



COURSE CODE: MAEGD 404

COURSE NAME: INDIAN LITERATURE
IN ENGLISH II

**CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND
ONLINE EDUCATION
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY**

MASTER OF ARTS

**ENGLISH
BLOCK III**



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MAEGD 404: Indian Literature in English II

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BLOCK III

MODULE IV: TRAVEL WRITING

UNIT 11: R K NARAYAN: *MY DATELESS DIARY*: AMERICA IN *MY DATELESS DIARY*

UNIT 12: AMITAV GHOSH: TRAVELLING IN THE ORIENT IN GHOSH'S "THE IMAM AND THE INDIAN"

MODULE V: DIASPORIC FICTION

UNIT 13: JHUMPA LAHIRI: *THE INTERPRETER OF MALADIES*: THEMES OF DISPLACEMENT IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S SHORT FICTION

UNIT 14: ROHINTON MISTRY: *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*: ALIENATION IN *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*

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INTRODUCTION: BLOCK III

MODULE IV: Travel Writing includes travel writing or travelogue as an essential genre of Indian English Literature which has now been considered as a serious academic endeavour. The overarching aim of this module is to provide introduction to travel writing in Indian English Literature through the works of two famous authors R K Narayan and Amitav Ghosh. **Unit 11: R K Narayan: *My Dateless Diary: America in My Dateless Diary*** will elaborate on R K Narayan's *My Dateless Diary*. The book is significant because he has deliberately left his diary dateless, which conveys the impromptu nature of the narration as it flows like a conversation. bring forth the significance of their experiences as they touch upon myriad issues of history, power, politics, the subaltern, centre and margin. **Unit 12: Amitav Ghosh: *Travelling in the Orient in Ghosh's "The Imam and the Indian"*** will highlight on a collection of essays based on Ghosh's travels to Egypt and Cambodia among many other places. Ghosh is both participant and observer in these writings. These essays are important as he has overthrown the colonial practice of representing the natives as 'other'. Further, his travel is also a research where he involves the locals in a dialogue and mutual exchange of ideas and culture.

MODULE V: Diasporic Fiction will introduce you to the writings of expatriate Indian writers who have settled abroad and write about their experiences in the diaspora. India remains a major concern in their writings specially when narrating the consequences of leaving behind their home in search of better lives in a foreign land. So, these stories mirror the sense of loss, issues of adjustment to a new life, and identity clash which forms an important part of the experience in a foreign nation. **Unit 13: Jhumpa Lahiri: *The Interpreter of Maladies: Themes of displacement in Jhumpa Lahiri's short fiction*** will deal with Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies*. These stories have minutely observed the dilemmas of diasporic lives. Lahiri's characters are the average Indian man, woman or child who struggles to find their footing in a society with a culture very different from their own. These are stories of

struggle, resilience affection, longing, homelessness, friendship, identity crisis and even celebration. **Unit 14: Rohinton Mistry: *Such a Long Journey*: Alienation in *Such a Long Journey*** will introduce you to the writings of immigrant Indian writers who have settled abroad and write about their experiences from their adopted homes. This unit critically discusses Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* as one such popular novel about India and its Parsi community.

The aim of prescribing these authors is to give a sense of variety and range of the diaspora fiction and its contribution in enriching Indian Writing in English. Hope learners will be enriched with the variety of this selections.

MODULE IV: TRAVEL WRITING

UNIT 11: R K NARAYAN: MY DATELESS DIARY: AMERICA IN MY DATELESS DIARY

UNIT STRUCTURE

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- 11.1 Learning Objectives
- 11.2 Travel Writing as a Genre
- 11.3 R.K. Narayan: Life and Works
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11.0 INTRODUCTION

Indian English Literature includes travel writing or travelogue as an essential genre which has only recently been considered as a serious academic endeavour. The overarching aim of this unit is to provide introduction to travel writing in Indian English Literature through the works of two famous authors R K Narayan and Amitav Ghosh. Writing and travel have always been intimately connected, says Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (2). Within fictional works, life has often been symbolised using the metaphor of journey. Great Epics like *Mahabharat*, *Ramayan*, *Odysseus* and works like *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Divine Comedy* have the trope of travel as central to their stories.

R K Narayan and Amitav Ghosh are well known for their fictional works that touch upon various issues ranging from social concerns, tradition and culture, Gandhian and Nehruvian socialism, environmental conditions, history etc. Their contribution to Indian English literature has been well acknowledged. In addition to this, Narayan and Ghosh have also penned travel narratives based on their travels to different parts of the globe. This unit will

focus on the two authors as travel writers and bring forth the significance of their experiences as they touch upon myriad issues of history, power, politics, the subaltern, centre and margin. R K Narayan's *My Dateless Diary* is significant because he has deliberately left his diary dateless, which conveys the impromptu nature of the narration as it flows like a conversation. *The Imam and the Indian* is a collection of essays based on Ghosh's travels to Egypt and Cambodia among many other places. The collection of essays is unique because Ghosh has consciously adopted the approach of micro and local interaction both as a participant and as an observer. He has subverted the colonial practice of representing the natives as 'other', instead his travel is also a research where he involves the locals in a dialogue and mutual exchange of ideas and culture. Narayan and Ghosh have both been deeply influenced by their experiences since once a journey is made the traveller is never the same again. Thus, travelling is also a scholarly and intellectual persuasion for them. Independence of observation and critical subjectivity are some perspectives that make travel narratives a powerful source of knowledge and information.

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to:

- familiarize you with the genre of travel writing and its beginning from the colonial times to the present.
- introduce Indian travel writing in English and familiarize few well known early Indian travel writers.
- acquaint you briefly with the life and works of R K Narayan
- discuss an exemplary text of Indian English Travel Writing, *My Dateless Diary* (1960), by R K Narayan
- help you to understand the increasing complexity in the form and content in this genre

11.2 INTRODUCTION: TRAVEL WRITING AS A LITERARY GENRE

Travel writing or travelogue is one of the most important genres in Indian Writing in English. Though the narration of travel experience is quite old in Indian history, it was during the colonial and postcolonial periods that travelogues became important texts of academic interest. The influence and practice of borrowed Western historiography could not address the spatial and socio-cultural differences evident in the colonial encounter.

It is difficult to restrict travel writing to any particular genre. It is interdisciplinary in nature. It is linked to different issues of colonialism, diaspora, globalisation and multiculturalism which subsumes within them sub-issues of race, class and gender. It may be found in the form of narratives, poems, diaries, letters, journals, essays, nonfictions as well as in fictions. Interestingly one often finds it difficult to distinguish between the novel narrating travel and the nonfictional works narrating travel experience. The use of travel as a metaphor for the journey of human life had been an important literary practice. Mary Louise Pratt cites such examples in Dante's famous *Divine Comedy*. There are many such examples in other works, for instance the journey of Everyman, the journey of Orlando, the quests of King Arthur and his knights and also the journeys of the Norse seafarers. In later ages we have Swift's acerbic satire in *Gulliver's Travels* where journey is the most important narrative trope. Again, with the advent of science there were sea adventurers who narrated their experiences to discover new lands. The famous works of Marco Polo or John Mandeville are as thrilling as any fiction. Some novels are based on actual travels. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a famous modern novel was written after his voyage up the river Congo. In poetry stories of journeys to the Polar Regions that were circulated inspired Coleridge when he depicted the Christian's moral journey or the mental journey of the Romantic poet in his poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The epical journeys are also used by poets to depict contemporary crisis. One example is Tennyson's poem "Ulysses". This indicates that travelling often opens up to the traveller many

other issues than just what is ontologically experienced. It leads to deep reflections on much wider aspects of human life or human nature.

Travel literature as a genre was, in the mid-1990s, accepted as a systematic field of study. The experience of ‘otherness’ discovered by travellers, carrying their own cultural identities, to ‘strange’ lands tend to compare their own cultures with those of ‘others’. This leads to a politics of representation. This is particularly the form of writing that flourished during the colonial and postcolonial times.

Travellers included explorers, voyagers, navigators, cartographers, anthropologists, and colonizers in search of new fields of commerce. Their accounts are often meant for dissemination of knowledge, guidance and practical advice to future travellers, and they also serve as inspirational accounts. They often reflect subjective reflections on different peoples, communities, races and religions.

It is from the colonial times that an awareness of the politics of travel began emerging. This is because of the power relation between the colonizer and the colonized. Maps were widely used to denote areas ‘darkness’, extent of colonial exploration and expansion. Travelling thus turned out to be a mode of acquisition of knowledge and power.

Commenting on colonialism Harish Trivedi writes: “it may be useful to look at the whole phenomenon as a transaction....as an interactive, dialogic two-way process rather than a simple active passive one; as a process involving complex negotiation and exchange” (Trivedi 15). It should not be forgotten that the English-educated Indian elites had welcomed the arrival of the British as it opened up new avenues of knowledge to the Indians. Trivedi’s statement retrieves the idea of mutual exchange that had prevailed among the Indian culture critics as well as the social reformists like Tagore and Rammohan Roy. This idea of the West offering a new paradigm of knowledge saw a proliferation of movement from East to West. Indians overcame the fear of crossing the *kala pani* (the seas) which had been a taboo. There was a new wave of enthusiasm for discovering unknown geo-cultural regions. People also moved to new places for exploring new possibilities for their career, and a

better life-style. Pilgrims belonging to different strata of society had been moving across countries for centuries. *Paribrajaks*, the romantic wanderers, the travelling bards and gypsies had also been important sections of travellers. The travellers of the colonial and post-colonial India belonged to a different category altogether. Not only did they cross the seas (*kala pani*) but also became an important part of colonial discourse.

Initially ‘politics’ of representation was not tagged to travel writing. travel literature, according to some sources, became popular in medieval China during the Song dynasty (960AD-1279AD). These were written in narrative prose, in essay form and diary style. Often the purpose of writing was to provide geographical and topographical information; the accounts were also written to share travellers’ experiences of the strange places with the readers. It was often a mode of ‘travelling for the sake of travelling’, to taste the pleasure of experiencing beautiful places of natural beauty. The movements often resulted in the travellers’ self-realization. The details of observations, of the trials and tribulations, of the dangers overcome by the persons instilled a sense of confidence in them. Some travelled to historical or archeologically important sites – such actual movements transported them to the past and they enjoyed the glory of the places through imagination.

Travelling often involves the issues of “transculturation”— the concept of the centre and periphery, of crossing borders, of a sense of space and identity. This is particularly evident in the colonial travels. Once away from the familiar surroundings and placed in some unfamiliar socio-cultural and strange geographical space, one confronts different forms of socio-cultural and political experiences and often experiences cultural shocks. Such experiences eventually lead to self-questioning, offer opportunities for adoption of new ideas and socio-cultural practices and widening the horizon of knowledge. Thus the traveller is inevitably transformed. When power hierarchy intervenes in travel narratives, the ‘politics’ of representation becomes more evident. Here the travel narratives tend to commodify exotic images of the lands and the people the traveller visits. Again, when the traveller from a colonized country travel to the land of the colonizer, his/her narration often takes the form of a

‘writing back’. It is in this way that the world gets divided into the Occident and the Orient.

Colonial travel writing occupies a major place in the huge gamut of travel writing. But the current and emerging variety of travel writing adopts an altogether different approach which is more preoccupied with scholarly and intellectual persuasion. Postcolonial travel writing attempts to come out of the Eurocentric practices of representation that proliferated in the 18th and 19th centuries. Even the travels from the East to the West written by colonized subjects and hyped as ‘writing back’ are/were not free from Eurocentric trends. Postcolonial travel writings dig in researches the complex issues of relations between place and space, home and nation, space and time, race and culture.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Mention few major traits of travel writing.

11.3 INDIAN ENGLISH TRAVEL WRITING

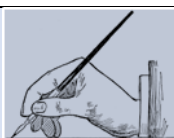
According to Susan Bassnett, travel writing is not an innocent account of the visual world, but it is about constructing a different culture from one's own point of view. She also discusses India from the point of view of the Western travellers who came to the East with a readymade India already constructed in their consciousness. It is one of the oldest civilizations and is made exotic with a collage of kings, marble palaces, gilded domes, snake charmers, dusky maidens, tigers, elephants and snakes. Thus, there was always the scope for generalization and over-simplification. During the colonial period this image percolated in the ideological framework of the Indian intellectuals who were introduced to English Studies. Therefore, the travelogues written in English by an Indian traveller who addressed the readers located both in and outside the country cannot remain innocent.

Sachidananda Mohanty writes in *Travel Writing and the Empire*, “ That travel writing is more than a geographical account, local colour, spirit of place, or depiction of manners and morals, and it is actually a form of memoir, an autobiography, dates back to Emerson and Thoreau, if not the earlier masters. What is radically new is perhaps the perception that travel books map out the territories of the mind, define contours of nations and communities, and determine forms of cultural and political representations” (xvii). The role of a travel writer is that of a translator who tries to translate that which strikes him/her as strange. The traveller also engages in mapping the geographical, cultural and social topography of the land visited by him/her. The traveller is a curious surveyor of the customs, cultures, and ways of life of the people he/she encounters. The accounts are often guided by a sense of amazement as well as curiosity. This is a human tendency to concretize and frame that which is vast and elusive. It also involves the traveller in revisiting his/her own consciousness of his/her identity and readjusting it. The attitude of the travel writer becomes part of the writer's own style. The Western travellers came as curious agents in search of the exotic and sensuous. Convinced of the

superiority of their own cultures, they were trapped in the Occident/Orient binaries. For them the Orient is the natural antonym of the Occident – the former is conceived as tame, insipid and inferior. The Occident is what the Orient is not. The travellers try to freeze the subject of gaze into a stereotype. Said pointed out that for the Western traveller the Orient was a given, in need of a careful scrutiny. It may represent a romantic tendency – “a romantic quest which (leads) ultimately, not unidirectionally out into the blank plains, dense forests, or nebulous skies of a beckoning or unknown land, but back into a tangled self” (Fulford and Kitson 167). This is applicable in the case of the traveller from a colonized land like India too, though it was more a tendency to gain ontological experience of that which have/had been promoted by the British Anglicists as superior. They have/had already gathered the experience of a foreign race known as the British and through the introduction of English had gathered a considerable amount of data on England and Europe. However, it should be made clear that the Indian colonial experience of the British administrators and the ideologies that they were introduced to, especially of the French Revolution or the American war of Independence, might have struck them as contradictory. This confusion is depicted, for instance, in the character of Dr Aziz in Foster’s novel *Passage to India*. Many Indian intellectuals welcomed the opening up of a passage to the West and often travelled there in search of new knowledge. A growing wave of Indian nationalism often inspired travellers to visit the West to represent India as an old and rich civilization. This was combined with the curiosity to know other nations in order to place India in the world map. There were also adventurers, tourists, opportunists, academicians, thus enlarging the list of Indian travellers growing simultaneously with the growing middleclass. This change in social structure was part of the changes that came along with British colonialism. According to Bassnett, in times of change people look comparatively at their own culture, seeking to explore alternative models or a different perspective of what is familiar to them.

The colonial period produced very few travel writings in English. The reasons are varied. In general people continued to nurture the inhibition of

crossing the 'kala pani'. Moreover, many could not afford to travel. A small group from the elite and educated travelled to the West for further education or on a mission to represent the voice of India. Gandhi had gone to speak at the British parliament and Vivekananda joined the Parliament of Religion at Chicago, USA and spoke about the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of India, Aurobindo Ghosh went to England for education in order to satisfy his father, Tagore for a mission to speak against the chauvinism created by exclusionist nationalism and also on different invitations as a poet; many of his family members travelled as they could afford it. The members of the famous Dutt family, known especially for the poet Toru Dutt, had gone to the West as they were converted to Christianity. Authors like Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Nirad C. Choudhury may also be mentioned – they wished to follow the career of authors writing in English. Gradually, many travelled to the West and decided to settle down there, thus forming a large Indian diaspora. But travel experience, as formally written in the form of travelogues are sparse in number. It is possible to find letters, most of them in native languages, especially in the colonial era. The recent trend of the Indian author as a globe-trotting phenomenon has yielded some consciously written travelogues. Thus, we have N.C. Choudhury's *A Passage to England* from the colonial time, Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* and Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake* in the post-colonial era. Dean Mahomet's *Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1794) which documents a strange history of an ordinary Indian in search of his fortune is identified as the first attempt in English at writing a travelogue by an Indian.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Mention few important characteristics of travel writing as stated by different critics.



The Beginning of Indian English Travel Writing: *The Travels of Dean Mahomed*

There have been efforts to identify the first work of travel writing written in English by an Indian and *The Travels of Dean Mahomed* written in 1794 is the date agreed upon by many scholars. The story of this ordinary Indian is interesting. He was destined to carve out a place for himself in Indian literary history. Therefore, a brief sketch of his career is necessary to illustrate the long passage of travel writing that later proliferated. Dean Mahomed, following the footsteps of his father had joined the Army of East India Company at the age of twenty-five. He worked under Captain Godfrey Baker who treated him as his son. Mahomed followed Baker when he returned to Ireland. Baker sent him to school where he studied the English language and literature. After Baker died, he eloped with Jane Daly, a fellow student.

Mahomed was enterprising and moved to London for new opportunities. He opened a restaurant, the Hindoostanee Coffee House, and also became famous by introducing Indian herbs and oils in his bath house and promised cure for asthma, rheumatism etc. Soon he was appointed as Shampooing Surgeon to the King of England.

However, he struggled to survive in the face of strong competition in business and often faced bankruptcy. He hardly realised at that point of time that it would be his travel writing, and not his business, that would win public recognition, a career he did not think much of. It would one day earn him a

permanent place in history. The work titled *The Travels of Dean Mahomed, a Native in Patna in Bengal, Through Several Parts of India, while in the Service of the Honourable The East India Company* is autobiographical in nature. This was a book that offered the Britons an opportunity to realise how they were look at by a colonized subject. Mahomed's career adds to the fact how the natives too exploited them by using the exotic image of the East that the West had constructed.

What makes this work unique is that Mahomed looked back not at India, but at the West, providing new perspectives to the Western readers about their own land. The traveller is not an explorer trying to discover the unknown. Mahomed's narration makes it clear that while creating the exotic but insipid East, the West, by default, had constructed itself as a fixed phenomenon. The traveller in Mahomed's narration breaks this fixity in the instinctive pleasure of discovering novelty. The Indian traveller too carries with him some preconceived notions learnt from books or other means and is unsettled by the experience of cultural shocks, oppositions and unfamiliar situations that he encounters. Again, the Indian traveller in the West often faces the embarrassment of becoming a curious object of study Amrita Satapathy writes, "Once the idea and the image clash due to an actual encounter, the East feels the urge to fight back by writing narratives in defamiliarized Indian English and Mahomed's travelogue cum autobiography confidently presents the real India for the West" (3).

11.3 R.K. NARAYAN: LIFE AND WORKS

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanaswami or R. K. Narayan, as he was popularly known, was born on 10 October, 1906 in Madras (now Chennai) which was a Presidency during British rule in India. His father was a school headmaster, but Narayan was never interested in formal education. His maternal grandmother was a strong influence in his tender childhood days. She introduced him to Indian mythology, Indian classical music and Sanskrit. Interestingly, the family conversed in English and were very cautious about

grammatical errors. Narayan studied in a succession of missionary schools. He was an avid reader of English novels, his favourite authors being Charles Dickens, P.G. Wodehouse, and Arthur Conan Doyle. Perhaps this peculiar environment of his childhood where Indian traditional knowledge went hand in hand with English Studies created the path towards the culmination of one of the most important pioneers of Indian English Novel writing. His family was indifferent to the nationalist politics and when, at the age of twelve, he participated in a pro-independence march, his family was not very happy. This event reminds us of Swaminathan in his famous novel *Swami and Friends* where little Swami bunks school to participate in a Swadeshi march. This may also justify the fact that Narayan, unlike his contemporary writers, was not overtly nationalistic in his works and has been criticized by some eminent critics. He himself was partly responsible for this misconception because in his autobiography *My Days* he has stated that for him writing was just a recreation as well as a means to earn his living. However, left to the sensitive reader his works are found to contain irony and humour which are serious literary tools of social and political criticism. One should note that instead of choosing the macro world of Indian nationalist politics, Narayan chose to look at the scene from the point of view of the common man and underscore their funny ideological confusions.

It is a common practice of scholars of Indian Writing in English to refer to R.K. Narayan along with his peers Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao. Together they constitute the leading trio of post-independence India who contributed remarkably to Indian English novel writing, a genre directly imported from the West. What is remarkable about them is that though they used the imported form, their genius gifted the Indian as well as the world readers a wonderful concoction that was peculiarly Indian, though written in English. This is not to say that there was no attempt at prose fiction writing before them. However, according to M.K. Naik Indian English Literature, by 1930 was more than a century old, but till then could not produce novelists of considerable output. It is interesting to note that the upsurge of Indian nationalism which Naik calls the Gandhian Age (1920-1947) was simultaneous with the proliferation of

novel writing. He writes, “A society compelled into self- awareness like this provides a fertile soil for fiction and it is no accident that the three major Indian English novelists, viz., Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, began their career during this phase”(15). Among these three, R. K. Narayan stands out as a writer of humble aspiration, limiting his imagination within the daily lives of the colonial and post-colonial middleclass of India. He created a fictional space for them and called it Malgudi.

Narayan obtained his Bachelor’s degree in four years in 1926 after failing in the entrance exam and thus losing one year. It is apparent from his academic career that formal education was not his forte. Fortunately, he took the advice of a friend and instead of taking a Master’s degree he concentrated on creative writing. He also joined school as a teacher but left it soon. He wrote stories for local newspapers and magazines.

His first effort in novel writing was *Swami and Friends* (1935) where he introduced the fictitious Malgudi. This novel was rejected by several Indian publishers until he sent it to a friend at Oxford. This is how it reached the English author Graham Greene. This was a turning point in Narayan’s career when his first novel got published by a foreign publisher. It was in the year 1935. Subsequently followed his *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) and *The Dark Room* (1938). The books got good reviews.

His life and career suffered a jolt when his young wife Rajam died, leaving at his sole disposal their baby daughter Hema. Narayan’s was a love marriage which was a desperate act in a traditional Brahmin family where the family always played the role of choosing the bride. Narayan, in his personal life had been a kind of detractor and did not tread the beaten path. Not only did he marry a girl of his own choice and gave up a stable income from his teaching career, after his marriage he became a reporter of the newspaper *The Justice* where he spoke for the deprived non-Brahmins. This created much noise since it was unusual for a Brahmin to support the case of the non-Brahmins. This also brought him in touch with people from various strata of society. There is no doubt that it enriched his experience as a writer who knew the mass of India.

Rajam's death brought about a change in the quality of his writing. After a period of literary ennui, he wrote *The English Teacher*. This was completely autobiographical, as if his pain of her loss found expression in the narration of his own life. This was published in 1945, seven years after his last novel. He also published *Malgudi Days* in 1942, which was his first collection of short stories.

Narayan had once tried to bring out his own journal *Indian Thought* but soon dropped the project. But he was able to start his own publishing company and named it Indian Thought Publications which ran successfully. Without planning to write a trilogy of autobiographical nature, Narayan had actually produced three books that more or less cover his life. *Swami and Friends* shows Saminathan, a little boy who hates the constricting experience in the system of missionary schools. He would rather adjust with the more flexible nature of the local school where he had enough time to play football and loaf about with his friends. Once he bunked school to join a Swadeshi March, threw a stone and broke the school window. Not knowing the significance of burning foreign clothes, in his excitement he also burnt his khadi cap. *The Bachelor of Arts* deals with the adolescent falling in love and manipulating the horoscope to marry a young woman. It is a tongue in cheek depiction of the flippant nature of youth. By the time he writes *The English Teacher* which is a kind of purging experience for him after the shock of his wife's death, his tone becomes more serious. The novel deals with the life of a young widower who has to manage simultaneously his work and his little motherless child. It shows his yearning for his dead wife with whom he communicates through planchet. The novel also criticizes the foreign education system introduced in India and introduces a model of education that would offer a free play to the child's education.

After writing *The English Teacher* Narayan was able to come out of the subjectivity of his own life and look around himself to perceive the peculiarities of the growing middleclass people during the colonial and post-colonial age in India. *Mr Sampath* maintains an objective tone while telling the story of a large-hearted printer Mr Sampath. He fails to run his printing press while trying to help an idealist. When he depicts a young man's dream to bring

out a journal, Narayan undoubtedly banked on his own experience. The *Financial Expert* (1951) launches the subject of the growing materialism that came with the British endeavour of fostering commerce in India. It introduces the first Indian bourgeois character in his novel, one who, with skill and cunning, tries to go up the social ladder so that his son could enjoy the privilege of money and luxury. It also is ironical, showing the chances of failure and mental setback that materialism entails. *The Guide* (1958), *The Man Eater of Malgudi* (1961), *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), *The Painter of Signs* (1977) are all about the newly opened up opportunities that the middle-class people grab to fulfil their dreams for money and a smooth life. The characters are cunning, dexterous, but somehow lovable because of the pathos that they create in their confused turmoil in a life that was still traditional, though new changes entered this age old social and economic structure alluring them. They become opportunists. *The Guide* is made famous with its filmed version which brought Narayan's name to the fore of the popular culture, though it is not an exact depiction of the spirit in which Narayan had written his novel. It is a picaresque novel and Raju is a rogue who makes a journey of the adventurous entrepreneur of the emerging modern India where there were many such common men who chose dubious paths to fulfil their bourgeois dreams.

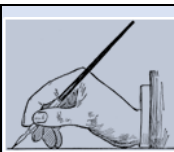
Narayan created the new entrepreneur characters like Raju of *The Guide*, Mr Sampath, the owner of a printing press in *Mr. Sampath*, the sweet vendor of *The Sweet Vendor*, Vasu the taxidermist of *Man Eater of Malgudi* and many more who were the products of industrial capitalism that was introduced by the British. These are the dreaming petit bourgeois who drastically left the still lingering agrarian social structure with its traditional ideologies. They deftly commute between their personal materialistic goals but also respond to the growing trend of Gandhism and nationalism in their own confused way. Narayan has often been accused that at a time when his peers were seriously addressing the nationalistic political milieu and representing Gandhi's constant fight against the social ills that had infected India, he was writing about ordinary characters with their petty aspirations. It should be noted that the growing middleclass was then the most throbbing and thriving

part of Indian society. It could provide a writer with a knack for irony and humour. Narayan with his genial humour exposed their confusions, hypocrisies as well their new found dreams. Colonial capitalism had opened up to them several avenues for material gain. However, Narayan does not forget to underpin the traditional Indian values that still existed in a variety of localized forms. The characters, absorbed in their material venture often deviate and cross the limits when they show signs of greed and ambition for power and money.

Gandhism in India saw a proliferation of novel writing. Narayan too was influenced by this great personality but unlike other writers his negotiation with this great legend was different from the usual one. Instead of depicting Gandhi and Gandhism from an understanding that came out from the works of many intellectuals of India and abroad, he took the upside down perspective of the ordinary semi-educated mass for whom Gandhism was an elusive abstraction. He took immense pleasure in writing the ordinary man's confusions, weird interpretations of Gandhism, the petty pretensions and hypocrisies. Swami of *Swami and Friends*, like Narayan himself, hates going to school and acts a truant one day. He enthusiastically joins a 'Swadeshi' rally without knowing its significance. In his excitement he throws his khadi cap when the people were burning foreign goods to protest against British imperialism. Sriram joins the followers of Gandhi because he had fallen in love with Bharti, a volunteer and follower of Gandhi. The sweet vendor in *The Sweet Vendor* is proud that he is a staunch Gandhian. But the reader would realize that his ascetic life is a pretext for him to hoard money for his son who, he believed, one day would climb the social ladder and join the elites. He cheats on the Income Tax Department with the firm assertion that Gandhi had given no instruction on the payment of tax. Raju of *The Guide* fasts to bring rain. His fasting is made to look like Gandhi's Satyagraha but it is the mob that he had exploited throughout his career who overpowers him with their faith in him as a Swami. Raju is caught in his own trap and is forced to fast though he is all the time haunted by the thought of food until he resigns to his fate. Some critics have interpreted his journey as epistemological – the rogue who repents

and finally transforms into a Swami. However, some would agree that like a picaresque anti-hero his journey is metamorphic.

Narayan's protagonists are part of the masses; their faces are the more prominent ones among the crowd. This gives us clue to his world-view as a writer. He is a consciously low profile writer and like Jane Austen is happy with depicting a limited world. When it comes to his use of the English language he accepts it as a colonial legacy and therefore part and parcel of Indian life. To match his subjects, he uses the simple English that the middleclass use in India.

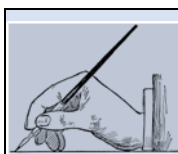


CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How did Narayan present the ordinary men's view of Gandhism in an ironical way in his writings?

Malgudi

Malgudi is Narayan's creation, an imaginary space in which the author shows the impacts of colonialism on a simple and conservative society. Malgudi, along with the author's own growth as a writer undergoes drastic changes. Initially it was a quiet town on the bank of the river Sarayu. After the British constructed the railways and Malgudi was connected to the rest of India, strangers began crowding Malgudi. This changed the social, cultural and economic structure of Malgudi. Banks, printing presses, hotels, taxi stands, smugglers' dens, cinema halls and film studios cropped up fast and affected the people. It gave Narayan ample scope to create grotesque characters. Narayan was interested in depicting this gradual transition which contributes to the comic scenario of each Malgudi story. The town is so real to the reader that it is easy to draw a map of the town. In his book *A Critical Study of the Novels of R.K. Narayan* Jayant K. Biswal states that into that small South Indian town with its orthodox values the modern civilization comes in all its manifestations raising a flutter here and there, disturbing the quiet waters of Malgudi life. He quotes H.M. Williams who writes that Malgudi gives Narayan the necessary fixity of background against which he could set a comedy of deviation and disturbance of the normal. He further adds that the comedy in the novels after 1946 depended very much on the abnormal outside influence with the placidity of the town. K.R.S. Iyengar in *Indian Writing in English* describes Malgudi as the real hero of all the eleven novels and numerous short stories as it has a 'soul' and while defying or embracing the changes remains unalterably itself.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. In what way is Malgudi important in Narayan's writings?

Non-Fictional Works

Apart from his Malgudi novels he expressed his thoughts in the form of essays in newspapers and journals. It is sad that Narayan is more popular as the writer of the Malgudi fictions, whereas his non-fiction works are also equally interesting. The essays are personal and conversational in tone. They are collected under the titles *Next Sunday* (1960), *Reluctant Guru* (1974), *A Writer's Nightmare* (1988), *The World of the Storyteller* (1989). He wrote columns for magazines and newspapers like *The Hindu* and *The Atlantic*. Narayan was also a translator and rewrote in the form of short stories many interesting episodes from the Indian epics. They are titled *Gods, Demons and Others* (1965), *The Ramayana* (1972), *The Mahabharata* (1978). He wrote short stories which are compared to the works of Maupassant. These collections are *A Horse and Two Goats* (1976), *An Astrologer's Day and Other Stories* (1947), *Lawley Road* (1956), *Malgudi Days* (1982), *Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* (1985), *The Grandmother's Tale* (1993). The last is a novella based on his remembrance of an interesting story that his grandma had told him when he was a child. Another autobiographical work is *My Days* written in the form of a memoir. Other works like *Mysore* and *Emerald Route*:

Passage through Karnataka sound like travel guides but they are, in fact, personal impressions and informal depiction of legends and history. He often delves deep in the common man's negotiation with Indian history. He prefers to choose a personal tone rather than an objective one and shares the nature of tragedy that people remember about their hero Tipu Sultan and his fatal but heroic battle against the British. The story moves the readers. These works excite the imagination of the readers.

Narayan's works like those of his peers Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand who first brought Indian Writing in English to the notice of the West. It was through the English writer Graham Greene that his first work *Swami and Friends* was published when the same was rejected by many Indian publishers. His success in The United States came when Michigan State University Press began publishing his works, who later relinquished the rights to Viking Press. Narayan's works are apparently simple in language and structure but are enlivening and witty. Even when reading his non-fictions, the reader would feel like being in the presence of the author chatting on various interesting but light incidents that create the fabric of everyday life. He could peep into the funny side of the creature called homo sapiens and could easily subvert the glory that man has created around the human race. Here he is close to his equally illustrious brother R.K. Laxman. Though he never tries to delve deep in philosophical abstraction but his unique humorous perception of life which, spiced with irony or a slightly pungent humour, is itself a worldview and touches reality.

11.3 READING MY DATELESS DIARY


Travel Writing usually depends on dates. So does the form of diary writing. In *My Dateless Diary*, published in 1960, Narayan introduces a unique style of datelessness, defying the important tool of diary writing, the marking of the narration or documentation under specific dates. Travel diaries capture the temporal movement of one's travel experiences. Temporality brings an undisturbed flow in narration which is epistemological. A traveller often

carries his/her diary, eager to capture the strange and unknown phenomena that s/he meets on his/her path away from home. The traveller travels to other places carrying his/her own cultural baggage; he gradually gathers knowledge through constant cultural negotiation.

R.K.Narayan, travelling through America was already an established writer in India and many of his stories were already included in some of the schools and universities there. As a writer he is humorous, objective, realistic, and detached. His career which started as a journalistic reporter has a great influence on his style of writing. As the title of the book suggests, the narration centres on R. K Narayan's travels and experiences in America. America as a nation encapsulates the minds of millions of people all world over because of its vibrant life. Narayan's style of writing in *My Dateless Diary* is full of cultural analogies between the American and Indian culture. His Indian sensibilities colour his narration as he keeps getting nostalgic about India, particularly Indian food. His craving for Indian coffee in a cafe is comical. In fact, he goes on to passionately describe the merit of brown coffee detailing the art of coffee making as performed in South India. He calls this recital on brown coffee as 'God given opportunity'. In an amusing and witty manner he takes us on a visual journey of his encounter with Americans and their way of life. At times the cultural difference also comes as a shock for Narayan, who initially struggles to keep pace with the American way of life. The book itself begins with the lines, "Yesterday, at the self-service cafeteria, I made the mistake of waiting for someone to ask what I wanted. Today I know better" (11). This is because in America, you choose and decide in an instant without making the rest in the line wait for their turn. Americans are very particular of time and the notion of self- service is also very strong.

Through the diary, we see how America is like a kaleidoscope which offers diverse experiences that tickle his sense as a keen observer. America is like an uncharted territory, a frontier that both beckons him as a tourist and demands his attention as an author. *My Dateless Diary* is the result of Narayan's position both as an Indian and as an author. Narayan makes an interesting observation regarding the use of the word 'Indian' in America. He

points out how the word gets constantly mixed up with a person from India, and to the Americans. He wittily states “The original confusion caused by Columbus still continues in speech” (147). The tone and tenor of the book is jovial and witty, yet Narayan doesn’t hesitate to state his struggles in trying to adjust to life in America. For instance, he deals with the existence of racial segregation in certain parts of America. He himself was a witness to such an experience when he boarded a bus with reserved seats for the ‘Whites’. *My Dateless Dairy* also gives poignant account of the life of Indians settled in America. He observes the problems faced by some Indians in America in adjusting to their life there. He feels that such Indians live ‘in-between’ Eastern and Western ethics. The dairy presents Narayan in America reacting and processing his experiences as an Indian. Narayan in his travels in America recognises that he is also a cultural ambassador of India. So, he is very careful when information is sought from him – information regarding India’s political scenario, Gandhi’s spirituality and Nehru’s socialist temperament, etc. Narayan masterfully answers such questions presenting India in her best light. Many a times he is also a carrier of Indian culture and philosophy. In a sense he is translating Indian philosophy and Indian ethics to the American audience. The dairy is written in a very personal tone, appealing to the most beautiful emotions of the human nature. The narration is spontaneous and factual without any kind of verbose descriptions.


CHECK YOUR PROGRESS	
	<p>1. What observation did Narayan make regarding the use of the word ‘Indian’ in America?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>

2. What adjustment did Indians make in America, according to Narayan?

11.4 AMERICA IN MY DATELESS DIARY

When he was in his fifties, Narayan, for the first time travelled to America. He was awarded the Rockefeller Fellowship and spent nine months travelling across the States. The book is a collage of a series of heterogeneous experiences deliberated in a tongue in cheek manner. It is his first visit to the USA. He began from New York and travelled round the country and ended his journey in New York. He found New York to be the favourite destination for most of the Americans. On his way he went to Los Angeles, California, New Mexico, Washington D.C. and Chicago. He jots down in the style of a diary his encounters with various luminaries like Greta Garbo, Edward G. Robinson, Milton Singer, Aldous Huxley, Cartier Bresson, Martha Graham and the Indian sitarist Ravi Shankar. As is natural, he also met the Indian diaspora. His experience with the anonymous American citizens ranging from business tycoons to the electrician, in different places like the train, bus, apartments and hotel rooms are interesting. He dwells on the peculiarities of American culture from American cuisine to their obsession with rules, technical gadgets. He finds how fast food restaurants, subway commuters, football or instant gurus create the texture of American life. He compares them with the more languid life in India that allows a double edged take on both the cultures. As a traveller

he notices particular characteristics that cling to the different cultures in the huge land mass named the USA. Thus, friendliness is ascribed to the people of the West of America, and more cosmopolitan wealthy and racist people are seen in the states in the Mid-West and East. His interaction with the ordinary people fascinates him as the common people are usually unpredictable. The electrician opens up to him once he finds that Narayan was not a Portuguese. The business tycoon on the train shows little respect for the writer because Narayan had no idea about steel industries. On the other hand, some surround him in a restaurant once they come to know that he was a writer from India. The white couple in a bus prefer to stand as they did not want to sit in the vacant seat beside a coloured person. They are an amalgamation of the warm, curious, queer, nasty, loving, temperamental bunch of people. In 1956 India was in her first decade of Independence with a charismatic Prime Minister and the legacy of Gandhi still fresh in the memory of not only the Indians but the whole world. So very often Narayan had to face questions on the first Prime Minister of India or the spirituality of the legend named Gandhi. Narayan's answers to their queries are often humorous and he tried to break the clichés about India. His humour turns sarcastic when he experiences colour prejudice. It is a book full of discoveries, humorous comparisons between Americans and Indians and a double edged but good-humoured critique of the American and Indian (South Indian) culture.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS	
	<p>1. What did you understand by Indian diaspora in America?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>

2. Mention few important attributes of American culture as observed by Narayan?

3. Why did Narayan not mention dates in his Diary?

Foreword

In his “Foreword” Narayan justifies his style of writing a dateless diary, “Datelessness has its limits. Sooner or later the seal of date shows up even in the most indifferently maintained diary.”

It is apparent that Narayan was not interested in the day to day documentation of his travel. Rather, book captures particular experiences that he found unique while travelling in a unfamiliar land and wished to capture them. He writes them down under different subtitles. His strength lies in his capacity to discover the funny and incongruous side of some apparently ordinary incident or character. This fun or incongruity is the product of the clash of two different cultures – one that he carried with himself in his persona and the other being the one of the land he visited. It invokes shock, surprise, realizations

New York Days

Narayan's first stint with America began in New York. He begins his "Diary" describing his first morning in this famous city. In a self-service cafeteria Narayan discovers the fast pace and orderliness of American life and soon learns to emulate, though with a critique tagged to this culture shock. He is nostalgic about the coffee made by his mother and cannot stop himself from lecturing on the irrationality of naming the coffee 'black' or 'white' because, for him a good coffee should be brown. He compares the languid atmosphere in a typical South Indian cafeteria. The detail of food and human behaviour itself have all the ingredients to entertain the reader by underscoring the incongruity of both the cultures. The description also gives away the socio-cultural background of the Tamil Brahmin writer who is not ready to compromise his vegetarianism and is ready to survive on cornflakes, milk and bread.

Later, when gazing at the Dolphin Fountains and gardens when he needed repose from writing, he realized how actual places are lesser than the pictures shown through 'View-Master' slides. This shows how a traveller often carries a pre-conceived image of a particular place and then tries to fit one into the other. An actual place is also a happening place where the traveller carrying his own cultural baggage faces cultural shocks. Watching old people mingling with the young, Narayan finds himself facing a question- "Why were aged persons attempting the feat with all that air of daringness?" (14). This attempt to defy age is a paradigm that opposes the Indian philosophy that after a certain age when children grow up the old are supposed to retire from material life and live the life of an ascetic. The sarcasm is specially targeted at the grotesquely elaborate hats of the women of New York who attempt to "cheat age" (15). This is a comment made by a cheerful American gentleman and Narayan had to agree with him. He goes to the root by pointing out how consumerism constructs the ideas of beauty and fashion. Again, he comes to know from his American companion that the culture of Texas is different from that of New

York, reminding the reader of the concept of 'salad-bowl' related to American multiculturalism.

Once while passing the show window of 'The Government of India Tourist Office' he found an American week-end visitor peering at the Indian mementoes displayed. It gave Narayan an opportunity to engage in 'sales talk' describing the particular article and also brag a little about India, its rich heritage of art and craft. His pleasure in romanticizing his country was such that he felt like discovering his own country again. His comment on the missing letters on the door is meant to imply unchangeable disorderly and carnival nature of India where rules are made to be broken and hardly anything is strictly ordered.

He gave on-the-spot lectures on Gandhi and Nehru when surrounded by curious strangers. It was apparent to him that they equated Gandhi with India and he protested in vain. For some, Gandhi seemed to be a sturdy and physically strong man. Probably, unable to conceive the idea of spiritual power they endowed Gandhi with a strong physique which went with their idea of leadership quality. This incident underscores cultural gap. On another occasion he encounters a sensitive and high-strung lady who is influenced by Narayan's *English Teacher*. She had lost a dear friend in a road accident and carried a sense of guilt for not expressing her intuitive foreboding and stopped him from going for a long drive. She wanted his help to commune with the dead as the protagonist of the book had done with his dead wife. Yet she feared that by American standard she would be seen as an eccentric. Narayan, a humanist, finds how ideological barriers are created among cultures when there are certain points of emotional commonality.

Again, his chance encounter with a Swedish American subverts the general notion of American materialism and the military imperialism that is usually associated with America. This old gentleman speaks about the futility of war or the atomic tests carried out in the oceans and killing fish. He represents a generation that is perturbed by the growing pace of American life and would love to chat on a variety of subjects like the pedigree of dogs or humanity in general. "We are all one; no need to fight even if we are


different...” (p.26). On another page of his diary he comments on the little prides and prejudices that the common Americans indulge in. Narayan noticed that they were quite tolerant and civil about any joke at their expense and would often participate, but are seriously hurt if they are hated. “They have a trembling anxiety lest they should be thought of badly” (37). Naturally a comparison with India enters this observation and the reader is given a glimpse of India where criticism creates a great hullabaloo but is promptly forgotten. It is a much hardened country which has gone through the ups and downs of time.

Narayan’s strength lies in his capacity to discover the strange and funny side of an ordinary character. The electrician who came to repair his reading lamp had not heard about India but knew Bombay. He was a funny sailor who had sailed around the globe but had never felt the inclination or curiosity to disembark and see the place. He took Narayan to be a Portuguese and learning that Narayan was an Indian vented his ire against the speakers of South America who spoke Portuguese calling it Spanish. Narayan had a taste of language that is not different from the Indian experience.

It is often that a traveller to a foreign land is elated and nostalgic if a touch of his/her country is discovered. This happened to Narayan when he was invited to the Indian Consulate for dinner. The dinner offered South Indian food and Narayan poured out a eulogy on the culinary art of South India. Even the ex-Maharaja’s expression of joy at the sight of ‘sambar’ and ‘dosai’ immediately endears him to Narayan. It is quite possible that the Maharaja was from some other province of India, but in a foreign land all discrepancies that are alive in India between different cultures are promptly forgotten and nostalgia brings them under the same umbrella named ‘India’. Though this chapter is under the sub-title “Key Obsession” because Narayan’s evening was spoilt when he discovered that he was not carrying his hotel room key, the jovial and good-natured Maharaja attracts the reader more than anything else.

Narayan introduces the readers to the very enthusiastic and dynamic publisher and Director of Michigan State University Press Lyle Blair, who offered to publish all the books of Narayan. The readers have a glimpse of

Narayan's career. The irony that stares at the face is that a writer found unpublishable in his own country was spoilt for choice when it came to name a foreign publisher.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS	
	<p>1. Mention few important observations of Narayan in the New York chapter.</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

Through the Mid-West

“The porter dumped my bags at a place and told me to await the arrival of ‘transfer’ man” (43). This was in Detroit and though Narayan was gradually getting used to hotels and the paraphernalia that entail staying in American hotels, he discovered that there was no end to learning new phrases. His self-congratulatory deliberation of outwitting the porter and saving the amount of tips turns funny when he is left with confusion at the phrase ‘transfer’ man. It seemed there was no end to learning.

On his way to Lansing he noticed the great gap between the ‘parlour seat’ and ‘coach seat’ on a train and the behaviour of the conductor reminds the reader of the ills of caste system in India. It also reminds the reader that though in India the rich are privileged yet the question of poverty and the democratic rights of all and sundry survives in the consciousness as a legacy of Gandhi, ... or even the Nehruvian socialism. This is characteristic of India in spite of the fact that it often creates chaos and anarchy. In the USA, which is a democracy like India, the discrepancy is followed as a rule and without a prick of conscience. Thus, the citizens seem more law abiding than the Indians.

The callous worship of wealth is further underscored when Narayan gets to a fellow passenger who turned out to be a steel magnet. Narayan felt awkward as he could not force himself to continue on “steel talk.” Soon he was callously dismissed when this gentleman learnt that he was just a humble writer and not linked to the steel industry of India.

While attending to Professor Edward Blackman’s lecture on Roman architecture, Narayan, in the role of a traveller across cultures becomes alert to the vast difference of political attitude when it came to comparing the two nations. It was the big election day in America, and instead of life coming to a standstill as in India, the Americans voted quietly while the daily life went along its own course.

While in Lansing, Narayan had to fulfil academic duties expected from an invited writer. He appeared for a television show where his co-participant Professor Blackman was equally nervous. Again, it was Narayan’s turn to be nervous when he went to visit Professor Useem’s evening class where his novel *The Financial Expert* was read. Narayan expressed how the very act of writing a novel is a pleasure for the writer, but once published, the work goes out of the writer’s arena. It then is analysed and dissected and the result is beyond the writer’s remotest thought. Narayan expressed his apprehension in his own style of humour, “It gave me an odd feeling to reflect that a book written in joy and hopefulness in that lonely splendour of my home in Yadavagiri, should now be turning up to plague me thus” (49). In the same interaction Narayan came to know that some of the Americans still maintained

a joint family structure. A gentleman produces a photograph of his family consisting of several generations. The traveller is involved in a process of adjustment and readjustment of preconceived notions. As the Americans, the Indians too have their own share of misconception about American culture. At the same time the Indian philosophy which sees happiness as an antithesis to material prosperity proves itself when Narayan converses with an American reporter. "We have everything in the world, yet are unhappy. We as a nation are terribly bored; and so seek continuous forgetfulness in excitements, gadgets and so forth" (54). The apparently serious discussion where Narayan gets a chance to lecture on the Indian habit of meditation or 'puja' turns funny when his listener scrupulously jots down on the back of a bus ticket any new word or idea which, Narayan wondered would produce a meaningless jumble of disjointed words. Narayan's next important comment on authors comes in the sub-chapter "Speech Correction" where he expresses his boredom listening to Ann Porter reading her masterpiece. The story is highly appreciated by Narayan but he adds that bad reading can mar a writer's reputation. "Moral: an author should never give a reading of his or her own masterpiece, nor should he try to explain it" (61) However, Narayan finds that unlike India, Americans possessed more patience and spent money to listen to lectures.


Narayan's comment on the peculiarities of the English Departments anywhere in the world is a mild satire on the pretentiousness that the language is capable of bestowing on its members. However, Narayan's humility broke the barrier of self-defence that the members created in fear that Narayan would ask them to comment on his works. Narayan's humour and irony is explicated in his style of deliberation and a deft use of time arrangement. He is capable to create suspense and reveal the surprise at the right moment. It was only after the end of the meal when things looked quite comfortable that someone blurted out the wrong question if his books were translated in English. That they had not read his books did not bother Narayan but he was embarrassed at the discomfort of his hosts when he had to inform them that he wrote in English.

The image of crazy Americans shows up during a train journey from Chicago to Madison. Though holding a ticket for the First Class, Narayan had

to travel in a crowded coach. Preference was given to a football team and their fan followers. Here, surprisingly the idea of propriety and order disappears. It parallels the Indian craze for film stars or politicians. This is not spelled out by Narayan, but any Indian reader would immediately recognize this overflow of sentiment or fanaticism. This subverts an earlier experience of travelling by train where class distinction was prominent. When it came to football, this adherence to rule evaporates. Narayan had to give up the idea of refund.

Narayan's experiences with the common people open up a plethora of entertaining deliberations. He refers to one Mrs R. who, though good natured, continued to tease Narayan on his unaccented English. Narayan's comment, "Gill suddenly developed pneumonia" somehow tickled the lady much to the consternation of Narayan. In his irritation he rudely told her that Indians speak unaccented English and communication should be the main aim of language. There was a sad poetic justice when his hostess Virginia wrote to him that Mrs R. was down with double pneumonia!

Narayan's cultural shocks continue with his journey across America. One interesting observation that Narayan made was on the much hyped architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. In contrast to the well finished houses seen in every part of America, Lloyd chose to be different by leaving some portion of the building rugged without any plaster. From the Indian point of view this was a regular sight as the poor or middleclass used their life's savings to build a house and often ran out of cash in the middle of construction. Thus, the houses remained without the finishing touch of plaster. Narayan, in a subtle touch of irony compares a rich country with a poor one and underscores the irony and pathos.

	<p style="text-align: center;">CHECK YOUR PROGRESS</p> <p>1. What does the phrase 'transfer' man mean?</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed black;"/>
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2. How did Narayan know that Americans are more law abiding than the Indians?

3 What did Narayan mean by 'cultural shocks'?

Chicago

Narayan's stay at Chicago was rewarding as he met eminent Professors who were academically linked to India. One important autobiographical element related to his career is his note on Chamu who came all the way from New York to Chicago to meet him. Chamu is the pet name of Dr M.N. Srinivas, an eminent sociologist known both in India and the USA. The most important fact about his link with Narayan was that he was the first reader of

the first manuscript of his first novel *Swami and Friends*. He was the only person in India to assure Narayan the novel was readable and publishable. Though a diary on travel, it incorporates the facts of his life. Travel writing, after all is also a mode of self-writing.

This chapter also highlights how the idea of the joint family was circulated as an academic topic to be discussed and debated and often appreciated for its utilitarian and ideological value especially for the holistic growth of a child. The reader is reminded of the man in a previous chapter who carried with him as a relic a photograph of his joint family.

The chapter also depicts with humour another eccentricity of the Americas – the celebration of the ‘Thanksgiving Day’, when life comes to a standstill. A stray comment by a barber about the expense undergone by the government by supplying and butchering thousands of turkeys at the expense of the taxpayer should not go unnoticed. It is typical of Narayan to put important issues in the casual comments made by characters from the middle and lower crust of society, thus underscoring the political, cultural or even economic significance of the mass. Like his famous brother R.K. Laxman, he too celebrated the ‘Ordinary Man’.

Narayan had been, throughout his career focussing on the extraordinary in the ordinary. Such characters are often products of the soil, enmeshed in the socio-cultural milieu of the place. Yet they are universal too. It is interesting when the writer discovers a mirror image of some character from his works in life away in some foreign land. Here the experience is inverted. This happened to him during his stay in Chicago. He saw Chandran of his *Bachelor of Arts* in a young man named Montague. He was a young man in love but as uncertain a character as any young man of his age. He even sounds like an Indian vegetarian who could not tolerate the scene of slaughter of animal or poultry.

In the subchapter “Opiated Cocoon” Narayan the traveller consciously comments on the traveller’s cultural baggage which intervenes in his/her perception. His first reaction to certain displays in the Chicago Museum was lukewarm because he thought that India had similar and better from the ancient times. In a self-reflexive mood he spells it out with the phrase “odious and

inevitable comparison” (79). He tells himself, “But I suppose, it is not right that I should see them in a mood of comparison; my aim should be an ‘Absolute’ viewing, rather than to know what it means to those for whom it’s meant” (79). It is interesting to note how an intellectually engaged character not only sees and readjusts his ideas while travelling but also is capable of elaborating on the workings of the mind. He admits to his ignorance about architecture and then, as if confiding to someone close enough to have the privilege of reading his personal diary writes, “...I know nothing about architecture, and dare to pronounce them here only because this is my own personal diary” (79). This style of creating an environment endows the work with human warmth. It may be taken as a soliloquy but a writer knows he has readers in mind. Here he is changing the reader’s status from a stranger to a confidante.

Westward Bound

The subtitle indicates a journey to the West. It is a long journey and for the period of forty hours the traveller’s daily ablutions are carried out while on movement. It is also restricted, and variety is created through “punctuations” of moving within the limited space. It begins with a strange feeling as people from various backgrounds are clubbed together. For example, Rukka’s sari draws the attentions of fellow travellers who had, perhaps, never seen a sari-clad woman. But soon it changes into a comfortable familiarity and even the most detached ones enjoy a break by greeting each other and feeling happy.

Instead of going to Los Angeles Narayan follows Chamu and his wife Rukka to Berkley. He engages himself in house hunting and gives a hilarious description, using an imaginative character Dr A, an Indian anthropologist and the practical mess the Indians face to manage the innumerable gadgets that come with a rented apartment. Again, while dining in a supposedly Indian restaurant, and taking note of the bogus and artificial atmosphere of Indianness that was offered along with food, he returns to continue to develop the story of Dr A. He imagines Dr A importing to America the Indian tradition of arranged marriage. Narayan’s travel writing is unique in the sense that he reveals the workings of a writer’s mind, who amidst the chaos of disjunctive experiences

culls the essence and through imagination attempts to touch reality. For Narayan, here, it is the incongruous and the funny side lurking in different cultures that try to negotiate or overpower each other.

Narayan introduces to the reader a linguistic scholar John who taught Hindi in Berkley. The incident of the photo shoots of each other against the backdrop of the Golden Gate Bridge was clumsy and resulted in a photograph with “two Golden Gate Bridges with a double-headed, four-armed monster standing under it – my first photographic effort” (87). Narayan’s backdated Indian box camera and John’s forgetting to turn the spool bring both the Indian and American to the same peril where technology proves invincible and possessing a power of its own.

San Francisco Key station offers a dramatic scene when Narayan was trying to gauge how to reach Albany. Perhaps his foreign look and confused appearance made him an easy prey to two hefty gamblers. They tried to forcefully sell a lady’s watch in order to earn money for gambling. Having his back to the wall Narayan turned desperate and forged a casual and careless look. He used his talent of word and trapped them in the maze of a half philosophical and half rational rhetorical overture. Luckily his instinct proved right. They were bored and confused and before they could come out of their baffled stupor Narayan disengaged himself and disappeared. However, his lecture on the ambiguity of the idea of ‘time’ captured by the watch and the insignificance of that machine because time is never the same everywhere has an important biographical significance. Narayan had never used a watch in his life.

Narayan’s house hunting turned out to be frustrating with his friends pointing out his irrational and erratic likes and dislikes. However, it ends with a job offer from the Carlton Hotel. Most important for him was perhaps the Campanille Clock which could be seen from his room. It is a paradox that a writer who symbolically seeks freedom from the constrictions of time has to begin his day by asking the time. It is also part and parcel of a modern traveller’s itinerary; the traveller is dependent on time tables and often pre-planned schedules. The extreme example of the modern traveller is the travels

of Phileas Fogg, a fictitious character who plans to go around the world in eighty days. It stands in contrast to the travels of Wordsworth, as in “the Prelude” where time is languid and does not follow the strictures of the clock. Again, the traveller writer’s quest for a place that would be ideal in inspiring creativity is perceived in Narayan’s desperate search for the ideal apartment. He wanted to begin writing his new novel. It reminds us of Wordsworth’s quest for the little cottage nestled in a pastoral setting. Much later we see this constant change of location to settle temporarily in order to write after a journey in some part of the globe exemplified by the globetrotting postcolonial writers like Amitav Ghosh.

A drive to Palo Alto from Berkley and back with Mrs K and her little son Joe turns out to be chaotic. The restless boy left no option for Mrs K to continue a fruitful conversation with the writer, though this was her prime object behind her offering to drive a long distance. Looking out at the American free-way Narayan is reminded of H.G. Wells and the grim machine-ageness. He finds no sign of life like a stray cow, dog or tree – characteristic diversions on an Indian highway.

At the dinner hosted by Bilgiri, a young student of linguistics, Narayan finds the lecture on phonetics by a visiting lecturer dry and uninteresting. The cocktail party draws out an equal amount of sarcasm from Narayan. He found it artificial as men and women engage themselves in a forced and pretentious enthusiasm for conversation, creating a lot of meaningless noise.

In this part the reader has a glimpse of the writer’s plan of writing. He first conceives the story in his imagination in its skeletal form, discusses it with Graham Greene and after his approval sets a routine of writing at least two thousand words a day.

As in a previous part of the book, Narayan has another similar experience of the American’s obsession with the concept of the joint family. The absurdity of such discussion is expressed by Narayan. The conversation is carried out on the abstract plane and they showed no interest in Narayan’s observation, neglecting the fact that they were with a man from a country which, till then, had retained the structure of the joint family.

Narayan's comment on 'Versatile Bob' allows the reader to have a glimpse of the numerous free-lancers that the flexibility of the education system produced. Bob is a typical example of the younger generation full of impatient energy. Bob could jump from one interest to another without a flick of the eyelid. Bob's interest in writing an article on Narayan yields no fruit and soon he launches a project on Indian caste system. Narayan's last chance meeting with Bob revealed that he had decided to write a thesis on 'Russian Collectivism'.

Animal love has its extreme manifestations in America. This is observed by Narayan when he finds the cat lovers going to the extent of consulting psychiatrists for their anxiety over their pets, who, they thought were going off the rails.

Narayan's comment on American commercialism and worship of material prosperity is sarcastic. The query of the anthropologist about Indian philosophy that underscored a rejection of materialism displays the vast gap between the American world view and the Indian philosophical trend that supported a release from materialism.

Narayan in this part of his travelogue meaningfully uses a variation of style. His observation under the subtitle "One Continuous Mood" is an extension of his critique of American commercialism. This is particularly about California where he notices how advertisements of 'No Flame Cremation' or easy instalments offered on funerals gave him a creepy feeling of crude commercializing of 'death'. So, in the style of drama he writes an imaginative story to lighten his mood. It is a miniature play with characters and dialogue with the atmosphere that seemed like the middle age suddenly caught in the modern times. A king hides in the humble house of an old woman to escape the persecution by a group of renegades. His followers come to rescue him and are engaged in a battle. Narayan, with the help of incongruous and funny dialogues which are advertisements of soups, dish washers sandwiched between chivalrous speeches of war offers a hilarious piece of satire.

Narayan continues to gather knowledge about the class of Americans he was regularly meeting in social gatherings or individual encounters. It became

clear to him that they were curious about India, Gandhi, Ambedkar or Buddhism and often confidently expressed their half-baked ideas in such gatherings. However, he noticed cynicism as well. “Irreverence, Blasphemy, are here as compelling a creed as any religious practice in a monastery” (111).

Narayan added to his heteroglot American experience his observation on the fate of old people. He was told that better nutrition and public health had increased the Americans’ longevity. Narayan noticed their loneliness as they waited patiently for letters from their children and grandchildren. A lady from Guatemala explained how “the whole of American life is based on getting rid of parents” (113). This was the result of breaking up families into small units; the constant discussion on the idea of joint family, perhaps, was a fruit of this realization. Interestingly, she offers a unique solution; it depended on the designing of houses with extra suits that could accommodate the old parents. However, there were people who would not agree and point out how the older generation created problem by either demanding independence or interfering. The author Metro is one of them.

Narayan introduces Metro in this part of the book who later turned out to be a close friend of Narayan. His direct query on Hindus and Muslims leaves Narayan fumbling for words. Narayan’s depiction of this incident is ironical and addresses an important question on Indian politics. His friendship with Metro is interesting because when it came to views on novel writing, they stood poles apart.

Narayan completes his new novel the title of which he does not reveal. He decides to hang around for a while and resume his journey.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Jot down few important observations by Narayan in the chapter ‘Westward Bound’

Los Angeles

Narayan finds Los Angeles a huge and sprawling city. The downtown hotel he checks into proved gloomy and he chose to stay at a motel at Sunset Boulevard near Hollywood. Narayan often made fun of his own clumsiness when it came to handling mechanical objects that have become part and parcel of modern life. He could not handle his camera and gave up. He decided to buy picture postcards instead. He would rather not wear a watch and ask people when he needed to know the time. In Los Angeles he had to buy a small table clock. Americans respected the value of time. Narayan's visit to Hollywood was not without purpose. He was looking for a producer interested in Indian stories. He also comments on the attempt by Hollywood to preserve its rich past.

His meeting with Aldous Huxley was fruitful. They discussed Buddhism and politics, Gandhi, Mescaline, 'Gayatri Dhyana Sloka' colour perception, Yoga and Industrialism. Narayan dexterously builds up the image of this famous man, letting the reader to have a glance at the person's mind; his

childlike curiosity and the huge range of interest. Like a true writer with a liberal worldview, he became self-critical. He criticized European, especially British imperialism and the cultural hybridity which he could not appreciate. He applauded Balzac and his spontaneity as a novelist.

Narayan shows his skill for detail while describing the appearance of Huxley. The combination of the mind and appearance of Huxley gives the impression of awe inspiring grace.

Narayan returns to Huxley after describing the film world that he found eccentric and funny. Being an Indian visitor, he could also see the mindless use of idols from Indian culture and his comments are not without a tinge of sarcasm. He finds how Vedanta, yoga, Self-Realization Centres with avid American takers of oriental philosophy. But soon he returns to his reflections on Huxley which is a writer's admiration of another writer and awe at the dynamism of Huxley's mind that he describes as "encyclopaedic". Narayan gave Huxley his *English Teacher* to read, especially to note the psychic phenomenon in the novel. At Huxley's place, he met the famous British stage director Peter Brooks, though initially Narayan could not identify him. He met other famous personalities connected to Hollywood, too.

Another notable observation on Los Angeles was the famous cemetery 'Forest Lawns'. Narayan wondered how a grim phenomenon could be so beautifully packaged and commercialized.

Narayan takes leave of Los Angeles. While leaving the motel he realized he had grown attached to the motel and its people.

Grand Canyon and Beyond


This part, for a change demanded description of Nature in her grandeur. Narayan's dexterous portrait of men, even the most ordinary one, is well known. Even in this travelogue he had concentrated on men and his own growing wisdom of a strange culture. But descriptions of the wonders of nature or geographical topography are part and parcel of any travelogue. Narayan expresses the tremendous impact that the Grand Canyon left on him and he realizes that words cannot express the direct impact of "a work of art by

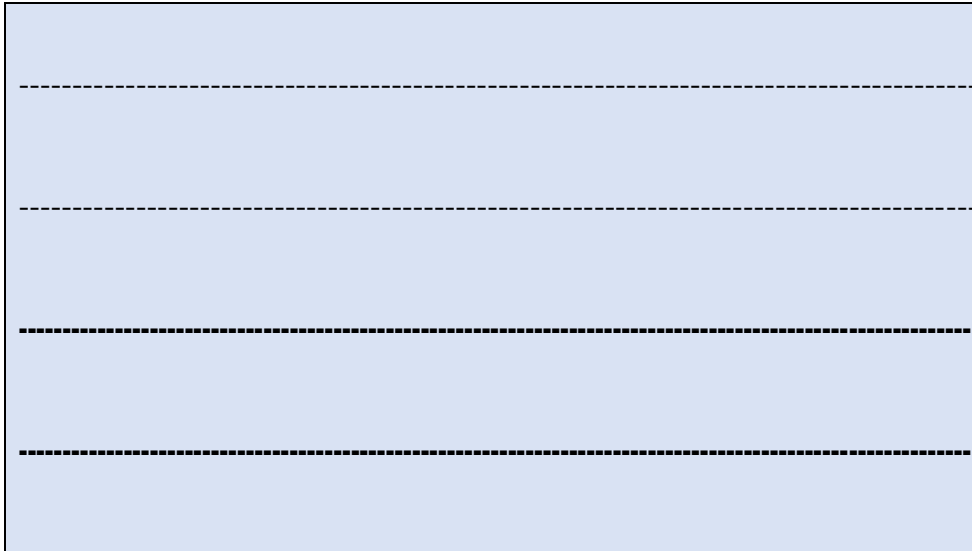
Nature” (143). He realizes the predicament of the writer who attempts to use words to convey such creation and thinks that such an attempt would be a sacrilege. Yet it is ironical that a traveller-writer has to write. He returns again to the American capitalism, analysing ‘Harveyism’. He writes about the legendary person Fred Harvey who had converted rocks, scenery, rivers, canyons, the whole civilization into cash business, selling them to tourists as souvenirs.

Gurukula in Tennessee

“Sewanee is a ‘Gurukula’, a small college of five hundred boys....” (152). Narayan had visited this place on an assignment of discussing his novels with the students. He found, to his surprise that a huge number of students had not only heard the name of Tagore but were genuinely interested in this Indian poet. Interestingly Narayan here faced the question on the “sacred cow” in India. They reasoned that since India was a poor country, consumption of beef could prove economical. Narayan replied that cows were scarce in India and should be preserved for milk.

Narayan’s first stint of American racism was in Monteagle where he boarded a bus for Nashville. The last seats were for the coloured passengers. A white couple prefers to stand though there were seats vacant in the row meant for coloured or black passengers.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS	
	<p>1. What is ‘sacred cow’? How did Narayan reply to the question of beef eating?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>



Washington D.C. and Onwards

After his journey in the West, Narayan finds Washington not only very cold, but a very formal city with most of the buildings housing different Government offices. But it was certainly the cleanest city of America. Narayan was also impressed by its taxi service. “I’ve found the most enchanting taxi-service on earth” (153).

On the train to New York, Narayan for the first time begins reading the manuscript of the novel he had written in Berkley, trying to read it from the point of view of his prospective readers. He had ample time to finish reading. It is a dramatic revelation to the curious reader who, till now had no clue to the name of this new novel. With the first line read out by Narayan the reader immediately recognizes it to be the famous novel *The Guide*. However, this does not prevent the traveller Narayan to take note of the landscape that rushed past his window. This is an interesting part that reveals how the travelling writer carries with him his own country while simultaneously reading the strange chapters that his journey to a foreign land reveals. *The Guide* that he wrote in Berkley carries no sign of his foreign experience; it is completely Indian. His dateless diary, on the other hand, documents his foreign experience from the point of view of an Indian traveller.

New York

Narayan had begun his journey from New York and returned to the same city at the end of his journey. In the meantime, he had completed his new novel but because of his habit of writing in a disordered style and his inscrutable handwriting it was very difficult to find a typist. “My handwriting generally reduces typists to a state of apathy and defeatism” (168). He worked for long hours to edit. He had to submit his manuscript to Viking on a certain day. However, at last his friend Faubion found him Jackie who was ready to go through the challenge.

Narayan’s New York experience was quite hectic but rich. He had the opportunity to listen to a performance in an Indian ambience. He had a taste of a debate which soon turned serious at a party hosted by Lyle Blair at Algonquin to celebrate the publication of Narayan’s *Mr Sampath*. Much to the embarrassment of Narayan the New York paperback publishers who admired Narayan compared him with Faulkner and Hemingway. They criticized Graham Greene and his obsession with catholic theology. They argued with a priest and almost spoiled the party. However, they thought that since America was a new nation, it was still fumbling for answers to certain religious and philosophical questions: according to them Narayan knew all the answers as he was from an ancient civilization.

Mysticism and questions on psychic experience haunted the Americans, especially the women. Narayan’s *The English Teacher* or *The Financial Expert* were popular topics among the intelligentsia. This not only reflects the depth hidden in a facade of a language of laughter that characterizes Narayan’s novels, but the reader has a glimpse at the confused American mind. The best part is Narayan’s meeting the legendary but mysterious actress Greta Garbo who had a sad lonely life in spite of all her fame. Her character comes out as something that is not expected from a popular celluloid diva. She sounded like a philosopher caught in the maze of life, trying hard to be free. Her questions to Narayan sound like a drowning person holding on to the last straw of hope.

Narayan ends his journey as well as his diary with Greta Garbo uttering, “How I wish we could stop time from moving and always taking us on to a moment of parting! Good-bye” (187). Perhaps her words are pregnant with the American dilemma – its fast life and all its efforts to find answers to questions which cannot be reflected on because of the constant hurry. Garbo’s words echo the observation of a very ordinary person in this part of the book. Myrtle, who came every morning to clean Narayan’s room said, “Your women don’t look worn out at all – they always look so soft and slow, while here all the time one has to be catching a sub-way or a bus, working, working” (170). This also illustrates how different cultures create myths of one another. Narayan the traveller negotiates them and acquires a dynamic and complex view of the world and the peoples.

11.5 SUMMING UP

In this unit you have learnt that:

- Travel writing is interdisciplinary in nature. It may be found in the form of narratives, poems, diaries, letters, journals, essays, fiction and non-fiction.
- Travel writing in mid-1990s was accepted as a systematic field of study.
- Very few travel writings in English during the colonial times are found in India.
- *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* written in 1794 is usually considered as the first travel writing written by an Indian.
- R K Narayan was born in a family where he grew up influenced by a blend of Indian traditional knowledge and English education on the other.
- R K Narayan created a fictional space called ‘Malgudi’ for the setting of his many novels.
- *My Dateless Diary* introduces a unique style of datelessness.
- *My Dateless Diary* centre’s on Narayan’s travels and experiences in America. America and India are both compared and juxtaposed in the diary.

- The diary presents Narayan in America reacting and processing his experiences as an Indian. He recognises that he is also a cultural ambassador of India.



11.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Critically examine the concept of Travel Writing.
2. Make an assessment of the difference between colonial travel writing and travel writing in the current and emerging variety.
3. Examine R.K. Narayan's *My Dateless Diary* as a representative text of Indian English Travel Writing.
4. Write a brief account of the early years of R K Narayan.
5. What is the title of R K Narayan's autobiography?
6. How is *My Dateless Diary* unique? How is America contrasted with India in *My Dateless Diary*?
7. Comment on the different cultural shocks faced by Indians in America as narrated in *My Dateless Diary*.



11.7 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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UNIT 12: TRAVELLING IN THE ORIENT: GHOSH'S THE IMAM AND THE INDIAN

12.0 Introduction

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Amitav Ghosh: Life and Works

12.3 Reading “The Imam and the Indian”

12.4 Travelling in the Orient in Ghosh’s “The Imam and the Indian”

12.5 Summing Up

12.6 Assessment Questions

12.7 References and Recommended Readings

12.0 INTRODUCTION

One result of academic attention to travel writing in Indian English literature has been the critical reviews that had followed the publication of travelogues like Amitav Ghosh’s “The Imam and the Indian” and *The Antique Land*. Amitav Ghosh is the most prominent voice in popularising travel narratives by incorporating personal experience as well as historiography. His objective in “The Imam and the Indian” is to unearth the lost histories from archives and bring to the forth subaltern voices of the medieval era and also to show that a rich cultural exchange in the form of trade prospered at that time between India and other Middle Eastern countries long before the Europeans came to India. “The Imam and the Indian” also questions the project of Western imperialism while demonstrating how countries like India and Egypt have become victims of such an enterprise. Travelogues are writings which usually cannot be confined within a typical genre and they may belong to both fictional and non-fictional prose. The blending of travel, history, and cultural anthropology has been exemplified in “The Imam and the Indian”. The travelogue is also a major source of information about places and persons; histories are discovered, rediscovered and revisited by bringing back to the readers again and again a considerable material for discussion. “The Imam and

the Indian” is certainly a very influential travelogue in terms of the rich and multiple perspectives of history, anthropology and literature.

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to introduce Amitav Ghosh as an important travel writer in Indian English literature

To this end, the unit will:

- acquaint you briefly with the life and works of Amitav Ghosh.
- discuss an exemplary text “The Imam and the Indian” written by Amitav Ghosh, a travelling, cosmopolitan writer of the post-*Midnight’s Children* phase of Indian English Literature.
- familiarize you with the research-oriented travel narrative of Amitav Ghosh.
- help you to understand the increasing complexity in both form and content in this genre.

12.2 AMITAV GHOSH: LIFE AND WORKS

Amitav Ghosh was born in July, 1956 in Calcutta. He came from a Bengali Hindu family. His father was a Lieutenant Colonel and had worked in the pre-Independence Indian Army. His schooling was done in the famous Doon School. His higher education began at St. Stephens College and then the Delhi School of Economics and St. Stephen Hall, Oxford. He was awarded DPhil in social anthropology.

After completing his formal education Ghosh joined the *Indian Express*, a well-recognized newspaper in New Delhi. He was also a Fellow at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, and Centre for Development Studies in Trivandrum. Later he was a faculty member in Queens College, and joined City University of New York, as Distinguished Professor in Comparative Literature. He was associated with the Department of English

at Harvard University as a Visiting Professor. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Literary Society.

Amitav grew up travelling to different places like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and places in India. He continued to educate himself actively through travelling to Iran, Egypt and the UK. He married Deborah Baker, the author of *In Extremes: The Life of Lawra Riding*. He resides in New York, though we may call him a globe-trotting writer. He never broke away from India and would often come to India in order to write.

After Salman Rushdie who gave the Indian English Novel a new direction, Amitav Ghosh stands out as a writer who blends history, anthropology and imagination to enrich his novels. As a fiction writer he cannot be compartmentalized because his novels blend history, ethnography, anthropology and travelogue. His themes are varied and impress the reader with a new outlook. It is actually impossible to categorize his works in stipulated formulas. His topics range from history, science, folklore, partition, colonial and postcolonial condition, hybridity, travel and journalism.

His debut novel *The Circle of Reason* was published in 1986. This was followed by *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), His Ibis trilogy are *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015). We see in his works his interest in the cross connection between the countries and cultures that grew around the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean.

Amitav Ghosh has also produced a considerable number of non-fictions under the titles *Dancing in Cambodia and at large in Burma* (1998), *The Imam and the Indian* (2002), and *Incendiary Circumstances* (2006). *In an Antique Land* (1992) is a travelogue with a difference that calls for a new definition of creative writing. It combines various forms of epistemological adventures and is written in two planes of experience.

In order to read his prose piece “The Imam and the Indian” which is also the title of his collection of essays, it is necessary to have a glimpse of the travelogue *In an Antique Land*. The book, as is mentioned earlier, covers an

ethnographic study of the farmers of the modern Egypt and also follow the course of research work done by Ghosh as a young researcher.

12.3 READING 'THE IMAM AND THE INDIAN'

In an Antique Land

Ghosh's travel to Egypt in 1980 was as a researcher in pursuit of a subaltern character discovered by chance while he was reading a collection of letters written in Egypt in the eleventh century. He wrote an interesting article on this mysterious character titled "The Slave of Ms.H.6". Ghosh gradually entered the world of the trade of the Middle Ages carried on around the Arabian sea, Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. He attempts to rewrite the history of this meaningful aquatic space that was the crossroad of an inclusive trend of trade and exchange of culture and friendship. He discovered, like a detective connecting different clues found in the letters as well as in the cultural and social histories of particular countries that this slave was called by the name Bomma. Not only did Ghosh discover a different definition of a slave in the countries or places like Fustat-Cairo, Aden and Mangalore of India, he found them engaged in a friendly exchange. Ghosh retrieves a history of a glorious past of these countries. The Europeans had written it off as part of a dark age.

In an Antique Land contains two layers. It focuses, on the one hand, an approach of a subaltern studies historian who, instead of following the grand pattern of elite history, works on the micro events and lives of ordinary people. He retrieves that which was put under the carpet by the grand narratives focussing the West as the harbingers of civilization. On the other hand, Amitav Ghosh writes a metanarrative on his own research methodology as well as his ontological experience while living in Egypt in order to pursue research. He selected the Lataifa, where he comes first in 1980 and then Nashaway, a neighbouring village where he came after eight years to conclude his book. His approach on his experience of modern Egypt is ethnographical where he uses

normal conversation to feel the pulse of the people. In the book the narrator is 'Amitab', as he was called by the villagers.

His stay in Egypt reveals to him how Western colonialism had successfully eradicated the traces of tradition in the forms of culture, indigenous knowledge systems and the general world view. Even the poor villagers were participants in the consumerism imported from the West in the name of modernity. This Western invasion of the mind led to a blind pursuit of Western materialism and a confused emulation of the West in the name of the advancement of civilization.

His first visit to Lataifa revealed to him how they were obsessed with modern gadgets. He saw the great gap between generations because the new generation, instead of following their traditional occupation related to agriculture, were engaged in gambling with their lives to acquire modern gadgets like televisions and cars.

Later, after eight years, when the narrator returns, he finds to his dismay, the hollowness of such a pursuit. The news of the young and is representative of many such losses of lives of youths engaged in the rat race.

'The Imam and the Indian'

'The Imam and the Indian' is the first prose piece in a collection of the same name. This particular piece was written in 1985 when Ghosh was in Delhi. He calls it a production of that fallow period between his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, and the second, *The Shadow Lines*. It had, for him, worked as the inspiration to write his third novel which is also a travelogue – *In an Antique Land*.

In 'The Imam and the Indian' Amitav Ghosh recalls a particular incident that was a moment of perception and revelation. During his stay in the village named Lataifa in Egypt he had heard about the Imam, a leading figure in the village. 'Amitab, as the villagers called Ghosh' is the narrator of the incident. His sense of decorum as well as his curiosity as an ethnographer prodded him to pay a visit. But this visit left him with a bitter aftertaste. He

surmised that it was the same with the Imam and so, he writes in a self-reflexive style saying that he had actually inflicted himself upon the Imam.

While living in Lataifa, the narrator had gathered from conversations that the villagers considered the Imam as a relic of the past. The Imam was also a barber and a healer. Ghosh got curious, hoping to have a glimpse of the traditional herbology, which, as the saying went, the Imam had a good knowledge of.

But unfortunately, in Egypt's rat-race for development and modernity, Imam's practice of this actually belittled him to the villagers. He also gathered from a village school teacher Ustad Ahmed that the Imam was a well-read man. The Imam lived in the part of the village where mud huts were closely built around the mosque. As he knocked on the door, it was the Imam who opened the door. He was a big man with brown intelligent eyes on a weather-beaten face. Though somewhat unkempt, he was energetic and restive. He was a sour person and welcomed the narrator with an unsmiling face. The grime and untidiness of his room showed that he lived alone. He had divorced his first wife and the second had left him.

The narrator had by then familiarized himself to the ways of polite greeting and for a while both were engaged in the long litany of Arabic phrases of greeting. The imam was perfectly courteous and before beginning any conversation he started brewing tea for his guest. Enthused by his courtesy, the narrator immediately broached the subject of indigenous medicine. The reaction was unexpected. The Imam was silent and to change the topic he began the same ritual of greeting. But instead of being discouraged the young researcher repeated his question. The Imam looked irritated and told him to his face that he was trying to forget it. After a while, with a renewed energy, he brought out a shining biscuit box and showed the narrator the display of unexpected contraptions inside the box. The narrator saw a hypodermic syringe and some glass phials. The Imam told him that he was learning about this new medical practice of mixing and giving injection.

After this he abruptly ended the conversation on the pretext of visiting the mosque. The narrator 'Amitab', as he was called by the villagers, gradually

found out through several cultural shocks that the situation in the village of 'fellaheens' did not meet his expectation. As a researcher coming to an ancient civilization, he found that instead of a restful and matured people the Egyptians, even at the grass-root level were quite fidgety and restive. They kept on moving to different places or countries for pilgrimage, wars, money and job opportunities which the narrator found similar to India. One day he met a man who was popularly known as 'Khameez the Rat'. Unlike the Imam he was a likable person who immediately set the narrator to ease. Interestingly, he found the features of Khameez similar to the intellectuals of Delhi and Calcutta, though Khameez was illiterate. In fact, Khameez had no intention of travelling beyond Alexandria. He had earned his funny nickname as he had a habit of gnawing away at things.

However, it was now his turn to entertain himself at the cost of the narrator. He informed his companions that the Hindus burned their dead. He pretended mock horror and his companions were scandalized. The narrator could not find a proper word in Arabic that would translate or explain the sanctity of cremation. Taking advantage of the narrator's embarrassment he told his listeners with feigned seriousness and concluded that the body was burnt to evade the punishment on the Day of Judgement. He also teased the narrator about cow-worship in India.

The narrator retained his calm and explained that in India the cows were more often beaten than worshipped. In a conversational mood he continued to inform his innocent and illiterate audience with information; they were awestruck when they heard that in India it rained half the year. It was a jovial company who wondered at a different culture, deciding that it was upside down and all wrong. When the narrator congratulated Khameez, as a father of a new-born he gave a cry of delight saying that in this case the Indians were similar to the Egyptians.

Khameez, one day, requested the narrator to persuade the Imam to come and see his ailing wife. The narrator had his doubts and told Khameez that it was difficult because he had a feeling that the Imam did not like him.

So, when the narrator met the Imam for the second time the Imam was actually determined to insult him. He dismissed the narrator's scholarship saying that he did not know Arabic. He was acerbic and asked the narrator why he worshipped cows. He intentionally neglected the narrator and addressing the shopkeeper who was in their company told him that the Indians burnt their dead. His tone was disparaging and he manipulated the conversation to his advantage. He made it seem as if the narrator was coming from a country that was backward and barbaric. He lectured on modernity and progress and praised the West.

The narrator tried hard to retain his calm because an ethnographer should be prepared for such antecedents. But he could not control his anger and soon there was a nasty repartee on the topic of progress and civilization. For the Imam defined scientific progress as the acquisition of arms and military power. The narrator, like a child, shouted back claiming that India too possessed modern weapons. Forgetting his stance as a researcher of human sciences he started boasting of India's nuclear power and added that India was a hundred years ahead of Egypt. Anger bred more anger and soon they accused each other of lying.

Yet a sudden realization dawned upon them. They realized that they were standing on the same platform when it came to the supremacy of the West in terms of power. In spite of their differences they were both deprived of the language of their own past, the language of spirituality, mysticism and faith. They could only argue on a borrowed language where not God, but science and technology ruled the roost. The narrator realized that the Imam would not have quarrelled with him if the narrator had been a white from the West. However, Khameez the Rat, with his inborn good humour, saved the situation by inviting the narrator to dinner. He requested him to forget the incident and to console him by promising to visit India one day. But he added mischievously that 'Amitab' must promise to bury him if he died in India.

Critics on Amitav Ghosh

According to Brinda Bose, *In an Antique Land* describes Amitav Ghosh's fieldwork experiences in Egypt. Ghosh, while staying in the two villages of Egypt, enters the field of ethnography to study the people and their lives. In spite of cultural or religious differences which are brought out sharply in the innocent questions of the villagers, in their reactions and stereotypes that they stick to when they imagine India, in spite of uncanny moments of hatred and distrust, the anthropologist realizes that his objects of study, somewhere are part of him. Roma Chatterjee in her discussion of the novel quotes Claude Lévi-Strauss who had argued that in a field-study not everything observed is part of the observation.

The narrator's clash with the Imam is one such moment of self-realization. In spite of a vast gap between Egypt and India in terms of politics, demography, economic and technological developments, both were gradually falling prey to Western materialism. Complete surrender to the technological superiority of Western modernity and wholesale rejection of local cultures piques the anthropologist Ghosh in "The Imam". The Imam, one of the lost repositories of traditional, medieval lore, is now convinced that his own healing powers are worthless in the face of modern Western knowledge' (75). He quotes Amartya Sen's relevant observation that the impact of colonialism is such that it leads to dissolution of the centuries of dialogues. As mentioned before, travel writing cannot be defined as a particular genre; rather it uses different genres to expostulate itself. "The Imam and the Indian" which later became a part of Ghosh's novel can be described as a travelogue. It is postcolonial in the sense that the traveller is a researcher with an urban mind-set. He has a particular academic project to fulfil. There are several arguments regarding the fixing of the genre of *In an Antique Land* in a particular category and some have described it as a complex novel accommodating anthropology, ethnography and travelogue. Travelling is certainly a part of Ghosh's project and he goes in search of the place where the geniza once held important documents of Egypt's subaltern history and which was siphoned away by the

Europeans before the people of Egypt could realize the loss. Ghosh, like a detective traces the medieval connection of countries around the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean which promoted a friendly and inclusive atmosphere among the countries connected in trade. In contrast, Ghosh shows in the episode with the Imam how European colonialism and imperialism had turned the relation into a competitive and destructive politics of power relations. “The Imam and the Indian” questions Western imperialism that claims itself as a ‘civilizing’ project.

12.4 TRAVELLING IN THE ORIENT IN GHOSH’S ‘THE IMAM AND THE INDIAN’

Travel is central to the essay “The Imam and the Indian”, but unlike the colonial traveller, the travels undertaken by the narrator ‘Amitab’ gives multiple perspectives – of an anthropologist, historian, author and an Indian.

The title with the two nouns “Indian” and “Imam” is a representation of the two ancient civilizations of Egypt and India. In the essay, the Imam of the village and the narrator have, as we have seen earlier, a verbal duel over their nation’s achievement in terms of Western modernity and violence that it entails. This internalisation of western values is the result of years of colonization which has made the natives look at their culture as primitive and demeaning. As a result, they judge the progress of their nation only from the prism of Western standards rejecting their ancient traditions and culture. The narrator is at first very angry with the Imam for his apparent jibe at the Hindu practice of burning their dead. The two end up arguing and making tall claims about their countries having better guns, tanks and bombs. The author writes, “So there we were, the Imam and I, delegates from two superseded civilizations vying with each other to lay claim to the violence of the West” (10). This makes him realise how the colonized nations like Egypt and India were always at war with each other, whereas they shared the same history of colonization and cultural hegemony.

Amitav Ghosh calls every man in the Egyptian village a traveller, who had travelled to some place or other for religion, sightseeing or employment. Travelling is also mainly a male prerogative particularly in traditional societies. Men are also displaced from their localities due to compulsions of livelihood. The chapter 'Egyptian in Baghdad' is an account of such displaced Egyptian men in Baghdad. Nadeed is a close friend of the narrator who is now working as an assistant in a photographer's shop in Baghdad. When 'Amitab' makes a long-distance call from New York to Baghdad, Nadeep and the speaker are elated at hearing each other's voices. The travel motif is more enhanced by the separate directions the friends had taken, the distance they had covered and the different cultural locations they had set themselves in.

When he revisits the village after eight years, Ghosh narrates how the village had changed beyond recognition after he left in 1981. He states that it was like a revolution; cement houses, colour TV sets, washing machines had inundated the houses of those who were considered poor once. It was the result of mass migration of men of the village to Iraq where there was job and good money. But, sadly sometimes men who had sent money back to build concrete houses, never returned. Nabeel was one of those who never made it back.

"The Imam and the Indian" is a tale told by a researcher who has preferred the micro approach of interaction which is local and private. His methodology is dialogic – a two-way exchange and negotiation with the natives. The colonial traveller, on the other hand, carries a cultural baggage which makes him observe the indigenes with pre-conceived notions and ideas. Such constructions of the 'other' by privileging the West take the form of political discourse that further leads to confrontations and questions. In the book, travelling is also pursued as a scholarly duty and intellectual performance. In the year between 1980 and 1981, Ghosh had travelled to the Egyptian village of Nacaaw ijjadiida, where he conducted field work on the cultural practice of 'hasad' the fear of envy and of being thought envious. The fear of envy is believed to be the central concern to the village and its people. This chapter gives interesting details of this practice which is not common in

India. Ghosh tells that the people of the village were very careful and avoided looking at the interiors of other houses lest they be thought envious. The fear of being thought as envious was as great as being envied and the use of charm to ward off the evil effects of envy was practised by everyone in the village. Envy played a major role in the social interactions between community members and at the same time it also affected the material aspects of a household like cattle, agricultural holdings and children. All these were the major causes of envy and they had to be guarded from such malevolent emotions. Thus, the chapter gives us an insight into ways in which social advantage was shunned by some families to avoid being envied and to maintain the goodwill of the village.

“The Imam and the Indian” uses the trope of travel also to enunciate the different journeys undertaken by different men in history, from the Emperor Babur to Ben Yiju a Jewish merchant. Ben Yiju had travelled frequently between Ifriqiya (Tunisia) and Mangalore (India) for trade and other businesses. He had also acquired a slave called Bomma. The significance of Ben Yiju’s story is that it portrays the life of an immigrant in India and the transculturation and acculturation, exchange and negotiation that took place both at the personal and cultural level. In a narrative which centralizes the trope of travel, the traveller is never the same again. His/her perspective is forever tempered by his journey and experiences. Even time, space and identity become intricately interlinked, influencing the identity of the traveller himself.

12.5 SUMMING UP

In this Unit you have learnt that:

- Amitav Ghosh grew up travelling to different places like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and other places in India.
- “The Imam and the Indian” is a travelogue and an ethnographic study of the farmers of modern Egypt

- He showed in “The Imam and the India” how a rich trade and commerce was carried on around the Arabian sea, Indian ocean and the Persian Gulf along with cultural exchange and friendship.
- *In an Antique Land* focuses on an approach of subaltern studies historiography by focusing on the micro events and lives of common people.
- The narrator is called as ‘Amitab’ by the villagers of Lataifa.
- The narrator’s clash with the Imam is a realisation of their complete surrender to the technological superiority of the West.
- Travelling is a part of Ghosh’s project and like a detective he traces the medieval connections of countries around the Arabian sea and the Indian ocean.
- The trope of travel in “The Imam and the Indian” departs from the colonial practice of looking at the natives as the ‘other’.
- Ghosh in his narration takes on the multiple positions as an anthropologist, historian and a writer.
- Travelling in “The Imam and the Indian” is also a scholarly duty and an intellectual performance.

12.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Which is the debut novel of Amitav Ghosh and when was it published?
2. Which three novels constitute the Ibis trilogy?
3. Who was Bomma?
4. Write a brief note on Ghosh’s travelogue *In an Antique Land*.
5. Discuss in detail how Amitab engages with the Imam.
6. How does Ghosh give a subaltern perspective to travel narratives in “The Imam and the Indian”?
7. Give an account of the friendship between the narrator and Nadeed.
8. Who was Ben Yiju? Why is he an important character in the travelogue?
9. Write briefly on the cultural practice of “hasad” as described by the narrator.

10. Comment on 'The Imam and the Indian' as the experiences of a cultural traveller.
11. Comment on the Travel Writing of Narayan and Ghosh vis-a-vis any other writer/s that you have read.

12.7 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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MODULE V: DIASPORIC FICTION

UNIT 13: THEMES OF DISPLACEMENT IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S SHORT FICTION

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.0 Introduction

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Jhumpa Lahiri as a Diasporic Writer

13.3 *Interpreter of Maladies*: A Collection of Short Stories

13.4 Themes of Displacement in *Interpreter of Maladies*

13.4.1 Exile and Alienation

13.4.2 Marriage and Man-Woman relationship in *Interpreter of Maladies*

13.4.3 India as an Image in *Interpreter of Maladies*

13.5 Summing Up

13.6 Assessment Questions

13.7 References and Recommended Readings

13.0 INTRODUCTION

Immigrant/Expatriate writing refers to the literature written by Indians who have migrated to other countries for various reasons. Today the term diaspora is also commonly used to refer to these immigrant writers and the literature that is produced is subsequently referred to as literature of the Diaspora. According to Jasbir Jain, "Expatriate writing occupies significant position between cultures and countries." Indians living abroad experience various kinds of problems. They suffer from a sense of displacement because they feel rooted to India and Indian culture and at the same time they are overwhelmed by the culture of the host country. They face cultural conflict and sometimes even racial segregation. They are treated as outsiders because of their culture and way of life which is very different from that of their host

nation. As a result, many of them experience alienation in their host country and suffer from nostalgia for their homeland. The sense of alienation arises from the fact that they cannot adjust to the western way of life which they find foreign to their own. This is like a cultural shock to them and they struggle to maintain their life as lived in their homeland. They miss their own country and its familiar society and long for their homeland. Thus, they experience nostalgia for a lost way of life. Salman Rushdie aptly states: “Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back even at the risk of mutated in the pillars of salt” (Rushdie 75). Often diaspora narratives are coloured by these experiences and are seeped with the desire and longing for homeland, nostalgia for past life, sense of alienation and marginalization. On the positive side many a times the diasporic writers have also been called as the cultural bearers of a nation. In this role the expatriate writers assume a significant role in bridging the two identities – the identity of origin and the identity of adoption. In this sense writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, Gita Mehta narrate the experiences of acculturation and assimilation that has become a very important survival strategy of a community in diaspora. Indian English Literature has significantly been enriched by such narratives as it addresses readers not only from India but also the global readers. Jhumpa Lahiri falls into this category of an expatriate writer or a diasporic writer. She approaches her position as an expatriate Indian in her own unique way. Her focus is on the experiences of Indian immigrants in America, their different lives struggling to adjust to their life away from India and in a foreign society. Her *Interpreter of Maladies* beautifully presents the different experiences of migration like nostalgia, alienation, assimilation and acculturation which has added a new and vibrant dimension to the body of Indian English Literature.

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Indian English Literature has been enriched by the writings of expatriate Indian writers who have settled abroad and write about their experiences in the diaspora. India remains a major concern in their writings specially when

narrating the consequences of leaving behind their home in search of better lives in a foreign land. These stories mirror the sense of loss, issues of adjustment to a new life, and identity clash which forms an important part of the experience in a foreign nation. Jhumpa Lahiri has minutely observed these dilemmas and almost every story in the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* narrates these issues. Lahiri's characters are the average Indian man, woman or child who struggle to find their footing in a society with a culture very different from their own. These are stories of struggle, resilience affection, longing, homelessness, friendship, identity crisis and even celebration. Such a genre of narratives has greatly contributed to the popularity of Indian English Literature because of their varied style and themes. This unit critically discusses Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* to give a sense of variety and range of Indian Writing in English.

13.2 JHUMPA LAHIRI AS A DIASPORIC WRITER

Jhumpa Lahiri was born as Nilanjana Sudeshna in London, UK to Bengali parents. She was born in the year 1967 and her parents had moved to Boston in the United States when she was young. Writing from a young age she realised that she had a divided identity –the identity of her parents maintained by their frequent visits to India and the identity of her friends and peers in America. Visiting India frequently with her parents she never really felt rooted in America nor felt at home in India. Jhumpa Lahiri's case is like her character Gogol from the novel *The Namesake* a second -generation expatriate for whom the experience of dislocation, alienation and homelessness is more intense than their parents. But being born and brought up in a foreign country they are also able to better acculturate their life in the country that they have adopted. Their parents who spent many years of their lives in India find it even more painful to break their ties from their country of birth. As an expatriate Jhumpa Lahiri writes from the perspective of what she has experienced and seen. Her stories are located in America and India and constantly deal with the experience of cross-cultural exchange, sense of

longing, nostalgia and predicaments of identity. India is a dominant landscape in her fiction which shows her concern and engagement with her Indian roots.

Interpreter of Maladies was Jhumpa Lahiri's debut collection of short stories for which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. The book brought instant fame and recognition to the author and was translated into more than 29 languages. Her next publication *The Namesake* which came out in 2003 also received rave reviews and in 2008 *Unaccustomed Earth* a collection of short stories was published. In 2013 *The Lowland* her second novel was also shortlisted for the prestigious Man Booker Prize.

13.3 INTERPRETER OF MALADIES: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

Interpreter of Maladies published in the year 1999 is a collection of nine short stories. This debut book won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000, the seventh book to do so in more than 60 years of the award's history in Fiction. The title of the collection is taken from one of the short stories in the volume where the protagonist works as an interpreter to a doctor. Interpretation also means translation as Mr Kapasi in the story translates the language of the patients to the doctor. But he simply does not translate their language he explains their disease and sickness so that the doctor is able to prescribe remedies to them. Similarly, taking into account the stories in this book, Jhumpa Lahiri too acts as an interpreter of immigrant experience in America. Lahiri is not just a translator of the language, she translates the culture, history and stories of communities that she has observed. Every story in the book deals with one malady or other, and Lahiri is able to discern the common thread of displacement and dislocation that runs through these lives. Her intense gaze and scrutiny of the separate lives of different individuals is admirable specially because her interpretation of their situation is so apt and true. She understands the joys, sorrows, pains and loss of every character in her collection.

The collection has characters of Indian descent who have settled in America, people who are immigrants and represent diverse immigrant

communities each with their own specific concerns and problems. But there are certain themes and issues that run central to all the stories. The need to belong, exile and rootlessness, lack of communication, sense of alienation have been experienced by every member of the expatriate Indians sometimes or other in their life. Each story in this collection revolve around a character or characters who find it difficult to conform to the mores of the American culture. They experience the constant conflict between two cultures and search for ways to fit into a community. Against the background of such cultural tension and anxiety Jhumpa Lahiri also depicts the complex nuances of personal relationships especially the complexities of husband-wife, adult-children and individual-society relationships. *Interpreter of Maladies* abounds in male and female characters who struggle not only to acculturate and assimilate into their unfamiliar surroundings but also struggle at a very personal level with loneliness, lack of communication, neglect and isolation. The first story “A Temporary Matter” deals with marital discord of Shoba and Shukumar. Shoba and Shukumar are a young married couple who had lost their only child at birth. The story begins with the announcement from the electricity department that “it was a temporary matter: for five days their electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at 8pm” (*IM* 1). The loss of their child created distance between the two and they had become very good at avoiding each other and remaining out of each other’s way. Lack of communication is compounded by the sense of exile experienced by them as immigrants. Isolated from their own community they struggle to cope with their personal tragedy and miserably fails. But in the darkness of the power cut their distance and difference seem to melt away and they open up to each other. They begin to look forward to the power cut as an opportunity to search for their own place and position in each other’s life.

“Interpreter of Maladies” which is also the title of a story in the collection is set in the state of Orissa in India. Mr and Mrs Das along with their children Tina, Ronny and Bobby visit India. They are an NRI family and India to them is not a familiar country, rather they find it different and even exotic. The two narratives of the Das family and Mr Kapasi run parallel to each other.

In fact, Mr Kapasi is the protagonist of the story as the title of the narrative indicates Mr Kapasi who is a taxi driver cum guide is a fluent speaker of English. Like Raju of R.K Narayan's *The Guide*, Mr Kapasi is an interesting guide and successfully guides tourists around Orissa. He is also conscious of his style of dressing and goes to great length to maintain his appearance. He realises that this would make his potential clients trust him and choose him as a guide and driver. But this is not all to Mr Kapasi, for it turns out that he also works as an interpreter to a doctor who does not understand the local language. Thus, Mr Kapasi assumes the role of the interpreter of maladies. But Mr Kapasi's life has not gone as he had planned or hoped for. Because of his affinity for languages he had hoped to work as an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries. Mr Kapasi's own wife had no respect for his job as an interpreter and he very well knew that it was a thankless job. So, when he mentions to Mrs Das that he worked as an interpreter to a doctor, her reaction flatters him and he begins to romanticise his own position in the eyes of Mrs Das. The narration is in third person and we see the Das family, particularly the relationship between Mr and Mrs Das, through the thoughts of Kapasi. We come to know that Mr and Mrs Das constantly bicker, they argue about taking care of the children and do not agree on places to visit. Mrs Das munches her puffed rice without sharing with the kids and Mr Das is engrossed in his guide book and camera equally oblivious of the children. Observing them, Mr Kapasi too thinks of his own marriage and life. He realises that even he and his wife share nothing in common except the children they bore together. He believes that he deserves a better life. Hence time and again he slips into a world of imagination and romanticises about what his life could have been. In the course of the day when he casually mentions to Mrs Das that he works as an interpreter to a doctor she tells him that his work is romantic and appreciates him for it. She is intrigued by his profession and asks him several questions. Later she even takes a family photo with him. Mr Kapasi imagines that since they share similar marital problems they can communicate to each other. His fantasizing begins again and he imagines himself in an intimate relationship with Mrs Das. He dreams of Mrs Das's letters and the carefully constructed

replies he would send her. When Mrs Das confesses to him about her affair and the paternity of her son Bobby, he imagines that he has become important to her and he is proud of being the first person to whom she has confided this secret. He imagines that he has risen in her esteem as a confidant, and he imagines himself presiding over all her problems, comforting her and holding her. But the trouble begins when Mrs Das expects Mr Kapasi to interpret her guilt and prescribe remedies so that she would stop suffering from the sense of shame and guilt. When she deigns replying to a question from him Mr Kapasi's fantasy ends and he realises at that moment that "he was not even important enough to be properly insulted" (*IM* 66). He is shocked at the callous and selfish motives of Mrs Das and it leaves him feeling bitter and angry.

This short story narrates multiple problems that ordinary people face when they suffer from lack of communication. The cultural gap between the Das family and Mr Kapasi is obvious. Though of Indian origin, the Das family members are Americans and they behave as stereotypical American tourists. Mr Kapasi misinterprets his relationship to Mrs Das and because of his failure to grasp the situation he is forced to acknowledge his own failed marriage and problems in life.

Another story entitled "Mrs Sen" narrates the story of an immigrant Indian wife who has accompanied her husband to America and her struggle to adjust to life in a strange and foreign land. Mrs Sen is a sensitive lady and in her own way she tries to create a semblance of home away from home. The story is told from the perspective of an equally sensitive eleven-year-old boy Eliot whom Mrs Sen takes care in the absence of his mother. The narration from the perspective of a child makes the portrayal of adults authentic, at the same time his innocence and curiosity highlights the outsider status of Mrs Sen. She wears saris, applies vermillion in the parting of her hair and cooks traditional Indian dishes. Eliot not only observes all the elaborate procedures with interest and awe he begins to grasp his own loneliness and isolation. He begins to share in Mrs Sen's sense of frustration and loneliness. Mrs Sen also exemplifies many Indian women, who like her are compelled to relocate due to marriage and other reasons and in the process they face various challenges in

trying to rebuild their lives in a foreign land. During the long absence of Mr Sen in his office, she takes to babysitting Elliot not only to earn some money but also to while away her time. The story also presents the subtle humane concerns that develops between Mrs Sen and Elliot, both of whom are similar in certain ways. They both desire love and company from their loved ones and at the same time they are lonely people struggling to move at pace with a fast moving world.

These stories exemplify Jhumpa Lahiri's deep understanding of human psychology and the subtle underpinning that binds each story and character. The brilliant portrayal of immigrant experience along with the human predicaments that besiege every man, woman and child in the narratives help the readers to understand the complexities of such lives. The language is simple, lucid and flows easily. She uses Indian themes and images to foreground the cultural and historical context of all the stories.

13.4 THEME OF DISPLACEMENT IN INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

13.4.1 Exile and Alienation

In simple terms, displacement refers to the process when someone is uprooted from his or her original location and compelled to grow roots in a location that is alien or foreign to them. Thus, displacement, whether forced or voluntary, involves the trauma of breaking connections with a familiar location. This experience of being wrenched from one's own homeland is one of the most important dimensions of the immigrant experience that leads to different facets of alienation and exile. Displacement in the form of alienation and exile is the central theme that runs through all the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Alienation is the feeling of being an outsider in unfamiliar surroundings, the experience of being a stranger in a foreign land. Exile is a condition when one is away from one's home. Such experience can only be narrated with an intense sense of nostalgia and longing and these expressions are more explicit in immigrant writings. Except the three stories – "Interpreter

Of Maladies,” “A Real Durwan” and “The Treatment Of Bibi Haldar” – all the other stories are set in America, narrating the struggles and predicaments of Indians who try to adjust to life in a foreign land. In the story “Mrs Sen,” Mrs Sen is a cultural outsider who faces practical difficulties in her everyday life in America. The story has a simple plot, but the central concern is narrating the deep divide in the psychology of Mrs Sen regarding the cultural conflict that she faces. One of the conditions of exile is when the expatriate attempts to create a semblance of home in the foreign country. Mrs Sen does the same. She continues to wear crisp saris and applies vermilion in the parting of her hair. She cooks elaborate Indian dishes and takes great pain to collect the ingredients. For instance, because of her love for fish she makes acquaintance with the fish vendor who saves for her whole fishes the way she preferred. She is an individual character, yet typifies many expatriates in similar situations who tend to hold to everything that reminds them of home and maintain the link that meant a lot to them. In fact, Lahiri writes, “Eliot understood that when Mrs Sen said home she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables” (*IM* 116). Similarly, in “The Third and The Final Continent,” the protagonist attempts to maintain a sense of Indianness in England by eating ‘egg curry’ with his Bengali friends. In America, he also discovers with his wife Mala that they could buy fresh fish from a guy named Bill which is a great joy for the them. Lahiri keeps making constant reference to certain Indian habits which represent the recurring motif in the stories. She narrates the habit of eating with hand by the Indian characters which is a part of the tradition of India. She also narrates the love for rice and fish of most of her characters. Lahiri also points out the love for saris that the women in the stories displayed. These instances show the way the characters cling on to their culture and tradition in America and in their own way they practice these little Indian habits. In “When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine” Lahiri displays the efforts that expatriates make to create a community of shared affiliations. The story has for its background the violent war between East Pakistan and erstwhile West Pakistan in the year 1971. The story which is narrated through the eyes of a ten-year-old Lilia is also about Mr Pirzada, a lecturer from Dhaka who is on a

year's visit to US on a scholarship. Lilia is an involved narrator who observes the daily routine of Mr Pirzada's visit and her parent's reactions. In a situation where one is away from home, expatriates search for compatriots, no matter from which region one belongs to. Lilia's parents found out Mr Pirzada's name from the telephone directory, for they always searched for familiar names that belonged to their part of the world. This was their way of building a community of their own in America. They invited him to their home. It did not matter that he was a Pakistani or a Muslim. What mattered was that they spoke the same language, ate the same meals and wore similar clothes. Though political issues intersperse the story, political ideologies are never allowed to divide the comradeship of the friends. Even within this small group political difference or national identity does not dissolve the feelings and relationships that develop between them in a land which is so away from home. Thus, not only Lilia's parents suffer from the sense of alienation, they constantly look for compatriots in America, Mr Pirzada too suffers intensely not only because of the war but also because he misses his family and is constantly worried about their safety and security. This story of two families in exile also deals with how Lilia's family has also acclimatized to life in America. As Lilia's mother points out that since Lilia was born in America she is more adapted to life and is fully at home there. But this does not mean that Lilia too does not experience sense of alienation and ambiguity in the adopted country. Lilia is surprised that at school no one talked of the war that was so religiously discussed at her home. She sneaks into the library and looks for books on India, China, Pakistan and other South Asian countries. She picks a book *Pakistan: A Land and Its People* and reads it until she is stopped by her teacher Mrs. Kenyon. This shows that Lilia was curious about her historical roots and in her own way attempts to gather knowledge and information about that part of the world that was so important to her family and to Mr Pirzada. Lilia's father too acknowledges the importance of knowing one's history and he tries to inculcate in Lilia her own cultural roots and heritage. Thus, Lahiri narrates how in exile the expatriates have to not only acclimatize with the history and culture of the foreign land but they also constantly attempt to maintain their cultural and historical roots.

“Interpreter of Maladies” is different in a sense that it involves an Indian American couple who feels alienated during their visit to India. Thus, Lahiri seems to show that experiences of exile and alienation is not culturally or geographically rooted, rather it is a universal experience that is felt by any individual who is compelled to adjust life in an environment that they find strange or foreign. Diaspora etymologically is an agricultural word meaning ‘to scatter’ or ‘to sow’. Diasporas are people who are scattered around the globe, carrying with them the cultural heritage of their own country and settling to a new life in a foreign land. Thus, they are also known as the ‘cultural carriers’ or ‘cultural transmitters’ like Mrs Sen is in the short story of the same name. Mr and Mrs Das in “Interpreter of Maladies” are in-between individuals, swinging between two cultures or two continents and living life in two ways. Unlike Mrs Sen, Mrs Das is completely American in her “red-and-white – checkered skirt that stopped above her knees, slip-on shoes with a square wooden heel, and a close-fitting blouse styled like a man’s undershirt” (*IM* 46). In fact Mr Kapasi the driver-cum-guide thinks that the family looks like an Indian family but is dressed as foreigners. They find Orissa different and intriguing. In fact, Mr Das’s head is constantly buried in a guidebook with India written on it in bold letters which appeared to have been printed abroad. Though they are of Indian origin they have to resort to guides and maps, thus in their case returning to India is not a case of homecoming but a simple tour. They are in exile in their own native country. Like tourists, Mrs Das does not engage in conversation with the locals or even with Mr Kapasi. Though she is an Indian herself she treats him with disdain. Their exilic position and sense of alienation in Konark and other places they visit is constantly reinforced by Mr Das’s camera that perpetually hangs on his neck giving him the image of an eternal tourist.

The last story in the collection “The Third and Final Continent” is autobiographical and is based on the experience of the author’s father. The title itself signifies a process of constant movement. It is another matter that he finally settles in America and establishes his anchor there, but the tie to his historical and cultural roots is still very strong. He is a displaced personae who

moves from one continent to another in search of a better life and social security. He has to adjust to life in England and when he moves to America he has to readjust to the American way of life. Thus life for him is twice removed from the life that he was familiar with in India. For instance, he learns to eat cornflakes for breakfast, brew his tea in a thermos, driving on the right hand side and eating hamburger. Lahiri shows how as an expatriate in an alien land, her father had to learn and adjust to these inevitable changes in order to survive. Mala, the wife of the protagonist, is filled with trepidation and fear on her first arrival in America. Her Indianness is starkly contrasted with the Americanised protagonist. In fact, the protagonist himself is keenly aware of the Indian idiosyncrasies of his wife. He observes that she covers her head with sari as a sign of modesty, that she eats with her hands whereas he had stopped doing that in America and when he decides to take her for outing her colourful and heavy attire shocks him. Jhumpa Lahiri being a second generation of Indian origin is deeply aware of the process of acculturation that every expatriate Indian had to go through. This process of acclimatisation was easy for the protagonist of this story because he faced all of the changes in different countries as a challenge and a necessity. But for his wife Mala, the cultural change brought a great shock for her specially because it required a great compromise and adjustment. She, like Mrs Sen, found herself out of her comfort zone and this made them confused and nervous about their situation and identity in a land so far away from home.

13.4.2 Marriage and Man-Woman relationship in Interpreter of Maladies

“Interpreter of Maladies” deals with marriage relationship or more explicitly with man-woman relationship. Lahiri’s stories exemplifies the essential truth that literature reflects real experience and that the gendered relationship between man and woman is one of the most important realities of the socio-cultural dimension of the world. Traditional Indian family is a strong unit and emphasis has always been on maintaining this unit as a strong part of

the entire social fabric. But in recent times this unit has undergone tremendous social changes in the face of modernisation and rapid globalisation. Traditional gender roles have been subverted and there have been call for greater opportunities and equality for woman in areas that had traditionally been considered male domain. In the postcolonial times voluntary and in-voluntary migrations have tremendously affected the traditional social fabric and families have moved out of the country and settled in locations all over the globe particularly in search of better life. These conditions are all the more exemplified in the diasporic communities or expatriates. Indian families abroad are torn by the pull of two cultures; the traditional Indian culture and western culture. This represents an in-between status wherein the individual is sometimes lost and confused. A common thread running in most of the diasporic writers are such experiences of anguish, loneliness, nostalgia and even disillusionments that are emblematic of immigrant experiences. Jhumpa Lahiri's stories therefore, illustrate how these experiences affect the man-woman relationship especially in a marriage where the hectic lifestyle leaves very little room for a healthy and vibrant relationship to develop. "Interpreter of Maladies" narrates the gender relations within the background of cross-cultural milieu, the real experiences and emotions of different individuals. "A Temporary Matter" is a delineation of marital discord between Shobha and Shukumar. Their marriage has undergone great strain because of the death of their child. The story delineates the alienation that has crept into their marriage and the lack of communication that seemed to further the bridge between the two. Shobha is presented as a modern woman, who is active and a workaholic. She uses her work as an excuse to avoid meeting her husband and the unpleasant mundane conversations. In contrast Shukumar dreaded going out of the home and lay in bed till noon when hunger made him get out of bed. Strangeness and distance had crept into their relationship and companionship and comfort was no longer a part of their life. Their attempt at avoiding each other was compounded by their denial to accept the reality of losing their baby. The power cut provides them with the opportunity to lay bare their feelings, most importantly to acknowledge the suffering of the other. Through this story

she depicts the modern-day malaise that immigrant couple like Shobha and Shukumar face crushed under the pressure of personal tragedy and a hectic life that leaves no time for healing and recovery.

Jhumpa Lahiri is not concerned with the larger human condition of poverty, war, disease, religion etc but as she depicts in this story it is the individual relationship and communication flow, clash of culture and inclusiveness which are the immediate concerns. It is this personal issue that needs to be transcended and overcome to survive as fulfilling and healthy individuals. Another story titled “Sexy” deals with a different issue that also depicts an important dimension of man-woman relationship –love and commitment. “Sexy” is the story of Dev, an immigrant Bengali in America, and Miranda, an American. Dev and Miranda develop an affair in the absence of Dev’s wife. One can say that Dev as an immigrant Indian is perhaps trying to identify with a part of the American lifestyle and his affair with Miranda is like an adventure for him. The story is also interlinked with the story of Laxmi’s cousin who faces a similar problem in her marriage. She and her son has been abandoned by her husband after he had fallen in love with a white woman he met on the plane. Lahiri seems to highlight the absurdity and superficiality of such affairs that afflicts many immigrants who are enamoured by life in the fast lane. Miranda’s final realisation of the futility of her affair represents Lahiri’s own deprecation of such meaningless and superficial relationships. The story shows Lahiri’s intimate understanding of man-woman relationship even within intra-cultural ethos. Miranda is portrayed as a strong woman who takes her own decision to end an affair that was demeaning to her as a woman and in doing so she experiences freedom and inner peace.

“Interpreter of Maladies” also deals with marriage and lack of communication between man and woman. Through an interpreter Mr Kapasi the readers are made aware of the marital discord and tension that exists between Mr and Mrs Das. Mr Kapasi in fact agrees that Mr and Mrs Das represent a bad match and that they shared nothing in common. When Mr Kapasi compares their marriage relationship to his own, he not only acknowledges his own failed relationship he also painfully becomes aware of

his own failures in life. This story is an intense scrutiny of man-woman relationship in different social-cultural milieu. Mr Kapasi fantasizes about developing intimate and romantic relationship with Mrs Das. Lahiri also hints at the extramarital desires that Mr Kapasi has and narrates in detail his voyeuristic gaze of Mrs Das. He looks at Mrs Das as a desirable woman, the feelings she aroused in him was never experienced with his wife. Thus, this also hints at the lack of intimacy that Mr Kapasi suffered with his own wife. But as an interpreter Mr Kapasi fails to interpret the feelings of Mrs Das. The misunderstanding that develops in Mr Kapasi is brought to a tragic conclusion by Mrs Das when she confesses her extramarital affair to Mr Kapasi in hope of receiving solace and empathy from him as a fatherly figure. Thus, this complicated man-woman relationship is captured beautifully by Lahiri in this short story. Also, the fact that Mr Das is completely unaware of his wife's infidelity and may never know about it also highlights the failure of their marriage which is based on dishonesty and lies. Twinkle and Sanjeev of "The Blessed House" exemplifies marital discord as a result of assimilative difficulties and differences in liking. The story also highlights the difficulty in developing familiarity between immigrant children who undergo arranged marriage because of the wishes of their parents.

Mrs Sen too suffers isolation and loneliness in her life in America. She constantly yearns for home and waits for letters to arrive from India. To her, cooking traditional culinary dishes is a daily ritual that she religiously follows to create an atmosphere that reminds her of home in Calcutta. But her husband Mr Sen does not share her nostalgia and sometimes is insensitive to her desires. This shows Mrs Sen's utter frustration. She suffers from disillusionment in her marriage and life in America. When she pulls out all her colourful saris and throws them on the bed, she asks Eliot when she will ever be able to wear them and go out. She also questions him whether anyone will turn up if she screams out for help. These instances highlight Mrs Sen's frustrations and loneliness in America, at the same time it conveys the sense of insecurity that she faces. The final scene of the story is relevant for it represents the many such catastrophes that immigrant Indians constantly face in their struggle to adjust to life in the

West. When she crashes her car with Eliot in the passenger seat Mrs Sen feels utterly defeated. The psychological struggle that she faced everyday is finally manifested into a physical one that epitomises her daily struggle in the alien land.

13.4.3 India as an image in Interpreter of Maladies

One can say that the most powerful image in “Interpreter of Maladies” is India. India is ingrained in the psychology of many characters like Mrs Sen, Mr Das, Mrs Mala and Lilia either as a lost home or as an exotic destination, or as a nation of rich history and culture that had to be preserved. In “A Temporary Matter,” when Shoba and Shukumar eat their dinner in the dark due to the power cut, Shoba is automatically reminded of India and how they used to have functions even when the power was out for hours. For the Das couple in “Interpreter of Maladies,” India is not home anymore for them. India is an exotic location that they come to gaze and wonder with awe. Thus, their home is America and they have become American Indian tourists. But it is in the characters like Mrs Sen, Mala, Mr Pirzada and even Lilia the sense of longing, nostalgia and homelessness is witnessed. In “Mrs Sen,” the ten-year-old Elliot recognizes that whenever Mrs Sen referred to home she meant India, and not her home in America. India assumes the central role in her everyday efforts at negotiating her life in America. She constantly listens to the cassette recorder of her relatives and the news they send about India. Thus, India is always present in her mind. The most important fact is that the author herself uses the image of India in the most crucial way because it binds all the stories in her collection to India directly or indirectly. Lahiri is herself indebted to India and the Indian people. It is her experiences in India that have provided the material as well as the inspiration for the stories in this collection.

13.5 SUMMING UP

In this unit you have learnt that:

- Diasporic writings are literatures that are written by Indian's who have settled abroad and who write about their experiences and life in the West. The literature produced by these writers are coloured by experiences of nostalgia, alienation, and rootlessness.
- Jhumpa Lahiri is an important voice of the immigrant community who narrates the experience of the immigrants in America.
- Her stories also have Indian setting and Indian characters which shows her interest in Indian themes and Indian motif.
- *Interpreter of Maladies* is her debut book which was published in the year 1999. The book was awarded the Prestigious Pulitzer prize for fiction in the year 2000. The stories in the collection have characters of Indian descent and is set in America and India.
- *Interpreter of Maladies* deals primarily with the themes of exile and alienation which is a common experience of Indian immigrants in America. The immigrant's experience of cultural conflict is portrayed. Torn asunder by the pull of Indian cultural roots and American values they represent the position of in-betweenness.
- Jhumpa Lahiri's versatility is also depicted by her treatment of the intricate and complex man - woman relationship in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Marriage is a central concern of the writer and almost all the stories in the collection deal with different dimensions of marital relationship.



13.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Which was Jhumpa Lahiri's first published book and which prestigious prize was awarded to this book?
2. What is expatriate writing? Analyse Jhumpa Lahiri as a diasporic writer.
3. Discuss the themes of exile and alienation in at least three stories in the collection *Interpreter of Maladies*.

4. What kind of marriages are presented in *Interpreter of Maladies*
5. Analyse and evaluate the various woman characters in *Interpreter of Maladies*.
6. Write a note on the man-woman relationship in the stories in this collection.
7. Discuss the significance of the title of the short story “Interpreter of Maladies.”
8. Discuss the image of India in *Interpreter of Maladies*.
9. How does Eliot describe Mrs Sen and her predicaments? What are the similarities in their situations?
10. What role does food have in the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri? How does food connect the expatriates to their lost home?



13.7 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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UNIT 14: ROHINTON MISTRY'S *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*: ALIENATION IN *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*

14.0 Introduction

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Rohinton Mistry as a Diasporic Writer

14.2.1 Rohinton Mistry and the Parsi Community

14.3 *Such A Long Journey*: A Critical Appreciation

14.3.1 Mistry's Use of Language in *Such A Long Journey*

14.3.2 *Such A Long Journey*: A Novel of Social Realism

14.3.3 The Theme of Journey in *Such A Long Journey*

14.4 Alienation as a Major Theme in the Novel

14.4.1 Nostalgia and Memory

14.4.2 Critique of Nation-State Power Politics

14.5 Summing Up

14.6 Assessment Questions

14.7 References and Recommended Readings

14.0 INTRODUCTION

Diaspora as a mode of discourse has emerged as a consequence of large-scale movement for better life or due to exile or other factors. Different kinds of migration have brought about profound changes in postcolonial countries like India which have been reflected in the literary outpourings from the nations. Diaspora originally referred to the Jewish exodus, when the Jews were forced out of their homeland as a result of religious, cultural and economic persecution. The word diaspora is derived from the Greek words *dia* (across) and *speirein* ('to sow' or 'to reap'). Today the word refers to any individual or group that has left their homeland/ancestral land and have adopted/settled in a foreign land. Thus, for such an individual or group, issues of home, homelessness, ethnic identity, nostalgia, alienation and memory are

key issues which have to be negotiated every day. India as a country houses a number of ethnic communities; some of them are very small in number like the Parsis, Christians and Indian Jews. They are referred to as minority communities and they are racially, linguistically and religiously diverse. Rohinton Mistry belongs to the Parsi community which is one of the most minuscule communities in India. He is one of the representative writers of the community, and his writings are a mirror of the Parsi life in India – their survival, trials and tribulations under a dominant Hindu and Muslim society. His novel *Such A Long Journey* is a diasporic narrative because it is engaged with the traumatic past of the Parsis when they fled from Iran. The crux of Mistry's novel is also the multicultural city of Bombay. Bombay is a place of memory, love, family and full of surprises with its sights, sounds and dust. The sense of alienation is also beautifully described through the sufferings of the main character Gustad Noble and his friend Dinshawji. His writings describe the different experiences of migration, nostalgia, alienation, assimilation and acculturation which has added a new and vibrant dimension to Indian English Literature. There are many famous writers who are also known as diasporic writers and some of them are Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Gita Mehta, Amitav Ghosh and Kiran Desai.

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Indian English Literature has been enriched by the writings of immigrant Indian writers who have settled abroad and write about their experiences from their adopted homes. India remains a major concern in their writings. These writers have greatly contributed to the popularity of Indian English Literature because of their varied style and themes. This unit critically discusses Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey* as one such popular novel about India and its Parsi community. The aim is to give a sense of variety and range of the diaspora fiction and its contribution in enriching Indian Writing in English.

14.2 ROHINTON MISTRY AS A DIASPORIC WRITER

Rohinton Mistry is a Parsi Gujarati of Indian origin who is based in Toronto, Canada. He was born in the year 1952 in Bombay, India and in 1975 he migrated to Canada at the age of twenty three. As stated, Mistry belongs to the minority community of the Parsis who were forced to migrate to India following repeated persecutions by the Islamic invaders in Iran. India is the country that gave them refuge and allowed them to settle as a community. Thus, India is their adopted land where their ancestors felt safe enough to survive as an ethnic group. But during times of social unrest like right wing politics and religious fundamentalism the Parsis experienced fear and victimization because of their status as a minority community. As an Indian from a minority community, Mistry experienced double-displacement when he settled in Canada because he had to struggle to maintain his multiple identities as a Parsi, Indian and Canadian. His works reflect these struggles: the sense of loss, nostalgia and the need to maintain an ethnic identity. Thus, through his own journey he also mirrors the experience of the Parsi community. Rohinton Mistry's first publication was a collection of inter-related stories titled *Tales from Firozsha Baag* in 1987. *Such A Long Journey*, 1991, was his first published novel which received many awards and recognitions like Canada Governor General's Award for Fiction, the Commonwealth Writer's Award for the Best Book of the Year and was also nominated for the Booker Prize. His second novel *A Fine Balance* was published in 1995 and received the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book. *Family Matters* came out in 2002 and apart from winning many prestigious awards it was also nominated for Man Booker Prize for fiction. Mistry also has a number of short stories that have been published and received rave reviews. He is today one of the most acclaimed and recognised writers especially of the Indian diaspora and his writings articulate the voices of a minority group.

14.2.1 Rohinton Mistry and the Parsi Community

The Parsis arrived in Gujarat, India around 756 A.D where they were granted asylum by the local king Jadav Rana. The king put certain conditions which required them to give up their 'Farsi' language and to adopt the Hindu way of dressing. In their struggle for survival the community had to make lot of compromise; as a result, they became close knit and held steadfastly to their existing religious and cultural identity. The community also experienced marginalisation because of their minority status. The fear of being appropriated into the mainstream culture also made them fearful of losing their ethnic identity. Rohinton Mistry as a first-generation expatriate writer closely observed these experiences and predicaments of his community in modern India. Mistry constantly returns to Indian and Parsi themes in all of his literary works. He assumes the privileged position of an outsider-insider and observes his native country and its throbbing everyday life. As a member of the minority community in India he experienced marginalisation and identity crisis but as an immigrant in Canada he has triple identities: an Indian –Parsi- Canadian immigrant. Rohinton Mistry is also well versed in the political dynamism of India and his novels constantly revolve around the socio-political environment of India especially the period of emergency and the post-independence India. His characters are Parsi but he also displays his acumen for portraying characters of other ethnic community. Though he migrated in the year 1975 he surprises us with his current knowledge about the contemporary Indian society especially the nitty-gritty of everyday life that a common man faces. Thus, issues of corruption, caste problems, government schemes, partisan politics, sufferings of common masses occupy dominant position in his fictions.

14.3 SUCH A LONG JOURNEY: A CRITICAL APPRECIATION

Such A Long Journey is Rohinton Mistry's first novel and it was published in 1991. The novel narrates the story of Gustad Noble and the various predicaments that he faces in his simple middle-class life. Gustad Noble is a

Parsi who lives with his family in Khodabad Building with his wife Dilnavaz, sons Sohrab and Darius and daughter Roshan. Khodabad Building houses the segregated community of the Parsis as their tenants. One of the striking facts about minority communities is that they live in a close-knit community because this provides them a sense of security as well as an identity. Thus Khodabad building is symbolical of such a practice where all the inhabitants are Parsis. The Parsis as a community has always been a close knit one and avoided contacts with other communities. They staunchly practised inter-caste marriage and opposed any kind of proselytisation. Gustad Noble is a kind-hearted gentleman who works as a teller in a bank. He is a religious Parsi, who performs his daily *kusti* prayers. He struggles to provide a comfortable life to his family and good education to his children. In the novel Major Bilimoria who is a close family friend, almost a brother to Gustad, disappears suddenly from Khodabad Building and no information is available about his absence. Gustad is terribly hurt by his mysterious absence and he considers this as a betrayal on the part of his friend. One day he receives a letter from his friend which sets him off on a journey of mysterious dealings. When Gustad decides to help his friend without any questions asked, Gustad's humanity and large heartedness is displayed. Following 'Billi Boy's' instructions Gustad receives a large amount of money which he is forced to deposit into a fake account in the bank. But circumstances compel him to withdraw the amount though it causes him immense hardship and he is also forced to enlist the help of his friend Dinshawji. Dinshawji is a garrulous old man who is lecherous in some ways. He suffers from cancer but displays immense courage in the face of this tragedy. Mistry's portrayal of Parsi men like Gustad, Dinshawji, Mr Pastakia, and Tehmul shows his adept eye for the men of his community and portrays them with all their idiosyncrasies. In fact, the close-knit relationship of the members of the community is also displayed when Gustad decides to confront Bilimoria rather than succumbing to the newspapers that published details of his so-called corrupt dealings. He is a loyal friend and performs all the Parsi rituals after Bilimoria's death and he knew that Bilimoria had been more than a brother to him. Dilnavaz, Gustad's wife is a religious woman who is

susceptible to superstitious belief. She is traditional Indian woman and her major concern is the domestic affairs and the welfare of her family. In fact Dilnavaz is not completely passive but her activism is more concerned with concocting remedies that is prescribed by Miss Kutpitia. Sohrab, their first born, is estranged from his father since he does not want to study at the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology and this becomes a bone of contention between the two. Gustad had dreamt of his son becoming an engineer and, in the process, helping the family, but when Sohrab refuses, he feels as if his whole world has shattered. This also shows the concern of middle-class Indian families for whom the only way out of poverty and middle-class station in life was to get admission into some prestigious institutions and find government jobs. Thus, Gustad's life is inundated by the twin demands of the domestic and public life. Gustad never gives up, he is resilient to the problems that besiege him. In his story Mistry has portrayed the lives of many such middle-class Indian men who confront such problems daily. The story with the Bangladesh war in the background also shows the nationalistic fervour that gripped not only the entire nation but also the minority community of the Parsis. Mistry also depicts the Parsis's zeal and fervour for the Indian nation, many even contributed to the war in the form of donations. Gustad shows his resilience in the face of personal and domestic problems. He resists the corruption that engulfed Bilimoria and in doing so he proves himself to be a hero. His humanity soars at the death of Tehmul, and it is with dignity and tenderness that he carries Tehmul to his apartment. Though he is an individual his journey, both physical and metaphorical symbolises the journey that a common man makes in his lifetime and how he faces all odds in an existential struggle for meaning and happiness.

14.3.1 Mistry's Use of Language in *Such A Long Journey*

One of the important characteristic features of a postcolonial text is the use of English as a means of creative expression. Rohinton Mistry celebrates the use of Indian English in the tradition of Salman Rushdie and other writers

of fiction. Historically, the Parsis had aligned themselves with the British when they were the rulers of India. They believed that by adopting British way of life and the English language they would become more like the British. As a result, many Parsi families started pursuing English along with their own Farsi language.

Words from Hindi, Gujarati, Farsi, and to quote Salman Rushdie ‘Bambaiyya’ slang are liberally used in the novel. This hybrid combination of multiple languages adds colour and variety to the narrative style. By inserting local words, idioms, jokes and adages Mistry subverts the hegemonic power play of the English language and moulds it to suit the needs of his narrative. Such use of the English language displays the postcolonial resistance to the European view of the “normative” or “correct” usage of the English language. Mistry does not employ a glossary for the innumerable local words that leaves many readers from the West and Europe unable to understand their meanings. But this deliberate ploy also demonstrates the challenges that he addresses to his readers. The use of Indian words also makes for authenticity in the character’s expressions of different emotions. Mistry makes use of abusive terms in the novel, slangs and vulgarisms that are spoken by his middle-class characters. Since such words are a part of their daily rhetoric, it may not be obscene for them but is a way expressing anger and frustration. Words like *morcha*, *nahi chalaygi*, *dadagiri*, *chawl*, *saala* are Hindi words that are very common words in the public discourse. Similarly, Parsi words like *dugli*, *kusti* and *sudras* are words that are specific to depictions of Parsi culture and practice. Such words that are sprinkled around the entire narrative shows the writer’s familiarity of the polyglot society that Bombay epitomised. Certain words also defy literal translation as they convey very Indian sensibilities and idiosyncrasies and the writer has done well to retain them in their original. As an expatriate Parsi, Mistry is also concerned with the preservation and narration of his ethnic identity. Language and linguistic expressions are an important medium where he can achieve this sense of preservation and documentation of the Parsi way of life.

14.3.2 *Such A Long Journey: A Novel of Social Realism*

Social realism is a style of writing that is concerned mainly with the truthful and faithful depiction of society and its different dimensions. One of its main objectives is social criticism. This mode of writing also believes in the inherent power of the written word and the writer's ability to document and present realistically the different problems, ailments and issues that besiege common men and women in a society. Thus, literature is considered as a potent tool for raising awareness among the masses about societal issues. The characters in this style of writing are products of society and societal mores where the lives, dilemmas and problems of common people are the crux of the writer's concern. On one level, this novel by Rohinton Mistry can be read as a documentation of the lives of middle-class men and women and their everyday concerns of money, job, corruption, marginalisation, fanaticism, friendship, betrayal, riots, encroachment, sickness and politics. Gustad Noble is a simple teller in a bank and his wife Dilnavaz is a housewife. Gustad is inundated by domestic problems even as the novel introduces him and his family. Khodabad Building houses a number of Parsi families who struggle to meet their daily ends. Like Gustad and Dilnavaz, most of the residents could no longer buy the 'fine creamy product' from the supplier, the Parsi Dairy and were compelled to depend on the *bhaiya's* watery milk. Dilnavaz remembers the days when ration cards were only for the poor but now they themselves depended on rationed items. Mistry has depicted the characters realistically based on his minute observation and familiarity with members of his community. They are engaging individuals but they also represent 'types' of men and women of the community. Miss Kutpitia is an eccentric spinster who claims to know black magic. It is through her that the issue of superstition that afflicts many common men and women like Dilnavaz are introduced into the story. Gustad's simple and kind hearted wife turns to Miss Kutpitia for help when she finds that her cherished domestic happiness is falling apart. Mr Cavaaji is an octogenarian ranting old man who suffers from hypertension and isolation. He rants against god, individuals and the society at large. In his character Mistry has delineated

the psychological fear and anxieties of the minority community in a society where nationalism, religious fanaticism and political intervention are on the rise. The mentally challenged and physically deformed character of Tehmul is also realistically delineated. He represents the marginal of the marginalised class, the oppressed outsider, the innocent victim of the uncaring world. Tehmul's character is also significant because he brings out the softer side of Gustad and Gustad treats him as a sharer of his experience since both of them suffered physical deformity though in the case of Gustad it was just a slight limp. Through Tehmul's character Mistry also shows how innocent individuals who live in the margins of the society become the victims of public wrath and national chaos.

Mistry's novel is also a social product of a place and time. The novel opens with the East-West Pakistan war in the background which in the later part of the story becomes integrally connected with Gustad and Bilimoria. Bombay is as important as Gustad's character in the text. Bombay the cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, multilingual city is portrayed with a throbbing life that goes on despite the chaos and cantre. But Mistry deconstructs this popular image of the city as home to plurality and multiplicity. Gustad and Dinshawji mirror the fear of the Parsi community in the wake of calls for homogenisation by the Shiv Sena, the regional right-wing party. The protest march at the end of the novel is attended by individuals from every walk of life to demand for essential and better living conditions. Demand for a cleaner and better service is recognised by all and this show of unity is in contrast to the divisive factors that threatened the fabric of Bombay's plurality. Mistry's landscape in the novel also details the Crawford market with its sounds, stench, flies and meat vendors, the House of Cages with pan-stained shops and barracks of prostitutes and the congested Bombay traffic that swelled with diesel fumes in the rain. Khodabad Building is a microcosm of the city itself that houses multitudes of families. The residents have their own internal bickering with each other but they also live together as a community. They feel protected by the wall that acts as an enclosure, shielding them from the dust and noise of the streets and

also demarcating their territory where they feel completely at home to practise their ethnic culture. Ironically the wall is also a great nuisance for the residents because it had literally been transformed into a place for open defecation by the public. The stench that flowed from the wall attracted flies that entered into the homes of the residents causing them intolerable sufferings. This is not an unfamiliar sight in India where open defecation is a pervasive habit among the public. Gustad comes up with a novel idea and he invites an artist to draw religious paintings on the wall. Thus, the wall is transformed by the artist and it becomes a place of reverence and prayer. It symbolises religious tolerance and harmony. As a novel of social realism, the wall also glorifies the artist and his art in propagating assurance and confidence of the residents in the novel.

The wall is also a central symbol in the text. Mistry himself is aware of many such walls that exist. Symbolically the wall represents the internal division between different communities in India. The wall also represents the self-segregation of minority communities like the Parsis who live cloistered lives, maintaining their own ethnic culture and identity and staunchly opposing any attempts at homogenisation by dominant ethnic groups. On the macro level the wall stands for the new boundaries that are redrawn between nations like India, China, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The wall also symbolises Mistry's own sojourns with India and Canada as an Indian-Canadian citizen.

14.3.3 The Theme of Journey in *Such A Long Journey*

As the title itself suggests, journey is the central motif in the novel. The literal journey of Gustad Noble is metaphorically connected with the mental voyage he undergoes as the story progresses and we see a different Gustad in the end – a man transformed by the overwhelming events he witnessed and experienced. The literal journey refers to Gustad's journey first to the Dinshawji's funeral and then to Delhi to meet Major Bilimoria. The death of Dinshawji leaves him a changed man. Dinshawji's reaction to his sickness by putting on a façade of boisterousness changes Gustad's cynicism and bitterness

towards life. He develops the philosophical understanding that problems in life has to be faced with a brave and stoic acceptance. His journey to Delhi also confounds him with the pervasive notoriety of the state and state agencies like the RAW.

The motif of journey also symbolises the journey of the nation since independence in 1947 and the strides it had made as a free country. The novel delineates how the secular ideas of ‘unity in diversity’ and multiplicity that was the foundation of the nation-state is continuously dismantled by divisive and parochial politics. The result is that minority communities like the Parsis feel continuously threatened by regional parties like the Shiv Sena which regards them as outsiders in India. Thus, the central motif of the journey also represents the journey of the Parsis whose very history in India is a history of migration. In their long journey in India the Parsis had undergone assimilation and acclimatization yet maintaining their ethnic identity. Thus, the Parsis are exemplars of cultural hybridity because they demonstrate cultural traits from the dominant Hinduism and their own Parsi culture. Journey also means a pilgrim or a voyage that is made for very significant or religious motives. Gustad’s psychological journey transforms him in the end. He is able to forgive his friend Bilimoria, has more respect for Dinshawji, he reconciles with his son Sohrab and treats Tehmul with respect and dignity. In the end when Gustad tears the blackout papers from his windows it symbolises a new beginning, a new ray of hope and determination.

The epigraph of the novel has three extracts that are taken from different sources. The first two extracts eulogise the journey of the Parsis through different times and different ages and how they continued their faith and belief even in exile. The first extract is from Firdausi’s *Shah-Nama* and the second is taken from Eliot’s “The Journey of the Magi.” The epigraph from *Gitanjali* is a philosophical rendition of man’s journey in this world which is arduous yet this journey also depicts the indomitable spirit of man.

14.4 ALIENATION AS A MAJOR THEME IN THE NOVEL

Alienation is an important theme that the writer explores in this novel. He is sensitive to the threats and anxieties that his community feel in Bombay and delineates the way they react towards these situations. The community had always lived in peace, practicing their own religion and significantly contributing to the development of the nation. Many Parsis owned banks and many of them worked in the banking sector. The nationalisation of the banks by the Indira Gandhi government, though welcomed by the public, was detrimental to the community as many of them lost their business and livelihood. Dinshawji recalls with nostalgia “Parsis were the kings of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalized the banks” (SALJ 38). Since the setting of the story is Bombay of 1970s the political upheaval of that period is vividly documented. The demands for a separate Maharashtra for the Maharashtrians also aggravated the sense of alienation among people like Guatad and Dinshawji. Dinshawji states, “And today we have the bloody Shiv Sena, wanting to make the rest of us into second-class citizens” (SALJ 39). These issues continuously worried Gustad particularly about the future of his children and the future of the Parsi community in India. Mistry’s opinion about contemporary politics is also highlighted by his criticism of central agencies like RAW and the corruption from the high-ups in political power to common men like Ghulam Mohammad. Gustad is unknowingly dragged into the web of lie, deceit and corruption and he is forced to do things that go against his principles. Gustad is the representation of not only Parsi middle class men, but his character also represents middle class Indians and how they survive in a postcolonial India under the onslaughts of globalisation, The Parsis were also looked upon as outsiders by members of other communities because of their unique cultural practice and some ‘idiosyncrasies.’ For instance, as they are non-vegetarians, they are treated with derision by some Hindus who are vegetarians. In the story when Gustad boards a bus with his bag of meat, a Hindu woman looks at him and his bag with disdain that left him numb in his

feet. He felt as if he was committing a sin and that he was polluting others on the bus. The author also makes constant reference to the demands for cow slaughter ban that rocked Indian politics time and again and he narrates how this politics of meat also affected the members of the minority communities like Gustad and Malcolm. Gustad stops eating beef and restricts to consuming other meat like chicken and mutton. The writer also highlights the dilemma that the community faced in maintaining their age-old practice in a modern and cosmopolitan society like that in Bombay. The Parsi death ritual involved leaving the dead in the Tower of Silence, exposing the body to nature that would eventually be fed upon by vultures. This practice was facing threat from different quarters. The residents around the Tower of Silence complained about pieces of dead bodies that birds dropped on their compounds. The community members themselves were divided over introduction of modern methods of cremation. The problem was also highlighted by the dwindling population of vultures due to encroachment of their habitat. Such dilemmas are sensitively presented by the author in this story. These innumerable issues that are faced by the community undoubtedly place them in a precarious position. They represent an 'in-between' community occupying a hybrid space in the dominant Hindu-Muslim society.

14.4.1 Nostalgia and Memory

Alienation is also experienced by the Parsi characters in the novel through nostalgia and memory. Nostalgia and memory are also themes that bind the different characters in the novel together. They experience nostalgia for a glorious past and a constant desire for a better future while adapting to life in the present. For a community in diaspora experiences of alienation and nostalgia is an inherent condition. The constant desire for a lost home or a glorious past tempers the diaspora's experience in exile. To come to terms with their state in exile they create a semblance of their lost home through cultural, religious and communal gatherings. Gustad repeatedly returns to the past, to the days of financial prosperity as a boy and the luxurious indulgence of his

prosperous family. Mistry writes, “Mixing memory and sorrow, he thought fondly of the old days” (SALJ 61). These reminiscences evoke nostalgia and longing for those times when they had chicken with every meal, servants to do the chores, vacationing in the hills and racks full of books. His present condition is a shocking discrepancy from his past and this reality stings him. The role of memory on the individual and collective psyche is significant as it unveils the character’s psychology. Dinshawji’s rant against the Marathas for renaming the streets in Bombay spurs him down memory lane. Every event in his life is connected to a name, a place, a connection that he had grown familiar with, but now suddenly every name has changed and he has to reconnect these new names to those private memories that he cherished. Dinshawji’s private outburst is also symbolic of the Parsi’s apprehensions in a continuously intolerant society. Miss Kutpitia also lives amongst the memory of her dead brother and nephew. She lives insulated within her apartment where their rooms have been left untouched for years since their tragic death. Miss Kutpitia’s inability to sever her memories of the past is symptomatic of an individual’s need to hold on to past happiness to survive in their present. But one of the characters that arouses our sympathy and insight is Mr Cavasji. He showers tirades against everybody including god, but his deluge is not only very significant but admissible for illustrating the predicaments of common men and also of minority communities. For a writer in diaspora like Mistry, journey down memory lane is a very significant part of their creative process. In fact, staying in Canada, Mistry recreates India and the Indian Parsis and their stories by constantly rekindling his memory.

14.4.2 Critique of Nation-State Power Politics

Such A Long Journey is set in post-independence India when many changes were introduced as reforms by Mrs Indira Gandhi and her government. The novel deals with the fear and anxieties of the Parsis in a Hindu dominated country. Mistry refers to the nationalisation of the banks that affected Parsis many of whom were owners of banks. The novel is set with the East-West

Pakistan war in the backdrop and the birth of Bangladesh. The novel delineates the ravages of war, the political disturbance and the arm-wrestling tactics of a corrupt government that affected the lives of common people like Gustad, his friends and family. Mistry ironically depicts the nationalistic fervour that gripped the people who were unaware of the corruption that agencies like RAW indulged in. Huge funds were diverted in the name of relief and rehabilitation and all these took place under the very nose of the government that was supposed to work for the welfare of the common masses. The government used the war as a propaganda to instil in the minds of the public the benevolent image of Indira Gandhi as a saviour. The story ironically narrates how the government makes use of individuals as pawns for personal gains and easily dispenses with them when they feel the need. Mistry is critical of this vested interest of the people in power and he ridicules these pretensions, and questions whether this was the new kind of freedom and choices that independent India dreamt of.

The novel blends historical fact with fiction and presents the crisis that such disastrous political affairs have on the community and their image in the country. The episode of Major Bilimoria is taken from the infamous Nagarwala affair that involved the then Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi. Mistry depicts the fear and anxiety of the community when an individual of their own community is involved in such sordid deals and also feared persecution against their community by the Government of India. Rohinton Mistry also depicts Nehru and Indira Gandhi as they were perceived by many members of the Parsi community –someone as authoritarian, ruthless and corrupt. Infact, Mistry writes in the novel that “Nehru never forgave Feroze Gandhi for exposing scandals in the government...” (SALJ 11). The Parsis believed that the Nehrus had unjustly treated Feroze Gandhi, a member of their community. This further heightened their sense of marginalisation in India. A particular incident in the novel highlights Indira Gandhi’s image among the common citizens of the nation. A newspaper reports about an eighty year old woman who travelled a long way to donate her gold bangles for the training of *Mukti Bahini*. The

reports stated that she presented her bangles to Mother India, whereas some reports said that it was Mother Indira. Here Mistry deliberately portrays the cult status that was created around Indira Gandhi as the Mother of the nation. She and her agents are also accused of indulging in political vendetta. When Ghulam Mohammed makes it very clear that Bilimoria's death was not a natural death but a political murder, Gustad's misgivings about persecution of individuals by the state is given further concession. This fear is reinforced by the confession that Bilimoria makes in his prison in Delhi. Mistry is also critical of regional and parochial parties like the Shiv Sena. The Shiv Sena considered the minority communities like the Parsis as outsiders, as British stooges and as opportunists. They represented the dominant culture's intolerance towards other ethnic community. Thus, the enthusiasm of development and progress that the new republic dreamt of is dampened by the hegemonic politics and power that plays out. Though Mistry is critical of such politics of India he also presents the other side of the Indian ethos i.e of tolerance, secularism and multiplicity. In the figure of the footpath artist and in his paintings of multiple gods and goddesses, prophets and deities of different religious belief he celebrates this multiculturalism of the Indian society. Gustad Noble's friendship with Malcolm a Christian and Ghulam Mohammad a Muslim is also a very powerful symbolism of this secular acceptance of the Indians.

The interconnectedness of historical facts like the 1971 war and the infamous Nagarwala affair adds to the authenticity of the narration. At the same time the portrayal of Parsi men and women, the detailed description of their way of life, prayers and rituals, the narration of contemporary issues of corruption, marginalisation, identity crisis, political issues all lend the narrative a sense of realism. Apart from a vivid documentation of his community's outsider status in India, Mistry's work is also an important postcolonial narrative of independent India. *Such A Long Journey* traverses the vast expanse of postcolonial experience of marginalisation, identity crisis, multiculturalism, social mobility and engagement with history. As a mouthpiece of the

community Mistry depicts how these postcolonial conditions affect the community's identity in multicultural India.

14.5 SUMMING UP

In this unit you have learnt that:

- Rohinton Mistry is an expatriate Indian writer who is settled in Canada. He belongs to the minority community of the Parsis who had migrated to India to escape persecution. Though he is settled in Canada he continues to write on Indian and Parsi themes. The Parsis experience marginalisation even in the multicultural society of Bombay. They struggle to retain their ethnic identity and cultural practice. Mistry's work can also be read as a documentation of the life and ethnic habits as well as rites and rituals of his community at the same time it can also be considered as his contribution to the preservation of Parsi way of life.
- The novel *Such A Long Journey* is about a Parsi middle class man Gustad Noble and his relationships with characters from different cultural, social and religious backgrounds. The story revolves around Gustad's family and their domestic problems which is parallel to the plot of Major Bilimoria's disappearance and Gustad's inevitable role in the money laundering that takes place between the Government and intelligence agency of the RAW.
- The novel critiques the blind nationalism that the government instilled in the public through their propaganda. The story narrates how the government makes use of individuals like Mr Bilimoria as pawns for their personal motive and dispense with them as they like. Mistry attacks Indira Gandhi and her idea of a welfare state that has failed to bring development in the country. Through the character of Dinshawji the writer criticises the corruption that was pervasive from the higher rung to the bottom in the government hierarchy. The novel deconstructs the idea of a nation-state in the context of India and questions whether India was fulfilling its dream of freedom and independence. We also see in the text the intermingling of

history and fiction for e.g. the Bilimoria incident is taken from the infamous Nagarwala case where even Mrs Gandhi is implicated.

- Journey is the central motif in the novel. Journey symbolises Gustad's literal journey as well as the metaphorical journey that he undertakes psychologically. The central motif also symbolises a pilgrim or a voyage that a man makes in this world. It represents the spirit and indomitable will of man. Journey also stands for the strides that India has made as a nation since independence. Very importantly this motif also represents the long history of migration that characterises the minority community of the Parsis. It is symbolical of their journey as they scattered like seeds to different parts of the world.
- As a novel of social realism *Such A Long Journey* documents the Parsi men and women in their different social contexts. Mistry narrates their everyday lives as they navigate through jobs, domestic problems, politics, corruption, riots, death, funerals and friendship. Mistry shows himself to be a master in describing the cultural and aesthetic ethos of his ethnic community. As a social document the story also gives a realistic portrayal of Bombay with its throbbing everyday life and its nuances. Mistry celebrates the social fabric of Bombay that is under threat by regional parochial parties that demand homogenisation and totalitarian kind of society.
- A hybrid variety of Indian English is used that has words from Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati and Farsi languages. Polyglot discourse makes the narrative interesting as well as more authentic because the verbal expressions of the characters retain their Indian idiosyncrasies. Also by resisting the use of "normative" or correct English Mistry displays the postcolonial resistance to European demand. This hybrid English is a very important medium for him to express his creative imagination as well as contribute to the preservation of the culture and practice of the Parsi community to which he belongs.
- Nostalgia and alienation are an important condition of a community in diaspora. Memory plays a very important role in recollecting past life or lost

histories. Gustad also repeatedly recollects the days of the glorious past when they were rich and affluent. Similarly, many characters are nostalgic about their lives in the past. Alienation in the form of isolation, marginalisation and outsider status is experienced by many characters in the story. Gustad suffers on a bus with his bag of meat when he is disdainfully treated by a Hindu lady. Dinshawji articulates the nationalisation of the banks that affected innumerable Parsis who lost their livelihoods. He also rants at the way they have been reduced to second class citizens. Many such incidents that reinforce this sense of alienation is interspersed throughout the novel.



14.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Rohinton Mistry as a diasporic writer. Name some of his famous works.
2. Write a critical appreciation of *Such A Long Journey*.
3. Write a note on the theme of alienation in the novel.
4. How does Rohinton Mistry criticise power politics in independent India?
5. What is the significance of journey in the novel?
6. What are the characteristic features of a novel of social realism? Give instances of realism in the novel.
7. Write a note on the significance of the 'wall' in the text.
8. Discuss the language and the narrative style of Mistry.
9. Discuss the character of Gustad in the novel.
10. Based on your reading make an analysis of Rohinton Mistry as a writer of Indian English Fiction.



14.7 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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