of the lost homeland and alienation is a favourite theme for many of the diasporic postcolonial writers. Though Roy herself is not a diasporic writer, *TGST* beautifully plays with this theme of rootlessness and absence of an ideal home. In fact, the narrative refers to numerous episodes of returns and the

consequent effects of migration and dispossession as one never returns to the same place again and past is irretrievable. In this context, one can take note of Ammu's shameful return after her divorce, Rahel's return from America, Estha's re-return and the unhappy homecoming of South Indian immigrant workers from the gulf States. In all these cases, the returned subjects suffer from the typical sense of exile and loss despite having returned home. While Ammu feels unwelcomed in her own family, the two kids hardly ever are able to make sense of the chaos around themselves. Pappachi is certainly not able to adjust to the Ayemenem ways of life and Chacko's Oxford phase makes him cynical about everything indigenous. This kind of experiences are metonymic and archetypal for postcolonial existence as one can never comfortably return to the pre-colonial modes of existence.

**Critique of the Indian Nation State**

Postcolonial narratives do not only deal with the formation of the nation and the rise of nationalism as a counter to the colonial rule. These also address the issues of the continuation of colonialism in other forms, specially by the postcolonial elite and the marginalization and exploitation of certain 'minor' communities and identities in the postcolonial society (Nayar 70). Just like the colonizers exploited the natives, now, it has been observed by many intellectuals that the natives are exploiting each other and thus, independent nation state has hardly fulfilled the dreams of a just society. This critique of the nation-state is one of the major concerns of Roy, who targets the sinister nexus between the rich, politically powerful and government officials in this narrative, where small people and their desires get crushed ruthlessly just because they and their desires do not matter. Thus, we see that Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and the policemen stand high in the power structure and they see to it that the transgressors – Ammu, Velutha, Estha and Rahel, who are too small to give any meaningful resistance to the Big Gods in the socio-political hierarchies, are punished and to put to their 'proper' place. Their approach towards these vulnerable people is not much different from those of the colonisers towards the colonised. And neither the nation state and its democratic ideals nor the revolutionary Communist wing of

Comrade Pillai provide any support or safeguard to these small people against violence that is rooted in caste, class and gendered codes of conduct.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Write a short note on the setting of the novel *TGST*.

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2. Who, according to you, are the big and the small gods in the novel? And why?

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3. Discuss the hybridity that marks the lives of the twins Estha and Rahel.

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**Postcolonial gendered critique**

Women's writing from the former colonies often deal with feminist concerns and the position of women in the postcolonial nation-states, specially the continuing patriarchal control over women. Many of these writers have also tried to show how female body and sexuality become sites of patriarchal and 'colonial' control. *TGST* is an exemplary case here. The brutal treatment which Mammachi receives in the hands of 'enlightened' and 'erudite' Pappachi, the way Ammu's husband tries to compromise with his English boss by putting her dignity at stake, the fact that while Chacko's manly "needs" are sanctioned to be fulfilled by the low caste labour class women, Ammu's affair with Velutha results in a scandal are highly significant and refer to the intersectional ties that exists between gender, class, caste and traditions. In fact, the text presents several examples of the patriarchal double standards of the contemporary 'liberated' educated Indian society where women are still treated as objects, to be possessed and used or abused as per the wish of their male relatives.

**Subversive Structure**

*TGST* reflects its postcolonial orientation at the level of the form as well through its subversion of *bildungsroman*. *Bildungsroman* is a type of novel in which central character's growth from childhood to maturity provides the main frameworks of the narrative. Once favourite of many postcolonial and nationalist writers seeking to allegorise the struggles and growth of a nation through the life of an individual, this genre lost its charm for the later generation. For many contemporary postcolonial writers, as the epic experience of national independence was followed by an anti-climax of tarnished ideals and soiled dreams, the progressive form of a typical bildungsroman could hardly represent these wretched realities. Thus, in the contemporary Indian narratives we have a reworking of the established conventions of national allegory. The continuities

between childhood and adulthood of Estha and Rahel and the significant role that is given to the memories in the narrative bring *TGST* very near to this standard genre of western fiction. However, the troubled nature of their return to Ayemenem suspends and almost reverses the genre's conventional progressive pattern. Besides, while memories play an organizing role in the plot of a conventional *bildungsroman*, in the present case these are rarely ordered, and are often repetitive and digressive in nature. These subversions have led many reviewers to even call *TGST* an anti-bildungsroman novel where the main protagonists never properly grow up.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

**Intertextuality in *TGST***

Intertextuality refers to the explicit or implicit references to other previous texts in a text. In a way all the texts are intertexts, but many contemporary postcolonial writers have used this technique overtly to undermine the notion of purity and authority in literature and by extension culture. In *TGST* intertextuality is deployed in a very conscious fashion with extended reference to *The Sound of Music*, *Heart of Darkness*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Jungle Book*, *The Tale of Two Cities*, the fairy tales about the Three Bears, The Ugly Toad who turns into a Handsome Prince, Rumpelstiltskin, Hansel and Gretel etc. along with the jam making recipe, boatsongs of Kerala and the Kathakali narratives like Kama Shabadam, Duryodhana Vadham etc. The presence of these heterogeneous intertexts can easily be linked to the postcolonial nature of the novel. Try to think and elaborate upon the idea in a short essay.

**Linguistic Experimentations**

In *TGST* Arundhati Roy recycles and challenges the linguistic inheritance of British colonialism in various ways. She not only takes pleasure in wordplay, puns, and rhymes; she also transgresses the limits of standard English with her non-standard spellings, reversed words, neologism, repetitions and emphatic capitalizations, fragmented sentences. Though her linguistic experimentations have been criticized repeatedly for being excessive, we should keep in mind that these also indicate some very specific cultural and political concerns which Indian novelists try to represent in an alien language with the help of Indian literary expression. The fact that Roy's children both imbibe and contest the symbolic

linguistic structures underlines the paradox of postcolonial English writers who use this colonial medium and also need to subvert it. Just two examples which can clearly give you a sense of Roy's subversive playfulness are: i) at one point in the text, the narrator says that the twins "had to form the words properly, and be particularly careful about their pronunciation. Prer NUN sea ayshun"; and ii) "Chacko told Rahel and Estha that Ammu had no Locusts Stand I" (actually referring to the Latin legal jargon, *locus standi*).

**Mixed Genre**

*TGST* resists categorization and draws together elements from the fairy tale, psychological drama, pastoral lyrics, romance, tragedy and political fable (Tickell 3). It not only borrows from Indian folk tale and romance traditions and the devotional bhakti literature but also repeats some of the conventions of the European tragic romance. Transgressive sexuality that haunts the whole novel is very similar to the famous English fictions about colonial India like *A Passage to India*. Forbidden love that breaks religious or social boundaries is also a staple of Indian film industry. Roy is also said to have borrowed heavily from the Kathakali traditions in the more melodramatic aspects of the novel. This impurity of the genre and heterogeneous influences and sources also point to the postcolonial hybridity of the novel.

## *8.6 SUMMING UP*

Postcolonialism and postcolonial literatures are multifaceted areas of theory and practice and there is little consensus about the breadth or limitations of their concerns. However, the two texts that you are reading in this module introduce you to some of the major concerns in postcolonial Indian English literary scenario. You need to remember that postcolonialism is just one dimension of these vibrant texts and this unit has introduced you to only some ideas. You must read the prescribed texts in order get a real sense of their beauty and complexity and understand the points of similarities and differences between the two narratives.

## *8.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Write a comparative essay on the linguistic experimentations conducted by Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy in the two novels prescribed in your syllabus.
2. Provide a detailed illustrative account of some of the major thematic concerns of postcolonial fiction with special reference to *MC* and *TGST*.
3. Postcolonial writers have not only experimented with the English language, but also tried to subvert the standard genres in their narratives. Elaborate upon the idea with suitable examples.
4. Discuss *TGST* as a postcolonial feminist narrative.
5. Write an essay on the critique of the Indian nation state in *MC* and *TGST*.
6. Draw a character sketch of Pappachi with special reference to his emulation of the English.
7. Write a note on the critique of colonial legacy in TGST.

## *8.8 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READING*


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## *UNIT 9 REPRESENTATION OF HISTORY IN RUSHDIE AND ROY*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *9.0 INTRODUCTION*

History is one of the most important issues that the postcolonial fiction writers have dealt with. Their obsession with history is deep rooted as history is not simply a record of past events, but also a matter of national and cultural identity, and thus intimately connected to the present and the future. Contemporary theoretical developments in the discipline of History have underlined the ideological nature of historiography and constructed aspects of history. Many postcolonial writers, hence, have invested their energy in challenging the lopsided narratives provided by the colonial masters and in retrieving and rewriting their own native and almost forgotten histories. In doing so, they have consistently underlined the nature and limitations of the act of representation. The two authors Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy you are studying in this unit have dealt with the issue of history in a complex fashion. Here you will be introduced to some of their ways and concerns so far as the representation of history in the prescribed texts is concerned.

## *9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

After reading this unit on the Representation of History in *MC* and *TGST*, you would be able to

- understand how representation is a matter of politics
- realise how history is never simply an objective account of a past event
- appreciate some of the major contemporary ideas related to history and historiography
- identify some of the key aspects of the treatment and representation of history in the two novels prescribed in your syllabus

## *9.2 THE NATURE OF REPRESENTATION*

Representation, in simple terms, is the presentation of an empirical reality in language or through a system of signs. However, in the contemporary theoretical discourses, especially postcolonial theory, the word has gained an entirely new meaning. As identities are no longer seen as independent entities in our times, and perceived as mainly built through discourses, representation has become a crucial concept in terms of identity formation and valuation of all kinds. Before proceeding further, you must note that representation in all human discourses is based on some prior notions of race, class, sex, culture, religion, etc. which again in turn were and are a product of discourses and representational modes. Thus, representations are circular in nature. Besides, it must also be registered in mind that representations are never neutral and a lot of power politics in implicated in the relationship between the one represented and the one representing. In short, representation is related to presence, voice and finally power. As representations are crucial in defining the identity of a community and culture, these shape the way we perceive and respond to certain communities and cultures.

In the context of postcolonial theory, it must be marked that in the colonial discourses and texts, the colonizers and the colonized were often represented in some fixed stereotypes which through repetitions often started working as 'the truth' and mostly justified the project of colonialism. For example, in these

narratives western cultures were mostly projected as rational, enlightened, progressive and capable whereas the rest of the non-white cultures were seen as irrational, superstitious and without a sense of history or morality. Postcolonial discourses expose the power politics underlying such representations which were for long accepted as standard. Much of the postcolonial literature has been devoted to undoing these stereotypes of native cultures in the colonial texts and presenting fresh narratives from below because the power, authority and right to represent one's own culture is the first step towards sovereignty.

## *9.3 POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE AND THE QUESTION OF HISTORY*

In a conventional sense, history is regarded as a true record of past events. However, in the present times, the objectivity of the discipline has been questioned severely. Now, history is mostly seen as a matter of representation. Rather than objectively recording events as these were, history makes use of a certain kind of narratives and rhetorical strategies to generate certain kinds of knowledges and images.

Thus, a lot of power politics is present underneath the smooth historical account of a time and a place. On the top of that, as there is no going back directly to the past, we have access to the past events only through narratives and the 'represented' records about them. Here, it must be understood that some "histories" because of their wider circulation come to be labelled as authentic and are generally accepted as definitive by the most. Thus, history and historical representations acquire a degree of power of shaping and influencing ideas and perceptions of the people.

### LET US STOP AND THINK

**Historiography**

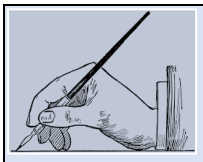
Historiography is the study of the way history has been and is written, specifically the way style, narrative, metaphors and etc. affect how historical records are received and understood. In short it talks about how a history is written, who writes the historical text, what is the context of its writing and publication and what historical method/s and sources have been used used. The key point is that it does not refer to the actual events, or history as such It only refers to the interpretation and

articulation of these events. It underlines the role of power and ideology in the writing of history and teaches one to be critical in the lessons of history presented.

In the post-independence era of most of the colonies, postcolonial writers have tried to deal with the question of colonialism in multiple ways and History has been one of their major concerns. The ill effects of colonial rule, racism and exploitation have been well charted by these writers. The homogenizing tendencies of the colonizers who tried to wipe out the complex realities of the colonies and impose one religion and one rationality on the natives have been frequently exposed in these narratives. In this literature, there is an insistence that the native people must understand their own history and the history of colonialism better. This correction of the Master's versions and reclamation of one's own history is basically a matter of cultural decolonization rather than political movement and has been a crucial one in liberating the former colonies from the colonial attitudes and forms of thinking.

To put in brief, the theme of history surfaces in the postcolonial literatures through:

- The appropriation of native history by colonial masters
- The stereotypical modes of representation
- The creation of mimic men in colonial cultures
- The attempts to revive and rewrite histories from the local positions and perspectives
- The recasting well-known events in a new light
- The portrayal of marginalized and/or multiple perspectives even personalized perspective on the large-scale histories and political events
- The depiction of alternative versions of history as illustrated by the subaltern studies project
- The use of conflicting and mufti-layered local, communal and personal memories which challenge the standard histories



## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What are some of the ways in which the theme of history has been dealt with by the postcolonial writers?

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2. The victory in which battle made the Company the rulers of Bengal?

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2. Was the English language a business tool in colonial India?

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## 9.4 Representation of history in Rushdie and Roy

The brief introduction provided above is by no means an exhaustive one and when you read the two prescribed texts in details you will realize that history as a concept and theme is so dominant in the prescribed texts and is dealt with in such a complex fashion that it cannot be fully illustrated. What follows should help you in a more nuanced reading of the two postcolonial narratives that are not only rooted in history, but through their alternative stories also question the veracity of a singular point of view provided in the standard histories.

### 9.4.1 Representation of history in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

*Midnight's Children* the postcolonial postmodern novel, can also, by definition, be termed as a historical novel. It must be fresh in your mind that our protagonist Saleem Sinai claims that his life is "handcuffed to history" basically, the nation of India by virtue of being born exactly at the same moment on August 15, 1947. In this fictionalized autobiography he seeks to impose some form on his chaotic life through the act of writing. In this section, we are going to focus on some of the ways in which Saleem Sinai represents history in its chutnified form where facts seamlessly merge with fiction, fantasy, gossip and subjective perception and memories. We will start with a brief account of the various references within the text which credit this novel of being a historical one and then proceed to examine how official nationalist histories have been challenged and subverted in this playful text.

To begin with, *MC* is unequivocally set in a recognizable geographical location and a temporal moment which is so specific that it can be pinpointed to a second and had been a part of history. Rushdie's protagonist in this novel is almost like a twin to the Nation and as he seeks to provide a comprehensive background to his past and connect it to the present, we can easily expect references to many signposts in Indian history. Historically, it covers the period from 1915 to 1978 and encompasses a selection of major events in modern Indian history such as the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre (1919), the Quit India movement (1942), the Indian Independence (1947), the partition of India (1947), the Bombay League Marches (1956), the Indo-China war (1962), the Death of Nehru (1964), the brief tenure of Lal Bahadur Shashtri as Prime-minister (1964-5), the Indo-Pakistan wars (1965 &1971) the first term of prime-minister Indira Gandhi (1966-77), the Emergency period (1975-77), the defeat of Indira Gandhi's Congress Party by the newly formed Janata Morcha Party in 1977 to name just a few. The novel does not only foreground a sense of history by referring to these historical incidents, but also gives it locations Bombay, Kashmir and Delhi sufficient probability to allow the readers feel that historically real times and places are being described here.

In one of his interviews, Rushdie once said, "The one thing that you learn as a historian is just how fragmented and ambiguous and peculiar the historical record is" (quoted in Bhaya Nair 57). This statement is quite pertinent in the context of *MC* in multiple ways. To start with we must notice that in addition to referring to the historical facts, the novel is also concerned with the way in which history is *recorded*, the techniques with which a period is conjured up and the relationship between the historiographer and his materials. Pramod Nayar in his comments on the novel refers to the connection between the alternative materials used by this text and its postcolonial politics. He writes that *MC* showcases the structures of historical memory: newspaper clippings, songs from films, photographs, and anecdotes, all of these make the alternatve archive of the postcolonial. While the colonizer's history is linear, progressive and organized, there are certainly other modes of historical memory. Histories emerging out of gossips and individual memories and rooted in the everyday life of people are leaky, uncertain and digressive just like the human beings. They are not organized in a linear fashion, nor do they claim objective truth. And this is exactly what

Saleem Sinai presents us with in his autobiography. In fact, Saleem considers himself a historian and eye- or rather nose-witness. His main sources are his 'all-knowing memory' (*MC* 88), telepathy and his 'powers of sniffing-out-the-truth' (*MC* 307). And we know none of these are the archival documents that are the stuff of which more traditional histories are made. And he clearly declares that his versions are only one of the versions. *MC* also emphatically points out the limits of the striving for a seamless narrative. Saleem explicitly and honestly points out that memory is the basis of his history, but nevertheless emphasizes its status as truth:

> 'I told you the truth,' I say yet again. 'Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own.' (*MC* 211)

In his version of the history, Saleem even claims that he has created India's history by thinking it into reality. He believes that his dreaming repeatedly of Kashmir spilled over into the minds of the rest of the population of Pakistan until his dream became the common property of the nation. The war, Saleem says, happened because he injected Kashmir into the fantasies of the rulers. Thus, objective reality mixes with fabulism, anachronism and personal fantasies. It must be also noted that it is not just the historical events which get concocted in the hands of Saleem, he even deliberately creates a fictional history of his family. It comes as a shock to the readers that Saleem is not the biological child of the Ahmed Sinai or even Amina Sinai. However, the narrative also underlines that beyond a point such facts hardly matters. Saleem Sinai remains Saleem Sinai as he and his family choose to imagine. It reestablishes the fact that history is as much a matter of inventions, selections and convictions as it is of facts.

Thus, *MC* explodes the notion of a nation having a stable identity and any single history. It underlines the fictionality and textuality of history, specially the standard official canonical history of India. Rushdie repeatedly have us believe that he is talking about a nationhood and national identity that is diverse,

disseminatory and does not add up to a single story, or a single people and single tradition or a single history.

In addition to the issues covered above, a comparison between Rushdie's depiction of Indian past and standard nationalist records is imperative to fully appreciate Rushdie's treatment of history in *MC*. Nicole Weickgenannt Thiara in his study *Salman Rushdie and Indian Historiography: Writing the Nation into Being* elaborates upon several episodes in the novel where Rushdie deliberately challenges and subverts the nationalist version of Indian history. Firstly, Thiara points out how in the novel the factual pre-history of the event of Independence is depicted as chaotic, with elliptical sentences and the seemingly arbitrary dropping of names like Cripps, Wavell, Attlee, and Mountbatten and their various schemes for a 'transfer of power' (*MC* 64). This unorthodox history-writing, without proper explanation or referencing, recreates the atmosphere of this erratic and improvised transfer of power and contradicts imperialist historiography's narrative of an ordered withdrawal of the British. On the other hand, the absence of Indian names in this context also punctures the triumphalist narrative of nationalist historiography. The driving forces of this specific event of Independence are depicted as consisting of the British government and the Muslim League. Neither Jawaharlal Nehru nor Gandhi, the 'official' fathers of the nation, are portrayed as having influenced it in a meaningful way.

Unlike other standard versions of the attainment of Independence which elaborately deal with the violence associated with creation of Pakistan, the Partition massacres are only passingly referred to in terms of the 'mass blood-letting' of the Punjab and the 'long pacifying walk of Mahatma Gandhi' (*MC* 112) in Bengal. Thus, though Gandhi is not entirely absent in *MC*, he is certainly not the central force in Saleem's narrative. In fact, the Gandhian idea of India, with his references to Hindu mythology and his emphasis on India's peasants is clearly not endorsed in the novel, whose idea of the nation is urban and multi-cultural as epitomized in the city of Bombay.

In contrast to Gandhi, Nehru's role in the scene of Independence is represented as central, but in contrast to his popular biographies, the text's portrayal of him is not celebratory, be it his appearance or his policies. Nehru is

usually referred to as the architect of secularism in India, and frequently criticised for having imposed this alien concept on a religious society. In *MC* it is not the un-Indian character of secularism that is criticised but its fictitious nature since it lacked serious implementation. The freezing of Ahmed Sinai's property and Amina's relief on hearing that Gandhi was killed by a Hindu nationalist and not a Muslim, depict the precarious situation of Muslims in the new nation-state and demonstrate that Nehru's secular vision struggled to compete against various antagonistic ideas and interests. Thus one by one, Nehru's achievements as lauded in nationalist historiography are depicted as either severely compromised or near-failures in *MC*.

Not just Gandhi and Nehru, in *MC* depiction of the Indo-Pakistani war in 1965 is also very different from the Indian nationalist records as it is bare of patriotism and refrains from assigning blame to one side only. Thus, we are told that both the Indian and Pakistani media produced an infinite number of lies: 'In the first five days of the war Voice of Pakistan announced the destruction of more aircraft than India had ever possessed; in eight days, All-India Radio massacred the Pakistani Army down to, and considerably beyond, the last man.' (*MC* 339) The Indian and the Pakistani versions of the war are pitted against each other in *MC* and no concluding remarks as such are provided by Rushdie in favour of one or the other. The pages are full of question marks and Saleem's own interpretation that 'the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth' is only one more outrageous claim among many (*MC* 338). In fact, Rushdie' displays similar attitude towards the Emergency period where both the portrayal of the government as well as the opposition movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan and Morarji Desai is unflattering.

To sum up, it can be safely said that in *MC* Saleem Sinai represents Indian history as a chutney – to use an image from the text itself – by mixing historiographical discourses with very subjective versions of Indian history. While some may not be able to appreciate its pungent taste, these 'sub-versions' are certainly fresh and opens up infinite possibilities of understanding the past.

### 9.4.2 Treatment of History in *The God of Small Things*

*TGST* is a work of fiction that deals with the lives of a young divorcee and her two children as these small people get trapped in the schemes and histories of the big people and lose control over their lives. Unlike *MC*, where the narrator claimed to be shaping history, in this third person narrative, history forms the backdrop as well as a force that changes the course of the lives of small people. In this section on the treatment of history in *TGST*, we are going to touch upon the multiple ways Roy uses and challenges the ideas and standard versions of history in the novel. The presence of history here not only refers to the realistic setting of the novel, but also how social-cultural traditions are challenge by the characters within the text and how the narrative as a whole exposes the grand histories of communist Kerala and post-independence Indian society which could hardly overcome the oppressive patriarchal capitalist or colonial regime in the true sense. In fact, like many other novels of the postcolonial era, this work also casts many well-known historical events in a new light and through its delineation of subaltern characters brings to the fore the marginalized and/or multiple perspectives, thus suggesting the presence of the alternative versions of history.

Most of the action of the novel takes place in a village called "Ayemenem," which is set near a river called "Meenachal." These two undoubtedly have strong resemblance to the real-life Aymanam, a village in the Kottayam district of Kerala, and to the river Meenachil, which provides the water supply to the village and often floods during the monsoon. Some of the novel's episodes are also set in the real town of Kottayam and in the historic port-city of Cochin. In addition to this real-like setting, Roy also provides innumerable references to the actual landscape of south-central Kerala, its people and customs, their music and dance, their religions and social organization, and their economic and political activities. Chronologically the novel is set at two junctures: 1969, when Estha and Rahel are seven years old and in 1993, when Rahel returns to Ayemenem. In a realistic fashion, most of the novel's political references are true to the timeline and represent the spirit of the era.

Alex Tickell in his book *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things* makes a pertinent remark regarding the use of history in the novel. He writes that Roy

uses the umbrella term, 'history' to present various kinds of socially, and by extension historically sanctioned oppressions in the narrative. Thus, for Roy, history is not simply an account of the past. It is the edifice where the powerful and the powerless constantly engage in conflict. Tickell points out that the term 'history' comes to signify a number of related things in *TGST* including, an 'inchoate past', the ordering of past events, and most significantly 'the weight that tradition imposes on the present, pre-determining actions and interpretations'. It is this last point with which the central theme of the novel is most intimately connected. It must be noted here that traditions and customs which propagate and perpetuate inclusions and exclusions are closely bound up with power politics. The traditional Hindu texts which laid down the caste rules are an example of historically naturalized order, and the often-repeated passage in *TGST* about the Love Laws, which also refers to the central theme of transgression underlines their continuing relevance: 'It really began [. . .] when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much' (33). These historical rules, as shown in the novel, are not stagnant and in an insidious fashion are capable of even absorbing new traditions such as Syrian Christianity and Marxism, into itself. However subversive or liberating these religious or political belief systems promise to be, once they are absorbed into 'history' in *TGST,* they lose their steam and come to be associated with the orthodoxy.

Tickell also points out that against the depiction of history as a powerful force of order and classification, *TGST* celebrates its opposite in images of trangressions and hybridity. Not only are the twins a type of transgressive two-egg hybrid, in numerous instances in the novel right from Mammachi's illegal jam-jelly mixtures to the unclassifiable moth that haunts Pappachi's dreams of entomological discovery, uncertainty and fluidity rules. In fact, in the world of the novel, transgression seems to be the way of life and we are told that all the members of the Ipe family 'transgress' in different ways: 'They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory' (31). When you read the novel, you can easily list these forbidden acts. However, the narrative also emphasizes that while some kinds of transgressions may be tolerated, some other kinds can't. And many power equations contribute to these levels of tolerance and intolerance towards the people who dare to challenge the course of 'history'.

In contrast to the transgressors, the novel depicts the authoritarian figures such as Comrade Pillai and the police inspector Thomas Mathew who are like the 'mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine' (262). They are the once who provide the maintenance to the Order of the Things. Their controlling power is clear when in Comrade Pillai is referred to as putting his hand into 'History's waiting glove' (281). This image not only emphasizes his manipulation of the existing order but also presents history as a political resource for those who know how to use it. In short, the fictional world of *TGST* is divided between characters like Comrade Pillai, Thomas Mathew and Baby Kochamma who misuse and (fearfully) enforce the status quo, and those, like Ammu, her children and Velutha, who are part of the social order but also have the propensity to transgress history.

In addition to underlining the difference between the Big controlling powers and the Small vulnerable people, this narrative also underlines the interconnectedness of the world where the very smallest things coexist with the very biggest. Whether it's the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water in a pond or the quality of the moonlight on a river, or how a child understands and misunderstands an adult world, or how history and politics intrude into personal lives, the novel depicts all these simultaneously. The emphasis undoubtedly is on showing how history is not just about big people and entities, an alternative point of view of the small things and small people deserve an equal representation.

## LET US STOP AND THINK

**The History House**

The novel not only uses history as a theme and context, in fact, there is is an actual abandoned building in Ayemenem, called the History House where "the Englishman who had 'gone native'" once lived, prior to the events of the novel (51). This one-time plantation owner had abused a young boy on his property. In her description of this literal History House as a "private Heart of Darkness," Roy makes a direct reference to Joseph Conrad's famous work, which has been widely understood as a critique of the dehumanizing effects of colonialism. In fact, Chacko uses the History House as a metaphor to convey the alienation of Indians' from their own past—a result of British colonization, which imposed foreign ideals and distanced Indians from

indigenous cultural practices and beliefs (51). But when Velutha is victimized in the same house, it becomes a symbol of the past's enduring effects in the present, and shows how oppression finds a space even in contemporary times.

In addition to such depiction of the oppression social regimes rooted in history, the novel also sarcastically questions the success of the communist ideology in Kerala. In March 1957 Kerala became the first Indian state – and indeed the first government anywhere in the world – to bring a democratically elected communist party to power. Rather than espousing violent revolution, the then party leader, E. M. S. Namboodiripad, proposed a 'peaceful' transition to communism. In *TGST* Roy exposes the misplaced political legacy of communism in Kerala in her satirical portrayal of Namboodiripad himself as 'flamboyant Brahmin high priest of Marxism in Kerala' (67) and his party followers. While many historians have lauded the contribution made by the communist movement in Kerala is its politicisation and mobilisation of the underprivileged and freeing the society from the tyranny of caste and communalism, Roy's portrayal of the late sixties is quite disturbing. She points out the fissures between the ideal and the practices of the so-called communists. One needs to just read chapters 5, 14 and 15 of the novel closely to understand Roys's critique of the vote bargains, the capitalist alliances of the communists, and the hypocrisy of Comrade Pillai and his comrades who still think and work along the caste lines.

In fact, the novel also deliberates upon possible reasons for the success of the communism in Kerala. While one theory related it to the large population of Christians in the state, another one credited it to the high literacy rate of the state. However, in her scathing criticism, Roy's narrator points out that the success of the communist party in Kerala was that it worked within the existing power structure:

> The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from *within* the communal divides, never challenging them,

never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy. (66–7)

The novel, thus, challenges the success stories of the communist history in Kerala. Another myth busted in the novel is that of women's empowered status in the state of Kerala. By the late 1960s, the state was starting to gain a reputation as a social and economic success story. Women's literacy and ability to find salaried work and a willingness amongst the families to educate their daughters and allow them to marry later than usual had been crucial factors in the state's high development index. However, the narrative of the novel exposes the deep-seated gender discriminations at work. Ammu's lack of *locus standi* or, as her children misinterpret it, her lack of 'Locusts Stand I', as a divorced Syrian-Christian woman creates a situation where 'there would be no more chances' (43) for her. She is deprived of her dignity as a human being legally and socially just because she wants to give herself another chance to be happy. What happens to her is in short clearly deflates the story of gender equity associated with Kerela's communist government and high literacy rates and underlines the oppressive tentacles of history at work.

An oft-repeated motif in postcolonial narratives which deal with the theme of history is the presence of the mimic men and an obsession with the master's language and literature. In the units preceding this one, you have already been introduced to the idea of the mimic men and how in *TGST* Pappchi is the representative of this class in the novel. A reference to Chacko's Anglophilia speech seems relevant in this unit as it refers to the relationship on the natives to their own history. Chacko is well aware of the dislocating effects of the colonial education and laments the cultural mimicry of the Ipe family, who are all "pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away" (52). One also notes how the knowledge of English literature is often reduced to a status symbol in *TGST*, and its recitation is frequently a show put on by children to impress adults. Two worth-noting points are the comical rendition of 'Lochinvar' (a ballad in Walter Scott's *Marmion*) by Comrade Pillai's niece, and a parroted version of

Mark Antony's 'Friends, Romans, Countrymen' speech shouted at high speed by his son, Lenin. But the one that deserves a special mention is an adult. At Cochin airport, where the Ipe family welcome Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol, Baby Kochamma literally recites Ariel's speech from *The Tempest* in order 'to announce her credentials to Margaret Kochamma [and] set herself apart from the Sweeper Class' (144). Needless to say that such recitations do prove how these characters are "trapped outside their own history."

## *9.5 SUMMING UP*

Both the novels prescribed in your syllabus deal with History in an elaborate and complex fashion. You must have noted that though their treatment of history is unique, finally they are trying to project the fissures in the standard histories and come up with alternative versions of histories. Needless to say, both the authors celebrate the ideas of transgressions and breaking down of the boundaries which have been handed down by authoritarian history.

## *9.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Discuss the elements which make *MC* a historical novel.

2. Write an elaborate essay on the significance of representation in postcolonial literatures.

3. What are some of the major ways in which Rushdie challenges the nationalist history of India in *MC*?

4. What are the various ways in which the idea of history has been used in *TGST?* Illustrate.

5. In *TGST* Roy busts various myths surrounding the colonial regime and post-independence communist governance in Kerala. Elaborate upon some of these with proper textual references.

6. What is representation? What kind of power equations are involved in the act of representation?

7. What are some of the current ideas which question the objective status of history? Explain with suitable illustrations.

8. Write a critical note on the presence of Gandhi in *MC.*

9. What is the allegorical significance of the fictive genealogy of Saleem Sinai?

10. By exposing the fissures and denying to take sides, how does *MC* subverts the nationalist historiography of Indian nation? Illustrate.

11. Discuss how the figure of Nehru is subtly mocked at in the narrative of *MC.*

12. Write a short note on the setting of the novel *TGST.*

13. What is the significance of the Love Laws in the context of the world of *TGST?*

14. How is the idea of transgression related to history in *TGST?*

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## *UNIT 10: NATIONAL ALLEGORY IN MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN & SOCIETY AND CLASS IN THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

**UNIT STRUCTURE**



## *10.0 INTRODUCTION*

In this last unit on *Midnight's Children* (*MC*) and *The God of Small Things* (*TGST*), you would be introduced to two distinct aspects of the novels which have received a lot of critical attention. In the first section, the focus is on *MC* as a national allegory. The phrase 'national allegory' has a particular resonance in the postcolonial studies since the famous American literary critic Fredric Jameson made his controversial remark on the third-world literature being typically national allegories. In the section that follows immediately, you will be introduced to Jameson's major contentions and its critique and then we move on to see in which ways the novel *MC* can be contained within the category of National Allegory and in which ways it surpasses any fixed concept like allegory. In the next section, the focus is on the theme of class in the world of *The God of Small Things*. Roy's novel is a sharp critique of the oppressive structures of the society which are predominantly gender, class and caste. All the three categories of class, caste and gender intersect and contribute towards the making of who is small and

who is big in the world of the novel. This section mainly will focus on these intersectionalities and underline how class structure works in a caste ridden patriarchal society.

## *10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES*

After reading this unit you would be able to:

- understand the category of national allegory, an important concept in the field of postcolonial literature

- appreciate how a work of literature like *MC* cannot be confined to very simplistic and rigid categories

- read and follow the major conflicts in the novel *TGST*

- learn the multiple layers of intersectionality between class, caste and gender which together shape the power structures of a society and are well illustrated in Roy's work

## *10.2 NATIONAL ALLEGORY IN MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

### 10.2.1 Postcolonial Literature as National Allegory: The Debate

The phrase "national allegory" and its concept as is in usage in the postcolonial studies is mainly associated with the name of American Marxist Frederic Jameson who in his essay "Third World Literature in an era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986) argued that -

> What all third-world cultural productions have in common, and what distinguishes them radically from analogous cultural forms in the first world [is that] all third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or I should say particularly when, their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. (Jameson 67)

Jameson had a specific reason for making such a sweeping statement. He believed that in the "third world" capitalism has still not split the private experience from the public sphere as it has already happened in the first world countries. Thus, in the erstwhile colonized nations the 'story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled structure of the public . . . culture and society' (67).

The sweeping nature of this claim has drawn strong criticism from various fronts. Timothy Brennan, for example, has questioned the veracity of Jameson's argument that the Third-World novel is for the most part 'socially realistic' and as something that it is unable to 'offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce' with their 'rhythm of modernist innovation'. According to Brennan, one of the problems with Jameson's account is that it makes Third-World literature an important artefact or record, but an artefact without theoretical importance – obscuring its staggering abundance and diversity by making it a totality to be 'mapped'. Aijaz Ahmad, himself writing from a Marxist position, objected to this position that reduced all third world writings to one generic mode, identified a totalizing and universalizing tendency in Jameson who failed to take into account the specificity of Third World cultures. Another major critic writing from a similar position is Stephen Slemon, who questioned the privileging of a mode of figuration that is intimately bound up with the discursive practices of the empire. Undoubtedly, to say that Third-World literature 'as a whole' is locked in the naive aesthetics of European realism is to fall prey to western orientalist ways of imagining. Last but not the least, critics like Mary Layoun have also correctly pointed out that some of the most interesting location or citation of the allegory of nationalism could perhaps not exclusively be situated in the Third-World novel at all but precisely in the universalizing postmodernist first-world works like Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow,* E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime,* Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and many others.

However, there have been many instances where the readers and critics have read and interpreted some particular postcolonial texts such as Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, Earl Lovelace's *Salt* or Fred D'Aguar's *Bethany, Bettany* as national allegories. In addition there are some texts like Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* and the one you are closely

reading in this unit, which foreground the idea that these are national allegories. Thus, we must appreciate the fact that while many postcolonial third world narratives may work as national allegories, to limit them to just this category and to deny any visibility or value to any other kinds of narratives is certainly dubious and an instance of essentialization just like other earlier Orientalist discourses.

## LET US STOP AND THINK

**The Idea of the Third World**

The term taken from the French *tiers monde*, is widely used to refer to the countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America in opposition to the capitalist First World and the Communist Second World. The term 'Third World' was first used in 1952 during the so-called Cold War period, by the politician and economist Alfred Sauvy, to designate those countries aligned with neither the United States nor the Soviet Union. Very quickly, 'Third World images' became a journalistic cliché invoking ideas of poverty, disease and war and usually featuring pictures of emaciated African or Asian figures. This finally led to the increasing racialization of the concept in its popular (Western) usage. The term also came to be used as a general metaphor for any underdeveloped society or social condition anywhere. Phrases like 'Third World conditions', 'Third World educational standards', etc., reinforcing the pejorative stereotyping of approximately two-thirds of the member nations of the United Nations who were usually classified as Third World countries. (*Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*)

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What were the views of Frederick Jameson on third world literature?

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2. What are some of the major objections which Aizaj Ahmad had about Jameson's views on third world literature?

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3. What according to you are the limitations of categorizing third world literature as just national allegories?

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### 10.2.2 *Midnight's Children* and/ as National Allegory

I didn't want to write a book which could be conventionally translated as allegory [...]. The book clearly has allegorical elements, but they don't work in

any kind of exact formal sense; you cannot translate the structure of the book into the secret meaning, the book is not a code. (Rushdie 1985)

This statement by Rushdie captures the complex nature of *MC* so far as it positions itself in terms of Jameson's categorization of third world literature as national allegory. While Rushdie does not deny the overtly allegorical nature of his narrative, he is also careful not to fall prey to any kind of fixed categorizations. In the section which follow, you will come across many features of the novel which establish it a classic case of national allegory and several others that undermine such essentialist interpretations and make it a heterogeneous and porous text.

To begin with we must acknowledge that the novel is about the nation state of India. Early in the narrative our protagonist Saleem claims, "at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world" (9). Thus, from the beginning of the narrative, Saleem' s fate is entangled with that of his country and his body comes to represent the body of the nation. In short, he becomes the allegorical figure of the Indian nation: "thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" (9). In fact, the narrative is full of instances where Saleem's life and destinies allegorically represent the fate of the Indian nation. As you read the novel, you will come across many accidents that he meets with and several cracks which reflect the condition of the nation state of India. One more interesting occasion when Saleem is clearly seen as India occurs around the middle of the novel. During a geography class Mr. Zagallo, the weird teacher lifts Saleem up by his hair, intending to show what "human geography" is (231): "'You don't see?' He quaffs. 'In the face of thees ugly ape you don't see the whole map of India? . . . These stains' he cries, 'are Pakistan! Thees birthmark on the right ear is the east Wing; these horrible stained left cheek, the West! Remember, stupid boys: Pakistan ees a stain on the face of India!' " (231-32). Saleem's face, thus, becomes a map that shows the whole Indian nation, his body becomes a place where meaning is enacted.

Several such instances establish Saleem's body as an allegory of the Indian nation. However, another allegory of the nation is at work in the novel as has been

persuasively posited by Ágnes Györke in the essay titled “Allegories of Nation in Midnight’s Children.” As the title of the novel indicates Saleem is not the only one to be born along with the nation. In fact, as a whole, one thousand and one children had "tumbled forth into the world" during the magic hour of midnight of Independence and all of them are closely related to the newly independent nation. Saleem becomes aware of their existence only at the age of ten and eventually becomes the mediator for the formation of Midnight’s Children's Conference (MCC). This conference is interestingly very close to Benedict Anderson’s views on nation as an imagined community. Thus, we see that though these surviving midnight’s children are as diverse as one can imagine, they come together following an imagined connection. In this way, they represent the relationship of the people belonging to one nation. According to Gyorke, the Midnight's Children's Conference (as an "imagined community") can be regarded as the metaphor of the nation, which later "develops" into an allegory, signalling the "decline" of India. Saleem often refers to this process when he desperately cries out, aiming to save the Conference: "Do not let this happen! Do not permit the endless duality of masses-and-classes, capital-and-labour, them-and-us to come between us!" (255). Since the decline of the M.C.C. signifies the decline of India, the Conference becomes the second allegory of the nation in the novel.

Another aspect which needs to be covered in this section on the allegorical aspects of the novel is when Saleem and other midnight’s children stop being allegorically associated with the nation. This happens at the critical point of the beginning of the Emergency when the image of the nation merges with the state. In the novel this subsuming of the nation under the state is associated with Indira Gandhi’s regime. Once Indira Gandhi appropriates the role of personifying the nation in her role as dictatorial commander of the state apparatus, Saleem’s discourse of mirroring the nation and MMC, the democratic collective that represented the diversity of India basically stops. We are even told by Saleem that the secret purpose of the Emergency was the annihilation of the midnight’s children because they embodied an idea of the Indian nation which was incompatible with that of Indira Gandhi.

While till now we have talked of how within the narrative, Saleem and the MCC come to clearly emerge in the allegorical role, it would be of benefit to understand that it is not just Saleem's body that represents India. His life in general also has multiple parallels with the nation state. Just like any nation is basically an imagined community, Saleem's life is also a series of imagined family, imagined responsibilities and imagined connection between the different part of life. Just as India cannot be imagined without its heterogeneous traditions, Saleem's Muslim, Hindu and Christian parents attest to the multicultural and muti-religious nature of the Indian nation.

**LET US STOP AND THINK**

**Imagined Communities**

Benedict Anderson argues that nations are acts of imagination. This does not mean that there is no territory or people involved in a nation. What he underlines is that we can connect to people in the other parts of the nation only in terms of imagining them as connected. This is facilitated though technologies such as the novel and other print forms. For example, located in one part of India we feel connected to other fellow Indians because there is so much writing, films, talk and discourses about them, even though there is no immediate geographical or cultural connection with them. We feel one because of this imagined connection between us.

In fact, the persona of Saleem and his life narrative as these emerge in the novel resist any kind of homogenizing understanding. Whereas many critics have seen this plurality as a postmodern bent, in many interviews Rushdie has insisted that it springs from a particular conception of the composition of the Indian sub-continent, and from a desire to resist 'singular' conceptions of Indian national identity. Rushdie would have us believe that his choice of fictional form derives principally from his desire to negotiate a concept of nationhood and national identity that is diverse, disseminatory and does not 'add up' to a single story of a single people or a single tradition.

Thus, the novel can very well be read as an allegory of the India nation. However, there is much more to the text than simply being an allegory. As

allegories typically are formal and stable with a moral or political meaning, the narrative structure and tone of *MC* goes much beyond this definition. The proliferating nature of the narrative does not allow this playful text to remain contained within any formal genre. This is why one can safely also say that Saleem's history is not supposed to make sense merely as a national allegory and his autobiography is not meant to be simply decoded as standing for the nation's biography. Jyotsna Singh (cited in Tickell) refers to *MC*'s 'mock-allegorical structure', which captures the parodic aspect of this strategy. We must keep in mind that Saleem's story always also makes sense as the story of a child growing up. And most of all, the story of him representing the nation growing up is constantly undermined by Saleem's excessive claims to centrality: "[in 1947] I was already beginning to take my place at the centre of the universe; and by the time I had finished, I would give meaning to it all" (*MC* 126–7). Thus, the exaggerated tone adopted by Saleem undermines the serious business of national allegory and the contradictions and uncertainties about almost everything that he professes and practices make this novel far richer than simply an example of a fixed category.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Refer to at least three textual occasions when Saleem claims to be India or shaping the destiny of India?

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2. How old is Saleem at the moment of writing his autobiography? Which year is it?

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## *10.3 SOCIETY AND CLASS IN THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

*TGST* with its realistic setting in the state of Kerala is a harsh critique of the oppressive systems at work in society. While the main focus of this section is to deal with the working of class discrimination in the narrative, and by extension exposing the failure of communist ideals and ideologies as depicted in the novel, you must keep in mind that such a discussion cannot be carried out properly without any reference to the issues of gender and caste which together contribute towards the grid of power-structures within the world of the novel. The following discussion will refer to several examples from within the text which clearly demonstrate how class, caste and gendered positions of the subjects dis/empower them and make them Big or Small in the world where power defines the fate of a person.

Since the publication of *TGST*, Roy has often emphasized the growing distance between the powerful and the powerless in contemporary India. In one of her interviews she said, "At some point, we have to [. . .] realize that the inequity in our society has gone too far. Take for instance the refrain that India is a country of one billion people [. . .] the truth is that we are a nation of 50 million people and the rest are not treated as people." Economic disparity is *one* of the main reasons behind such scenario. Roy beautifully explores class issue in her fiction through the motif of factory. Antonia Navarro-Tejero in the essay "Power Relationship in *The God of Small Things*" lists various consequences of the setting

up of the factory which are not very positive. A close reading of some of these reveals how capitalism works in conjunction patriarchy and caste system in world of the novel.

Communism in simple terms is a socio-economic, political and philosophical ideology which is against the capitalist system of private ownership and propagates the idea of classless society where there is a common ownership of the means of production. This philosophy is in sharp contrast to religious, racial, caste based or any other kinds of hierarchies. In the novel *TGST* Chacko is the self-proclaimed communist character through whom most of the issues pertaining to class structures and exploitation are explored. Chacko is the son of Pappachi and Mammachi, affluent Syrian Christian family who is sent to Oxford to pursue his studies. There he married Margaret Kochamma and soon has a daughter also. But eventually the marriage does not last long as Margaret leaves him for an Englishman. Consequently, Chacko returns and ironically joins Madras Christian College as a lecturer. Though he thinks of himself as a communist, his limited insight does not let him see the paradox of being a communist and being affiliated to a religious entity. When his father dies, he leaves his job and comes to Ayemenem to take over his mother's pickle business. The fact is this that Mammachi had been running her business as if it were a big kitchen very easily and successfully. But Chacko comes and decides to modernize and turn it into a capitalist enterprise. Loans are taken and this finally results in financial disaster. He displaces Mammachi from her management position and makes her only a sleeping partner. And even though Ammu had been actively working for the factory, she is relegated to an insignificant position in the new setup and has no right to the property. The business was running well even without any formal name; now it is to be given a name. Comrade K.N.M. Pillai, and not Mammachi, is consulted in this matter. The final choice is "Paradise Pickle and Preserves." However, it is not such a paradise for the powerless class and eventually it emerges as a site the exploitation of the lower-class women and Dalits. Note the irony of the situation that the feudal owner of the factory is also self-proclaimed communist. He repeatedly fails his communist ideals and in fact, actively participates in the perpetuation of the established unfair gendered wage system. He even calls pretty women to his room and forces his lust on the pretext of

lecturing them on labour rights and trade union laws. He is called a: "landlord forcing his attention on women who depended on him for their livelihood." Disgusted his hypocrisy and exploitative moves, Ammu aptly calls him a case of "spoiled princeling playing *Comrade! Comrade!* An Oxford avatar of the old Zamindar mentality."

Another interesting machinery that is at work in the factory is caste system. Velutha is an untouchable belonging to the Paravan community. He is an efficient carpenter and indispensable to the factory by virtue of his expertise in handling the machines. However, he is also a card holding member of the communist party. By virtue of this association, this parvan is seen as dangerous by the "crusader for justice" Comrade Pillai. He is scared that if Velutha is kept in the factory, it may upset the other factory workers, but Chacko cannot do without him. The solution to the system comes from Mammachi who suggests that Velutha must be paid less than a touchable carpenter because of his caste and he also "ought to be grateful that he was allowed to touch the things that the Touchables touched." As we see later, Velutha is also denied any help by the leaders in the party when he lands in trouble because of false allegations and has to die miserably in the police custody.

All these instances must make you understand that exploitation of the economically weaker section is not the only oppressive system exposed by Roy here. There are intricate webs of gendered and caste structures which go parallel with the capitalist system. And as it obvious the ideal of a classless society where all will be treated equally and get what they deserve fairly as espoused by communists only remains an unfulfilled dream. In short, *TGST* is replete with instances which prove that that the Communist Party exploited existing inequalities of caste and class in Kerala.

In addition to this kind of a stark critique of the upper and middle class mentality in which the lower class people are not perceived as subjects and are simply used as things to be used and discarded, Roy also cites some instances where the otherwise economically inferior people indulge in a power-game to settle scores. It is interesting to note that while Chacko is very fond of Comrade Pillai, the feelings are not reciprocated. The communist leader is very conscious of their class difference and during Chacko's visit to Pillai's house, he holds his

class circumstances 'like a gun to Chacko's head' (275). In a rather sad instance, after sexually abusing Estha, the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man quells his potential protests by telling him he is a 'lucky rich boy, with porketmunny and a grandmother's factory to inherit' (105). Such cases underline Roy's keen understanding of the complexities of class relations prevalent in the society.

In a similar fashion it will not be out of place to refer to how canonical English literature is often reduced to a status symbol in *TGST* and a mark of social superiority. One memorable example of this occurs when the Ipe family goes to welcome Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol at the Cochin Airport and Baby Kochamma childishly recites Ariel's speech from *The Tempest* in order "to announce her credentials to Margaret Kochamma [and] set herself apart from the Sweeper Class" (144). Such small but subtle examples show how people are constantly aware of their class position in the everyday life and how it is not only money that matters; language also comes to play a significant role in such power games. Thus, the world of *TGST* is populated with high class people who either by virtue of their religion or education are bilingual and fluent in both the cosmopolitan English and Malayalam, the main language of the state of Kerala. All the members of the Ipe family—Pappachi, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu, Chacko, and the twins Estha and Rahel—belong to this group. The "untouchable" worker Velutha, his brother Kuttappen and his father Vellya Paapen, the cook Kochu Maria, and the workers at the Paradise Pickles and Preserves factory would be virtually monolingual in Malayalam, mainly because of their class and education/ lack of education.

Thus, the novel explores working of class structures at multiple layers and as you read the novel, it would be a good idea to keep a note of such instances. As the major concern of the novel is to represent how the "big things" like class, religion, caste and politics affect "small things" such as childhood, romance, daily life, family dynamics etc, you must read all these issues in their interconnections. And as has been pointed out by most of the critics reading the novel, Ammu and Velutha's affair, an act that denies the dehumanizing, exploitative separations of caste, class or ethnic difference, though inconsequential, must be read as a symbol of symbol of a more egalitarian future.

## LET US STOP AND THINK

**Caste System in India**

Caste system is a traditional Hindu form of social organization which divides people into hierarchical groups. Caste not only dictates one's occupation, but also dietary habits, dress codes, and interaction with members of other castes. Members of a high caste enjoy more wealth and opportunities while members of a low caste perform menial jobs. Upward mobility is very rare in the caste system. Most people remain in one caste their entire life and marry within their caste. Castes fall into four basic groups known as *varnas*: Brahmins—priests, scholars; Kshatryas—warriors, kings; Vaishyas—traders, merchants, bankers, and finally Shudras—laborers, servants, peasants. A fifth, large group of people known as Asprishya or "untouchables" exists in addition to these castegroups. Untouchable jobs, such as toilet cleaning and garbage removal, bring them into contact with filth, bodily fluids, and trash. They are therefore considered "polluted" and not to be touched. As a result, they experience frequent social discrimination. The Indian constitution, adopted in 1950, outlawed all discrimination against "untouchables" Although it is illegal to discriminate against "low" and "untouchable" castes in modern-day India, prejudice still continues. In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha comes from a family of Paravans, a category of untouchables associated with fishing and boat-building. It may also be noted in the context of the novel that the Syrian Christians, one of India's smallest religious communities are said to be originally "high caste" Hindus who got converted by St. Thomas the Apostle early in the 1st century AD when he is said to have visited Kerala. Although Christian, they follow many Hindu social customs. They are affluent and highly educated, asserting a high social status based on their claimed "upper-caste" Brahmin ancestry. The Ipe family belong to this group.

Despite Christianity that made inroads into Kerala nearly two millennia ago, and communism that emerged as a powerful egalitarian force in the last century, caste continues to exercise an insidious, all-pervasive influence in Kerala.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How does Roy expose the hypocrisy of the self proclaimed communist Chacko in the novel?

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2. What makes Velutha the most vulnerable character in the novel despite his talent?

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1. How does higher class and caste system work hand in hand in the world of the novel?

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## *10.4 SUMMING UP*

This concluding unit on the two novels prescribed in your syllabus is meant to introduce you to the two very pertinent aspects of the novels. Both the aspects pertain to the overall nature of the narratives rather than focusing on just one episode or two. The ideas and clues provided in this unit would certainly help you to find many more aspects within the texts which deal with the nationalist discourse in *MC* and capitalist and communist ideologies in *TGST*.

## *10.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS*

1. Write a comprehensive essay on *MC* as a National Allegory.

2. Discuss the concept of third world literature as national allegory in the context of postcolonial literature and criticism.

3. Elaborate upon the ways Roy explores the working of class structures in *TGST*.

4. How are the issues of class, caste and gender interrelated in the world of *TGST?* Illustrate with suitable examples.

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**JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS**

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