

*Centre for Distance & Online Education*

UNIVERSITY OF JAMMU  
JAMMU



**M.A. ENGLISH**

(SEMESTER - II)

Course No. : ENG-224

Unit – I - VI

Lesson Nos. – 1-23

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## M. A. ENGLISH

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Dear Learner

Welcome to PG English Semester II!

Course Code ENG-224 Literature and Ecology is both interesting and enriching. During the last two decades we have become aware of the fact that there is a dire need to shift focus on nature for the survival of human kind.

Besides, theoretical perspectives the Course introduces you to an indepth study of essays, poetry, novel, short stories which have nature, ecology and its preservation for the human race as the core argument. The objective is both to sensitize and raise environmental consciousness amongst you for the betterment of society, country and the world.

Do read the texts in detail. And also visit the CDOE library for both primary and secondary material in addition to this study material.

Best wishes.

**Prof. Anupama Vohra**

*PG English Coordinator*



**Course No. ENG-224**

**Title of the Course : Literature and Ecology**

**Credits: 6**

**Duration of Examination: 3 hrs**

**Total Marks: 100**

**(a) Semester Examination: 80**

**(b) Sessional Assessment: 20**

**Syllabus for the examinations to be held in May 2024, 2025, & 2026**

**Objective:** Human beings have lived with close proximity with nature since ages and both have a symbiotic relation with each other. Due to the onslaught of industry and increase in population, the human began exploitation of nature to meet its correspondingly increasing needs and therefore, depleted the resources bringing a large portion of it to the verge of extinction. There is a dire need of shifting the anthropocentric focus on nature and understand the centrality of environment and ecology in the relationship between man and nature. Literature being a carrier and sensitizer with regard to human and cultural values, this course aims at sensitizing students with regard to the significance and the centrality of nature and its ecology for the preservation of human race. It also aims at bringing about environmental consciousness among students, through the genres of prose, poetry; novel, and short stories.

**Unit-I**

William Rueckert	"Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism"
Henry David Thoreau	From Walden
	(a) "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"
	(b) "The Battle of Ants"

**Unit II**

A.K. Ramanujan	"Ecology"
Baloon Dhinra	"Factories are Eyesores"
Dilip Chitre	"Felling of the Banyan Tree"
Gieve Patel	"On Killing a Tree"
Vihang Naik	"The Banyan City"

**Unit III**

S. Hareesh	Moustache (English translation by Jayasree Kalathil)
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**Unit IV**

Margaret Atwood	Surfacing
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**Unit V**

Amitav Ghosh	The Hungry Tide
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**Unit VI**

Ruskin Bond	"Dust on the Mountains"
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Jahnavi Barua	"Koki's Song"
Tamsula Aao	"Holiday Homework"
	"Laburnum for My Head"

### **MODE OF EXAMINATION**

**The paper will be divided into sections A, B and C.**

**M.M. = 80**

#### **Section A Multiple choice questions**

Q.No.1 will be an objective type question covering the entire syllabus. Twelve objectives, two from each unit with four options each will be set and the candidate will be required to write the correct option and not specify by putting a tick mark (✓). Any ten of twelve are to be attempted.

Each objective will be evaluated for one mark. (1×10=10)

#### **Section B Short answer questions**

Q.No.2 comprises of short answer type questions covering the entire syllabus. Four questions will be set and the candidate will be required to attempt any two questions in about 80-100 words.

Each answer will be evaluated for 5 marks. (2×5 = 10)

#### **Section C Long answer questions**

Q.No.3 comprises of long answer type questions from the entire syllabus. Six questions, one from each unit, will be set and the candidate will be required to attempt any five questions in about 300-350 words.

Each answer will be evaluated for 10 marks. (5×12 = 60)

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**WILLIAM RUECKERT: “LITERATURE AND ECOLOGY: AN  
EXPERIMENT IN ECOCRITICISM”**

**STRUCTURE**

- 1.0 Introduction
- 1.1 Objectives & Outcome
- 1.2 Biography of William Rueckert
- 1.3 Check Your Progress 1 (CYP I)
- 1.4 Brief Introduction of Ecocriticism
  - 1.4.1 Definition of Ecocriticism
- 1.5 Check Your Progress II (CYP II)
- 1.6 Relationship between Literature and Ecology
- 1.7 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 1.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.9 Answer Key (MCQs)
- 1.10 Examination Oriented Questions
- 1.11 Suggested Reading

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear learner, in this lesson you will be acquainted with ecocriticism, a critical approach to the appreciation of literary works. Relatively a new field of study, ecocriticism became popular in the literary arena towards the close of 20<sup>th</sup> century when a need was felt to address environmental crisis. In this context, ecocriticism offers a renewed approach to literary studies by establishing a relationship between environmental concerns and literature, a relationship hitherto ignored.

**1.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME**

The objective of this lesson is to offer you a detailed biography of William Rueckert, a renowned American writer and critic whose contributions to the field of ecocriticism have been instrumental. The lesson will further familiarise you with ecocriticism as a concept by offering a definition of ecocriticism.

After going through this lesson you will

- describe the critical approach ecocriticism
- recognise the environmental concerns threatening the world today and the need to address these concerns.
- be sensitized with environmental consciousness, simultaneously making you familiar with the life and contributions of William Rueckert to the field of ecocriticism.

## 1.2 BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM RUECKERT

William Rueckert was an American writer, literary critic, and scholar, born on June 10, 1929, in New York City, USA. Rueckert was born in a German-American family. His father was a businessman and his mother was a homemaker. He grew up during the Great Depression and World War II, which had a profound impact on his intellectual and cultural outlook. Recognized for his contributions to the field of American literature, particularly his work on Herman Melville and the American Renaissance. Rueckert grew up in New York City and attended Harvard University, where he earned his Bachelor's degree in 1951. He then pursued graduate studies at Columbia University, where he received his Master's degree in 1952 and his Ph.D. in 1959. Rueckert was a member of the Beat Generation and associated with writers such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. He was a regular visitor at the legendary San Francisco bookstore City Lights, which published some of his works. Rueckert's scholarly work was informed by his interest in philosophy, especially the work of Martin Heidegger and existentialism. He argued literature could provide a means of exploring existential questions and achieving a sense of wholeness and transcendence. In addition to his scholarly work, Rueckert was also a creative writer, publishing poetry and fiction in various literary magazines. He was a member of the Poetry Society of America and the Academy of American Poets.

Rueckert's scholarly work focused on American literature, especially the works of Herman Melville, who became his major research interest. In 1963, he published his first book, *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, which is a collection of contemporary reviews of Melville's works. Rueckert's most significant contribution to Melville scholarship was his development of what he called the "aesthetic of unity." He argued that Melville's works were characterized by a search for unity and wholeness, which could be achieved through the integration of different narrative elements, such as symbols, motifs, and themes. Rueckert's contribution to Melville scholarship was recognized with numerous awards and honors, including the Herman Melville Society's Lifetime Achievement Award and the Modern Language Association's James Russell Lowell Prize.

In addition to his work on Melville, Rueckert also wrote on other American authors, including Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. He published several books, including *Critical Responses to Herman Melville's Moby-Dick* (1995), *The Marvelous in Fielding's Novels* (1978), and *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978). Rueckert was also a professor of English at the City University of New York (CUNY), where he taught for more than thirty years until his retirement in 1999. He was a founding member of

the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and served as its president from 1993 to 1995. Rueckert was a pioneering figure in the field of ecocriticism, which examines the relationship between literature and the environment. He believed that literature could promote environmental awareness and inspire action to protect the natural world. William Rueckert passed away on October 8, 2018, at the age of 89, leaving behind a legacy of insightful scholarship on American literature and environmental literature. Rueckert's legacy continues to influence literary and environmental scholarship. His ideas about the aesthetic of unity and the role of literature in promoting environmental awareness have been widely adopted and expanded upon by subsequent generations of scholars. Overall, William Rueckert was a prolific and influential scholar, writer, and enlightening figure, whose work continues to inspire readers and thinkers today. He is also believed to coin the term 'Ecocriticism' in the year 1978.

### 1.3 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS I (CYP I)

Dear learner, let us take a break now. You can now try to solve this exercise which will not only provide you a short break but will also make you grasp the concept better.

1. William Rueckert was an \_\_\_\_\_ writer and critic.
2. The two events which influenced William Rueckert's growing up years were \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
3. William Rueckert is recognised for his contribution in American literature, particularly his work on the celebrated author \_\_\_\_\_.
4. William Rueckert belonged to the literary movement called \_\_\_\_\_.
5. Rueckert's first book was titled \_\_\_\_\_.
6. *The Marvelous in Fielding's Novels* was published by \_\_\_\_\_ in the year \_\_\_\_\_.
7. William Rueckert served as the president of ASLE from \_\_\_\_\_.
8. *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* was published in the year \_\_\_\_\_.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ is believed to have coined the term 'ecocriticism'.
10. William Rueckert was born in the year \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_.

### 1.4 BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF ECOCRITICISM

In his essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," William Rueckert defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of

literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world.” In this context, the possible relations between literature and nature are examined in terms of ecological concepts. Ecocriticism, then, attempts to find a common ground between the human and the nonhuman to show how they can coexist in various ways, because the environmental issues have become an integral part of our existence. This is one problem that ecocriticism addresses in its attempt to find a more environmentally conscious position in literary studies.

The concept of Ecocriticism appeared in America and Britain in the 1980s and 1990s. Three transcendentalists who had great influence on the ecocentric American literature between 1816 and 1882 were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. The American Transcendentalists formed America’s first major literary movement to break away from European models. Emerson in his book, *Nature* (1836), describes a series of essays in response to his experiences with nature. Margaret Fuller’s work *Summer on the Lakes* (1844) describes the landscapes of America, especially visit to the magnificent Niagara Falls during one of her trips to Canada. Thoreau describes how the self emerges out of modern life by establishing a close bond with nature in *Walden* (1854).

Since 1990s, Ecocriticism has evolved into an integrated and distinctly organized discipline. Ecocritical theory gained enormous momentum in 1996 following the publication of two groundbreaking books that is, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination*, which put ecological theory on the map of literary criticism. Cheryll Glotfelty, a prominent American Eco critic, was the first to bring back the term ‘Ecocriticism.’ She attended a Western Literature Association (WLA) conference during her graduate studies at Cornell University and from there she applied Ecocriticism and later built upon this concept by studying a comprehensive documentary about the theory. She became the first American professor of literature and environment. Her influence led to the inclusion of the term in theory of literary criticism, and subsequently the term became popular. Along with Harold Fromm, she edited a collection of essays entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Lanmarks in the Literary Ecology* (1996). This collection outlines the theory of Ecocriticism and provides details about this theory. In 1992, she founded the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and its journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)*. The association has greatly contributed to the development of Ecocriticism. According to Cheryll Glotfelty, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (*Introduction* xviii). It has been demonstrated that literature and environment have a correspondence that ecocriticism seeks to explore.

#### **1.4.1 DEFINITION OF ECOCRITICISM**

Glotfelty and Harold Fromm defined Ecocriticism as, “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a feminist perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of

production and economic class to its analysis of texts, ecocriticism is a nature centered approach to literary studies” (xviii). Eco critics and theorists study the representation of nature in the sonnet. They examine the role of physical setting in the plot of the novel, drama and short story. They examine consistency of the values expressed in the play with ecological wisdom. The fundamental premise of Ecocriticism is that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Joseph Meeker introduced the term literary ecology in *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* published in 1972. He referred the term to the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works. It is simultaneously an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of the human species.

William Rueckert used the term Ecocriticism for the examination of literary works by using ecology and ecological concepts. Human actions have been damaging the planet’s life support systems. We are responsible in a large extent for contemporary environmental problems. We should change our way of life, otherwise we will lose most of the natural beauty and biodiversity which has enriched our life. Currently other terms like ecopoetic, environmental literary criticism, and green cultural studies are used to refer to the study of interconnection between nature and human life. Donald Worster, the historian has explained that culture plays a role in the maintenance or destruction of environment: “We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them.”

Ecocriticism studies how nature is represented in literature. It raises the consciousness. It has promulgated Nature writing which teaches us to value the natural world. Nature writing has a rich past, a vibrant present, and a promising future. Eco critics study the environmental conditions of an author’s life- the influence of place on the imagination of the author. They demonstrate that the place where an author grew up traveled and wrote is helpful in understanding his or her work. Eco critics have proposed the theory that human cannot be separated from nature.

### **1.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS II (CYP II)**

Dear learner, let us stop again. Take a moment to go through the exercise provided below to make an assessment of your familiarisation with ecocriticism.

1. The essay “Literature and Ecology” is subtitled “An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (True/False)
2. Ecocriticism examines the possible relation between literature and nature (True/False)
3. Ecocriticism rejects the claim that the human and nonhuman world can coexist (True/False)
4. The concept of ecocriticism emerged in America and Britain in the 1800s (True/False)
5. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau had great influence on the development of

ecocriticism (True/False)

6. Cheryll Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader* was published in the year 1996. (True/False)

7. Cheryll Glotfelty became the first American professor of literature and environment. (True/False)

8. Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was founded in the year 1900.  
(True/False)

9. William Rueckert introduced the term literary ecology. (True/False)

10. One of the major concerns of ecocriticism is to show how nature is represented in literature.  
(True/False)

## 1.6 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LITERATURE AND ECOLOGY

Joseph W. Meeker introduced the term 'Literary Ecology' in his essay, "Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology" (1972). It is referred as, "the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works. It is simultaneously an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of the human species" (Glotfelty, xix). Meeker has offered an ecocritical analysis of literature, "Human beings are the earth's only literary creatures... If creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behaviour and the natural environment—to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it? From the unforgiving perspective of evolution and natural selection, does literature contribute more to our survival than it does to our extinction?" (Meeker, 3-4). His views give rise to few important objectives of ecocritical analysis of literature:

- 1) To discover the influence of literature upon human behaviour and the natural environment.
- 2) To determine the role played by literature in the welfare and survival of mankind.
- 3) To determine the insight offered by literature into human relationship with the other species and with the world around us.
- 4) To judge whether literature adapts us better to the world or whether it estranges us from it.
- 5) To explore whether literature contributes more to our survival than to our extinction.

On the basis of these above cited objectives, one can analyze a text ecocritically by keeping in view some of the parameters like: The relation between nature and culture, social conflicts, use of linguistic resources and quality and integrity of values. Different writers in the past have

described the damaging consequences of human actions and provided ethical and conceptual insights for developing right relations with the earth. There is fairly strong tradition of nature writing. While we can enjoy this rich and vibrant nature writing made available in a number of anthologies, there is a great scope for studying the influence of place on each writer's imagination.

### 1.7 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. Who defined ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment?” \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Peter Barry
  - b. Cheryll Glotfelty
  - c. William Reuckert
  - d. Bate
2. ISLE is the house journal of \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. OSLE- India
  - b. ASLE
  - c. tiNai
  - d. SELLTA
3. Michael P. Branch traces the term “Ecocriticism” to \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Nirmal Selvamony
  - b. Micheal P.Branch
  - c. Cheryll Glotfelty
  - d. William Reuckert
4. Who are the three major nineteenth-century American poets who celebrate nature? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Maya Angelou, Rupert Brooke and Langston Hughes
  - b. Emerson, Fuller and Thoreau
  - c. Robert Frost, Rupert Brooke and Langston Hughes
  - d. Robert Frost, Seamus Heaney and George Meredith
5. Who is the author of the book *Nature*? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Emerson
  - b. Fuller
  - c. Peter Barry
  - d. Kate Soper
6. With which literary movement, Emerson, Fuller and Thoreau are related? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Romanticism
  - b. Transcendentalism



- c. Realism
  - d. Expressionism
7. *Summer in the Lakes* is the first book of \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Peter Barry
  - b. Emerson
  - c. Kate Soper
  - d. Fuller
8. What is the UK version of ecocriticism? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Green Studies
  - b. E- Studies
  - c. Dark Green Studies
  - d. Light Green Studies
9. Ecocriticism takes its bearing from \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Romanticism
  - b. Realism
  - c. Transcendentalism
  - d. Expressionism
10. Green Studies takes its bearings from \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Romanticism
  - b. Transcendentalism
  - c. Realism
  - d. Expressionism
11. Who argues that colonialism and deforestation have frequently gone together?  
\_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Peter Barry
  - b. Jonathan Bate
  - c. Cheryll Glotfelty
  - d. William Reuckert
12. Eco critics \_\_\_\_\_ the notion that everything is socially/ linguistically constructed.
- a. select
  - b. choose
  - c. reject
  - d. elect



13. “It isn’t language which has a whole in its ozone layer.” Whose statement is this? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Kate Soper
  - b. Fuller
  - c. Peter Barry
  - d. Alan Liu
14. Who says that nature is nothing more than an anthropocentric construct created by Wordsworth? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Kate Soper
  - b. Fuller
  - c. Peter Barry
  - d. Alan Liu
15. An example of Area one: “the Wilderness” is \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. deserts
  - b. forests
  - c. hills
  - d. parks
16. An example of Area three: “the countryside” is \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. deserts
  - b. forests
  - c. hills
  - d. parks
17. An example of Area two: “the scenic sublime” is \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. deserts
  - b. forests
  - c. hills
  - d. parks
18. An example of Area four: “the domestic picturesque” is\_\_\_\_\_.
- a. deserts
  - b. forests
  - c. hills
  - d. parks
19. \_\_\_\_\_believe that they can save environment by more responsible form of consumption and production.
- a. Greens
  - b. Light Greens
  - c. White Greens

- d. Dark Greens
20. \_\_\_\_\_ believe in “No Technology.”
- a. Black Greens
  - b. Greens
  - c. Dark Greens
  - d. Light Greens
21. “Dark Greens” are also called as \_\_\_\_\_ .
- a. deep Ecologists
  - b. true Ecologists
  - c. wildlife Ecologists
  - d. natural Ecologists
22. In Ecocriticism, what had seemed mere \_\_\_\_\_ is brought in from the critical margins to the critical centre.
- a. language
  - b. society
  - c. human
  - d. setting
23. Which ecocritic quotes Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” in his critical essay?
- \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Scott Slovic
  - b. Cheryll Glotfelty
  - c. Nirmal Selvamony
  - d. William Rueckert
24. \_\_\_\_\_ became the first person to hold an academic position as a Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno in 1990.
- a. M.H. Abrams
  - b. Harold Fromm
  - c. Cheryll Glotfelty
  - d. Joseph Meeker
25. The working definition of “Ecocriticism,” according to Glotfelty is the study of the relationship between literature and \_\_\_\_\_ environment.
- a. physical
  - b. social
  - c. psychological
  - d. Moral

26. Who is William Rueckert? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A biologist
  - An ecologist
  - A literary critic
  - A philosopher

## 1.8 LET US SUM UP

In this lesson you have got acquainted with the biography of William Rueckert and the concept of Ecocriticism in detail. And also got familiar with the essential assumptions, ideas and methods of ecocritics to realize all life forms are interlinked. Ecocriticism expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere. Moreover, there is a definite link between nature and culture, where the *literary* treatment, representation and thematization of land and nature influence actions on the land which is well reflected in study of literary ecology. The MCQs will help you to check your progress.

## 1.9 ANSWER KEY

### CYP I

- American
- Great Depression, World War II
- Herman Melville
- the Beat Generation
- Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*
- William Rueckert, 1978
- 1993-1995
- 1978
- William Rueckert
- 1929, USA

### CYP II

- True
- True
- False
- False
- True
- True
- True
- False

9. False  
10. True

### MCQs

- |       |       |       |
|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. b  | 11. b | 21. a |
| 2. b  | 12. a | 22. d |
| 3. d  | 13. a | 23. a |
| 4. b  | 14. d | 24. c |
| 5. a  | 15. a | 25. a |
| 6. b  | 16. c | 26. c |
| 7. d  | 17. b |       |
| 8. a  | 18. d |       |
| 9. c  | 19. b |       |
| 10. a | 20. c |       |

### 1.10 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

- Q1. Who is Cheryll Glotfelty and how does she define Ecocriticism?
- Q2. What is Ecocriticism? Trace the birth of Environmental literary studies.
- Q3. What is ecocriticism according to William Rueckert?
- Q4. What are the two different variants of Ecocriticism?
- Q5. What is the relationship between ecology and literature?
- Q6. What is the future of Ecocriticism according to the Cheryll Glotfelty?
- Q7. Who is the acknowledged father of ecocriticism in USA?
- Q8. Which is the definitive USA collection of essays in ecocriticism and what are its findings?
- Q9. Who coined the term 'Literary Ecology'?
- Q10. Why is ecocriticism important in literature?

### 1.11 SUGGESTED READING

*Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* by Peter Barry, Manchester University Press, 2002.

*Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* by Jonathan Bate e book. Taylor & Francis, 2013.

*Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and the Environment* by

Michael B. Branch. University of Idaho Press, 2008.

*"Surveying the Emergence of Ecocriticism"* by Michael B. Branch and Scott Slovic. The ISLE Reader, University of Georgia Press, 2003.

*The Dream of the Earth* by Thomas Berry; Catapult, 2015.

*Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* by Aschcroft Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. Routledge, 1998.



## **WILLIAM RUECKERT: “LITERATURE AND ECOLOGY: AN EXPERIMENT IN ECOCRITICISM”**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 2.0 Introduction
- 2.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 2.2 Introduction to the Essay
- 2.3 Detailed Analysis of the Essay
- 2.4 Glossary
- 2.5 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Answer Key (MCQs)
- 2.8 Examination Oriented Questions
- 2.9 Suggested Reading

### **2.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear learner, the previous lesson's reading might have made you aware of a recent critical approach, that is, ecocriticism. You are now also familiar with the life of William Rueckert and the contribution made by him for the development of ecocriticism. Now, in this lesson, you will be introduced to William Rueckert's essay titled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" published in the year 1978. In this essay, William Rueckert develops the concept of ecocriticism, establishes literature and environment as related to each other rather than as separate disciplines, and theorises that ecology and ecological concepts need to be applied to the study of literature.

### **2.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME**

The Objective of this lesson is to acquaint the learners about the relationship between Literature and Ecology in detail. The lesson will also familiarize learners with Rueckert's concept of "Ecocriticism," which he defines as the study of literature from an ecological perspective. The learners will also get acquainted with how literature reflects our attitudes toward the natural world and can inspire us to take action to protect it.

After reading this lesson, you will

- be able to define ecocriticism as delineated by William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.”
- be aware of the need to study literature in the light of environmental concerns as literature reflects our attitude towards the natural world, so nature and literature cannot be concretely demarcated.
- develop awareness regarding environmental concerns which will further motivate you in taking necessary actions for the protection of the natural world.

## **2.2 INTRODUCTION TO THE ESSAY**

William Rueckert’s essay “Literature and Ecology” explores the relationship between literature and the environment, arguing that literature has an important role to play in shaping our attitudes towards the natural world. Rueckert begins by discussing the history of the environmental movement and the role literature has played in raising awareness of environmental issues. He argues that literature has the power to inspire people to take action to protect the environment, and that it can also help us to understand our place in the natural world. Rueckert also discusses the importance of narrative in environmental thinking. He argues that storytelling is a powerful tool for inspiring people to care about the environment and to take action to protect it. By telling stories about the natural world and our relationship to it, we can create a sense of empathy and connection with the environment that can inspire one to take action. Rueckert then goes on to explore the concept of “ecocriticism,” which he defines as the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. He argues that ecocriticism can help to better understand the ways in which literature shapes attitude towards the environment, and that it can also help to develop a deeper appreciation for the natural world. Throughout the essay, Rueckert cites examples from literature to illustrate his ideas. He discusses the work of authors such as Thoreau, Wordsworth, and Whitman, all of whom he believes had a deep appreciation for nature and helped to inspire others to protect the environment. He also discusses the work of more contemporary authors such as Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry, who have continued this tradition of writing about the environment and advocating for its protection.

## **2.3 DETAILED ANALYSIS OF THE ESSAY**

In the essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” Rueckert has expressed his views regarding the deep and inevitable relationship between literature and ecology. In the section ‘Literature and Biosphere’, he talks about the contradictory nature of human towards non-human nature. He tries to highlight the problem of co-existence of the human and the non-human nature with the cooperation of one-another. He takes examples of the renowned ecologists like Aldo Leopold, Ian McHarg, Barry Commoner, and Garret Hardin, who have raised the ecological consciousness in various other fields like sociology, economics, political science, etc. Also, he refers to Barry Commoner’s first Law of Ecology which says: “Everything is connected to everything else.” This law focuses on every little particle which exists in this universe and brings it into the centre. It also opposes the anthropocentric nature of

human and highlights that human agency has no authority to control, abuse and exploit the non-human nature. There should be protection laws and legal rights for even the non-human nature which includes the whole of the flora and fauna be it aquatic or terrestrial.

The next section entitled 'Energy Pathways which Sustains Life,' Rueckert gives examples of the famous works: *King Lear*, *Moby Dick*, and *Song of Myself*, which according to him are the ever-living and inexhaustible sources of energy capable of transferring their energies which in turn sustain life and the human race. They are always in store and their energy is endless. Literature is the living, dynamic and connecting medium between the human and non-human nature. Further, in this section Rueckert talks about the energy cycle and focuses on the first law of thermodynamics which says 'Energy can never be created nor be destroyed.' Energy flows in one-way only and transformed from one form to another. Energy of every particle is recycled, reorganized and reused in the universe. Rueckert asserts that in the field of literature, it comes in the form of creativity which is not in the form of language only but all work of arts like music, paintings etc. Energy used in creating these art forms is stored energy which can be used time and again, which is the essence of living human community. Biological community has only one and ultimate source of energy, that is, the Sun but the human community has many sources of energy apart from sun which includes literature as a one of the biggest source of energy. It is important to maintain a healthy relationship between literature and the ecosystem. Reading is considered as the source of transfer of energy. A well understood work of art is the model for energy-flow, community building, and ecosystems. The stored energy is released from the work of art in the form of reading, teaching and critical discourses. Kenneth Burke, one of the first critical ecologists, considers drama as a model of literature to raise the energy level. Reading and enacting literature is a multidirectional process which transfers from work of art to reader and reader to reader. These motives are not pleasure and truth, but creativity and community.

In the next section 'Poems as Green Plants,' Rueckert talks about Ian McHarg who considers ecology as a model which considers evolution as a creative process to raise the matter from lower to higher order. He also coined the term 'Negentropy' which means entrapping of Sun's energy on its path to entropy. It saves the energy and puts it in other creative processes. In this regard, green plants are considered as 'Nature's poets. Analogy between poems and green plants has been created and poets as suns. Poems entrap all the energy and in turn create creativity and community. Teaching in a classroom does the same work and best kind of teaching of ecology is the one which creates and generates the highest amount of creative energy.

In the section 'The Remorseless Inevitableness of Things,' Rueckert discusses the idea that human beings are just one part of the larger natural world, subject to the same forces and laws that govern everything else in nature. Rueckert argues that this perspective is essential to understanding one's place in the world and responsibility to protect the environment. It is one of the main reasons why one has failed to protect the environment is one has separated oneself from nature, seeing it as something separate and apart from oneself. He argues that this perspective is misguided, and that one need to recognize as part of the larger natural world and subject to the



same forces that govern everything else. To illustrate this point, Rueckert cites examples from literature, such as Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where characters are subject to the same natural forces as everything else in the world. He also cites examples from modern science, such as the laws of thermodynamics, which demonstrate that energy and matter are neither created nor destroyed, but merely transformed from one form to another. This emphasizes the need for humans to recognize their place in the larger natural world and to take responsibility for their impact on the environment. By understanding that one is subject to the same forces and laws as everything else in nature, Rueckert argues, one can develop a deeper appreciation for the environment and work to protect it.

In the section 'The Central Paradox - Powerless Visions,' the author explores the paradoxical nature of literature's relationship with environmental issues. On one hand, literature has the power to inspire people to take action to protect the environment, but on the other hand, it can also create a sense of powerlessness and despair that can be detrimental to environmental activism. Rueckert argues that literature often portrays the natural world as a powerful and awe-inspiring force, which can lead to feelings of powerlessness and insignificance in the face of nature's vastness and complexity. He suggests that this can create a sense of despair and fatalism, which can undermine efforts to protect the environment. However, Rueckert also argues that literature has the power to inspire people to take action by presenting a vision of a better world, one in which humans live in harmony with the natural world. He suggests that literature can inspire people to take action by presenting a positive vision of the future and by demonstrating the ways in which one can work towards a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the environment. This section emphasizes the importance of balancing the power of literature to inspire action with the need to avoid creating a sense of powerlessness and despair. By presenting a positive vision of the future and demonstrating the ways in which one can work towards a more sustainable relationship with the environment, literature can play an important role in shaping our attitudes towards the natural world and inspiring one to take action to protect it.

In the section 'The Harshest, Cruellest Realities of Our Profession,' the author discusses the challenges of integrating environmental concerns into the study of literature. Rueckert suggests that the traditional approach to literary criticism has often ignored or downplayed the relationship between literature and the environment, and that this has made it difficult to fully appreciate the environmental dimensions of literary works. Rueckert argues that literary criticism has traditionally focused on issues such as form, style, and literary history, while largely ignoring the environmental contexts and implications of literary works. He suggests that this approach has contributed to a broader cultural and intellectual disconnect between human beings and the natural world, and has made it more difficult to address environmental issues through literature. Rueckert suggests that in order to fully appreciate the environmental dimensions of literature, one need to develop new methods of literary analysis that take into account the relationship between literature and the environment. He suggests that this will

require a broader and more interdisciplinary approach to literary criticism, one that draws on insights from fields such as ecology, biology, and environmental science. This section emphasizes the need for literary critics to take environmental concerns seriously and to develop new methods of literary analysis that take into account the relationship between literature and the environment. By doing so, Rueckert suggests, one can better appreciate the environmental dimensions of literary works and use literature as a tool to address pressing environmental issues.

In the section 'The Generosity of the Poets' the author argues that poets have a unique role to play in addressing environmental issues. Rueckert suggests that poetry has the power to awaken one to the beauty and wonder of the natural world, and to inspire to take action to protect it. Rueckert cites several examples of poets who have used their work to address environmental issues, including Gary Snyder, Robinson Jeffers, and Wendell Berry. He suggests that these poets offer a vision of a more harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world, and that their work can inspire to take action to protect the environment. Rueckert also suggests that poetry has the power to challenge our assumptions about the natural world and to encourage us to think deeply about our relationship to it. He suggests that poetry can help to see the natural world not as a resource to be exploited, but as a complex and interconnected system that one is a part of. This section emphasizes the unique role that poetry can play in addressing environmental issues. By inspiring us to appreciate the beauty and complexity of the natural world and by challenging assumptions about one's relationship to it, poetry can help to foster a deeper sense of connection and responsibility towards the environment.

In the section 'The Generosity of Adrienne Rich's Diving into the wreck,' the author focuses specifically on the environmental themes in Adrienne Rich's poem 'Diving into the wreck.' Rueckert argues that the poem is an example of how literature can be used to address environmental issues in a powerful and effective way. This poem explores the relationship between humans and the natural world, and challenges assumptions about that relationship. He notes that the poem is filled with powerful images of the ocean and the creatures that inhabit it, and that it presents a vision of the natural world as something that is both mysterious and awe-inspiring. It suggests that the poem is also a call to action, urging one to take responsibility for the environmental damage that one has caused and to work towards a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the natural world. He notes that the poem ends on a note of hope, suggesting that there is still time to change human ways and to protect the environment for future generations. It highlights the power of literature to address environmental issues in a meaningful and effective way. Through its use of powerful images and its call to action, Rich's poem offers a compelling vision of a more sustainable and harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world.

In the section 'The Deconstructive Wisdom of W.S. Merwin's Lice,' the author examines the environmental themes of the poem. Rueckert argues that the poem is an example of how literature can be used to deconstruct traditional ways of thinking about the environment and to challenge

assumptions about one's relationship to it. He suggests that "Lice" is a poem that exposes the ways in which human beings have exploited and damaged the natural world. He notes that the poem is filled with images of destruction and decay, and that it presents a vision of the natural world as something that is in a state of constant flux and transformation. Rueckert also suggests that the poem is a critique of the way that humans think about the environment, particularly the tendency to view it as something separate from oneself. He notes that the poem challenges this notion by presenting the natural world as something that is intimately connected to human beings and that cannot be fully understood or appreciated through our usual ways of thinking. Through its use of powerful images and its deconstruction of traditional ways of thinking, Merwin's poem offers a critique of one's exploitation and damage of the natural world and challenges one to view the environment in a more interconnected and holistic way.

In the section 'The Energy of Love in Walt Whitman's Songs of Myself,' the author examines the environmental themes in Walt Whitman's famous poem "Song of Myself." Rueckert argues that the poem is a celebration of the natural world and a call for action to protect it. Rueckert suggests that "Song of Myself" is a poem that expresses Whitman's deep love and reverence for the natural world. He notes the poem is filled with vivid descriptions of the landscape and its inhabitants, and it presents a vision of the natural world as something that is full of wonder, beauty, and vitality. He also suggests that the poem is a call to action to protect the environment. He notes that the poem urges one to take responsibility for the natural world and to work towards a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with it. He argues that the poem's celebration of love and unity can serve as a powerful force for environmental activism, inspiring one to take action to protect the environment and to work towards a more just and equitable society. It shows the power of literature to inspire to protect the environment. Through its celebration of the natural world and its call to action, Whitman's poem offers a powerful vision of a more sustainable and harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world.

In the next section 'Teaching and Critical Discourse as Forms of Symbiosis,' the author examines the relationship between teaching and critical discourse, and how they can be used to promote ecological awareness. Rueckert suggests that teaching and critical discourse are both forms of symbiosis, in which the teacher and the student, or the writer and the reader, depend on each other to achieve a deeper understanding of the subject matter. He notes that in the context of ecological awareness, this symbiotic relationship is particularly important, as it allows one to challenge conventions and to think more critically about one's relationship to the natural world. He argues that teaching and critical discourse can be used to promote ecological awareness by encouraging students and readers to think more deeply about environmental issues. He notes that by engaging with literature and critical discourse on the environment, one can develop a more nuanced understanding of the issues at hand, and work towards developing more sustainable and just solutions. Through its exploration of the symbiotic relationship between teaching and critical discourse, Rueckert argues that one can develop a more nuanced

understanding of the environment and work towards a more sustainable and just future.

The final section of the essay is titled 'But'. In this section, Rueckert acknowledges the challenges and limitations of using literature to promote ecological awareness. Rueckert notes while literature can be a powerful tool for promoting environmental awareness, it is not without its limitations. He suggests that literature is often seen as a form of entertainment or escapism, rather than a serious medium for addressing environmental issues. Additionally, he notes that literature can sometimes be seen as a luxury, something that only the privileged few have access to. Despite these challenges, Rueckert argues that literature can still play a vital role in promoting ecological awareness. He suggests that by engaging with literature on the environment, one can develop a deeper understanding of the issues at hand, and can work towards developing more sustainable and just solutions. He also notes that by using literature to promote ecological awareness, one can reach a wider audience and inspire people to take action to protect the environment. Despite these challenges, Rueckert suggests that by engaging with literature on the environment, one can work towards a better harmonious future.

## 2.4 GLOSSARY

storehouse: any repository or source of abundant supplies, such as of facts and knowledge

pluralism: the existence of different types of people, who have different beliefs and opinions, within the same society

paradoxical: seemingly absurd or self-contradictory

sustainable: the use of natural resources when this use is kept at a steady level that is not likely to damage the environment

anthropocentric: regarding humankind as the central or most important element of existence, as opposed to God or animals

substantive: having a firm basis in reality and so important, meaningful, or considerable

symbiotic: involving interaction between two different organisms living in close physical association

equitable: fair and impartial

## 2.5 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. The first Law of Ecology: "Everything is connected to everything else" is given by \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) Barry Commoner
  - b) Aldo Leopold
  - c) Ian McHarg
  - d) Garret Hardin
2. The Works like *The King Lear*, *Moby Dick*, and *Song of Myself* are\_ sources of energy.
  - a) ever-living
  - b) inexhaustible
  - c) unlike fossil fuels

- d) none of these
3. Energy stored in a work of art \_\_\_\_.
- a) can be used by the same creator
  - b) can not be used again
  - c) useless
  - d) none of these
4. Kenneth Burke considers \_\_\_\_\_ as the model of literature to raise the energy level.
- a) poetry
  - b) drama
  - c) novel
  - d) non-fiction
5. Which thinker has tried to design a new model of reality based upon ecology?  
\_\_\_\_\_.
- a) Ian McHarg
  - b) Rachel Carson
  - c) Ernest Haeckel
  - d) Barry Commoner
6. According to Ian McHarg, entrapping of Sun's energy on its path to Entropy is  
\_\_\_\_\_.
- a) negentropy
  - b) positive entropy
  - c) thermodynamics
  - d) none of these
7. Green plants are considered as \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) nature's literature
  - b) nature's stewards
  - c) nature's poets
  - d) all of these
8. Garrett Hardin's ironic population projection: if we continue our Present 2% growth rate indefinitely, then in only \_\_\_\_\_ years there will be standing room only on all the land areas of the world.
- a) 500 years
  - b) 270 years
  - c) 615 years
  - d) 487 years

9. What is William Rueckert's contribution to literary studies? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) He developed Ecocriticism as a literary theory.  
b) He invented a new method of literary analysis.  
c) He was the first to study the relationship between literature and ecology.  
d) He discovered a new genre of literature.
10. Which of the following statements is true about William Rueckert's theory of ecocriticism? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) It views literature as separate from the natural world.  
b) It argues that literature has no impact on the environment.  
c) It analyzes how literature represents and shapes our understanding of the environment.  
d) It focuses exclusively on environmental activism in literature.
11. According to William Rueckert, what is the relationship between literature and ecology? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) Literature has no relationship to ecology.  
b) Literature is a reflection of the environment.  
c) Literature is a tool for understanding and shaping our relationship with the environment.  
d) Literature has a negative impact on the environment.
12. Which of the following literary works is an example of ecocriticism according to William Rueckert's theory? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald  
b) *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau  
c) *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee  
d) *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen
13. According to William Rueckert, what is the primary focus of ecocriticism? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) The relationship between humans and nature  
b) The impact of literature on the environment  
c) The study of endangered species  
d) The impact of environmental policies on literature
14. What is the term used by William Rueckert to describe the interconnection of all living things? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) Biocentrism  
b) Ecocentrism  
c) Anthropocentrism  
d) Posthumanism

15. According to William Rueckert, how does literature contribute to ecological awareness? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) By depicting the destruction of the environment
  - b) By providing a sense of escapism from environmental problems
  - c) By promoting an anthropocentric view of nature
  - d) By encouraging readers to appreciate the interconnectedness of all living things
16. Which of the following is NOT a characteristic of ecologically oriented literature, according to William Rueckert? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) A focus on individualism and human progress
  - b) A recognition of the interconnectedness of all living things
  - c) A concern for the impact of human activity on the environment
  - d) An emphasis on the importance of conservation and sustainability
17. How does William Rueckert suggest that ecocriticism can contribute to environmental activism? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) By providing a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between literature and the environment
  - b) By encouraging readers to take action to protect the environment
  - c) By promoting an anthropocentric view of nature
  - d) By advocating for the use of technology to solve environmental problems
18. What does William Rueckert mean by the term “Environmental Imagination?” \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) The ability to imagine the impact of environmental destruction on future generations
  - b) The ability to imagine the interconnectedness of all living things
  - c) The ability to imagine the natural world as a source of inspiration for literature
  - d) The ability to imagine alternative ways of living in harmony with the environment
19. Which of the following is an example of ecologically oriented literature, according to William Rueckert? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) A science fiction novel set in outer space
  - b) A romance novel set in a city
  - c) A memoir about a person’s relationship with their pet
  - d) A novel that explores the impact of mining on a small town’s ecosystem
20. According to William Rueckert, how does ecocriticism differ from environmentalism? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) Ecocriticism focuses on the relationship between literature and the



environment, while environmentalism focuses on activism and policy-making.

- b) Ecocriticism focuses on individual actions to protect the environment, while environmentalism focuses on collective action.
  - c) Ecocriticism promotes an anthropocentric view of nature, while environmentalism promotes a biocentric view.
  - d) Ecocriticism is concerned with the preservation of endangered species, while environmentalism is concerned with climate change.
21. Which of the following is NOT a characteristic of ecocritical literary analysis, according to William Rueckert? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) A focus on the relationship between humans and nature
  - b) A recognition of the importance of cultural diversity in environmental discourse
  - c) An emphasis on the power of language and narrative to shape attitudes towards the environment
  - d) A focus on the psychological and emotional dimensions of environmental awareness
22. According to William Rueckert, what is the goal of ecocritical literary analysis? \_\_\_\_.
- a) To promote environmental activism
  - b) To provide a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between literature and the environment
  - c) To encourage readers to appreciate the beauty of nature
  - d) To critique the impact of industrialization on the environment

## 2.6 LET US SUM UP

In this lesson you have read the essay and the detailed analysis of the essay covering the important sections of the essay. Rueckert explores the relationship between literature and the environment. Rueckert argues that literature has the power to help us appreciate our relationship with the natural world and can inspire us to protect it. Rueckert begins by discussing the history of environmental thinking and the role that literature has played in this discourse. He argues that literature has always been concerned with environmental issues, but it is only in recent years that these issues have been taken seriously by the public. The essay has sections.

## 2.7 ANSWER KEY (MCQs)

- |      |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. a | 10. c | 19. d |
| 2. b | 11. c | 20. a |
| 3. b | 12. b | 21. b |



- |      |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|
| 4. b | 13. a | 22. b |
| 5. a | 14. b |       |
| 6. a | 15. d |       |
| 7. c | 16. a |       |
| 8. c | 17. a |       |
| 9. a | 18. d |       |

## **2.8 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. What is the history of the environmental movement, and how has literature played a role in raising awareness about environmental issues?
2. What is ecocriticism, and how can it help to better understand the relationship between literature and the environment?
3. How have authors such as Thoreau, Wordsworth, and Whitman contributed to the tradition of writing about nature, and how have they inspired others to protect the environment?
4. What is the role of contemporary authors like Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry in continuing the tradition of writing about the environment and advocating for its protection?
5. How does literature shape our attitude towards the natural world, and what can we learn about our relationship with the environment through the study of literature and ecology?
6. In what ways can literature inspire people to take action to protect the environment?
7. How can the study of literature and ecology help us to develop a deeper appreciation for the natural world?
8. What are some of the challenges and limitations of using literature to address environmental issues?
9. How does the concept of “nature writing” fit into the broader field of literature and ecology, and what are some examples of notable nature writers?
10. How can we use literature as a tool to bridge the gap between human culture and the natural world?
11. Comment critically on the different sections of the essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.”

## 2.9 SUGGESTED READING

Bates, Marston. *The Forest and the Sea: A Look at the Economy of Nature and the Ecology of Man*. Mentor, 1960.

Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. University of Chicago Press, 2000.

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**“WHERE I LIVED AND WHAT I LIVED FOR” BY HENRY  
DAVID THOREAU**

**STRUCTURE**

- 3.0 Introduction
- 3.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 3.2 Henry David Thoreau: Life and Works
- 3.3 Check Your Progress I
- 3.4 About *Walden*
- 3.5 “Where I Lived And What I Lived For”: Summary
- 3.6 “Where I Lived And What I Lived For”: Analysis
- 3.7 Check Your Progress II
- 3.8 Themes
- 3.9 American Transcendentalism And Thoreau
- 3.10 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 3.11 Answer Key (MCQs)
- 3.12 Glossary
- 3.13 Examination Oriented Questions
- 3.14 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.15 Suggested Reading

**3.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear Learners, after understanding the concept of ecocriticism in the previous Lesson, you will now read about Henry David Thoreau, one of the best known American writers who can also be precursor of the genre of nature writing. This lesson focuses on his essay “Where I Lived and What I Lived for” and after going through this lesson you will come to know about a significant time in Thoreau’s life where he renounced the material world and retreated to live amidst nature for a period of more than two years, and the various life lessons he learnt during this time period following his close communion with nature.

### 3.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME

After going through this lesson you will

- develop an understanding about the life and significant works of Henry David Thoreau as well as his contribution to the genre of nature writing.
- be familiarised with the essay “Where I lived and What I Lived For,” one of the most distinguished works in American literature.
- be appreciative of Thoreau’s ways of living in close communion with nature which developed sympathy and empathy in him for the natural world, and this would also aware and sensitize you dear learner towards the preservation and conservation of nature and environment.

The objective of this lesson is to make the learners familiar with Henry David Thoreau’s work *Walden* with special reference to the chapter “Where I Lived and What I Lived For”, one of the most distinguished works in American Literature and nature writing.

### 3.2 HENRY DAVID THOREAU: LIFE AND WORKS

Henry David Thoreau (July 12, 1817-May 6, 1862) was an American essayist, philosopher, and poet. Thoreau’s writing is influenced by his own life, in particular his time spent at Walden Pond. He enjoys a lasting and celebrated reputation for embracing non-conformity, the virtues of a life lived for leisure and contemplation, and the dignity of the individual.

Henry David Thoreau was born to John Thoreau and Cynthia Dunbar on July 12, 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau’s father was with the Concord fire department and also ran a pencil factory, while his mother rented out parts of their house to boarders and cared for the children. Named David Henry at birth in honor of his late uncle David Thoreau, Henry David Thoreau was known as Henry. The third of four children, Thoreau spent a peaceful childhood in Concord celebrating, especially the natural beauty of the village. When he was eleven year-old, his parents sent him to Concord Academy, where he did well and was encouraged to apply in college.

In 1833, at the age of sixteen, Thoreau began his studies at Harvard College. His older siblings, Helen and John Jr., helped pay his tuition fee from their salaries. He was a serious student, but was ambivalent to the college’s ranking system, preferring to pursue his own projects and interests. This independent spirit also saw him taking a brief absence from the college in 1835 to teach at a school in Canton, Massachusetts, and this stint was an attribute that went to define the rest of his life.

When he graduated in 1837, Thoreau was uncertain what to do next. Uninterested in a career in medicine, law, or ministry, as was common for educated men, Thoreau decided to

continue working in education. He secured a place at a school in Concord, but he found he could not administer corporal punishment. After two weeks, he quit.

Thoreau went to work in his father's pencil factory for a short time. In June of 1838 he set up a school with his brother John. However, John became ill just three years later and the school was shut down. In 1838, he and John took a life-changing canoe trip along the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, and Thoreau began considering a career as a poet of nature.

In 1837, when Thoreau was a sophomore at Harvard, Ralph Waldo Emerson settled in Concord. Thoreau had already encountered Emerson's writing in the book *Nature*. By autumn that year, the two kindred spirits had become friends, brought together by similar outlooks: both trusted staunchly in self-reliance, the dignity of the individual, and the metaphysical power of nature. Although they would have a somewhat tumultuous relationship, Thoreau ultimately found both a father and a friend in Emerson. It was Emerson who asked his protégé if he kept a journal (a lifelong habit of the older poet's), prompting Thoreau to begin his own journal in late 1837, a habit which he, too, maintained for almost his entire life up until two months before his death. The journal spans thousands of pages, and many of Thoreau's writings were originally developed from notes in this journal.

In 1840, Thoreau fell in love with Ellen Sewall, a young woman, visiting Concord. She accepted his proposal but her parents objected the match and she immediately broke off the engagement. And Thoreau never married.

Thoreau moved in with the Emersons for some time in 1841. Emerson encouraged the young man to pursue his literary leanings, and Thoreau embraced the profession of poet, producing many poems as well as essays. While living with the Emersons, Thoreau served as a tutor for the children, a repairman, a gardener, and ultimately the editor of Emerson's works. In 1840, Emerson's literary group, the transcendentalists, began the literary journal *The Dial*. The first issue published Thoreau's poem "Sympathy" and his essay "Aulus Persius Flaccus," on the Roman poet, and Thoreau continued contributing poetry and prose to the magazine, and in 1842 the first of his many nature essays, "Natural History of Massachusetts." He continued publishing with *The Dial* until its closure in 1844 due to financial troubles.

Thoreau became restless while living with the Emersons. In 1842 his brother John died a traumatic death due to tetanus. Thoreau, shocked, moved to New York, to live with Emerson's brother William on Staten Island, tutoring his children, and attempting to make connections among the New York literary market. He felt unsuccessful and despised city life. Here, Thoreau met Horace Greeley, who was to become his literary agent and promoter of his work. He left New York in 1843 and returned to Concord. He worked partly at his father's business, making pencils and working with graphite.

Within two years he felt he needed another change, and decided to finish the book he had begun, inspired by his river canoe trip in 1838. Inspired by the idea of a Harvard classmate, who

had once built a hut by the water to read and think, Thoreau decided to take part in a similar experiment.

Emerson bequeathed to him the land he owned by Walden Pond, a small lake two miles south of Concord. In early 1845, at the age of 27, Thoreau started chopping down trees and building himself a small cabin on the shores of the lake. On July 4, 1845, he moved into the house in which he lived for two years, two months, and two days, officially beginning his famous experiment. These were to be some of the most satisfying years of Thoreau's life.

His lifestyle at Walden was ascetic, informed by his desire to live a life as basic and self-sufficient as possible. While he would often walk into Concord, two miles away, and ate with his family once a week, Thoreau spent almost every night in his cottage on the banks of the lake. His diet consisted mostly of the food he found growing wild in the area, and also planted and harvested his own beans. Remaining active with gardening, fishing, rowing, and swimming, Thoreau also spent lots of time documenting the local flora and fauna. When he was not busy with the cultivation of his food, Thoreau turned to his inner cultivation, mainly through meditation. Most significantly, Thoreau spent his time in contemplation, reading and writing. His writing focused mainly on the book he had already begun, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), which chronicled the trip he spent canoeing with his older brother that ultimately inspired him to become a poet of nature.

Thoreau also maintained a fastidious journal of this time of simplicity and satisfying contemplation. He returned to his experience on the shore of that lake in just a few years to write the literary classic known as *Walden* (1854), arguably Thoreau's greatest work.

In the summer of 1847, Emerson decided to travel to Europe, and invited Thoreau to reside once more at his house and continue tutoring the children. Thoreau, having completed his experiment and finished his book, lived at Emerson's house for two more years and continued his writing. He could not find a publisher for *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. He decided to publish it at his own expense, and made little money out of its meager success.

During this time Thoreau also published "Civil Disobedience." Halfway through his time at Walden in 1846, Thoreau met the local tax collector, Sam Staples, who asked him to pay the poll tax that he had ignored for multiple years. Thoreau refused on the basis that he would not pay his taxes to a government which supported enslavement and which was waging war against Mexico (which lasted from 1846- 1848). Staples put Thoreau in jail, until the next morning when an unidentified woman, perhaps Thoreau's aunt, paid the tax and Thoreau reluctantly came out. Thoreau defended his actions in an essay published in 1849 under the name "Resistance to Civil Government" and now known as his famous "Civil Disobedience" work. In the essay, Thoreau defends individual conscience against the law of the masses. He explains there is a higher law than civil law, and just because the majority believes something to be right does not make it so. It follows then, he explained, that when an individual intuits a higher law to which civil law does not accord, he must still follow the higher law—no matter what the civil consequences be,

in his case, even spending time in jail. He writes: “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.” “Civil Disobedience” is one of Thoreau’s most influential works. It has inspired many leaders to begin their own protests, and has been particularly persuasive to non-violent protesters, including such figures as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi.

Ultimately, Thoreau moved back into his family home in Concord, working occasionally at his father’s pencil factory as well as a surveyor to support himself while composing multiple drafts of *Walden* and finally publishing it in 1854. After his father’s death, Thoreau took over the pencil factory.

By 1850, Thoreau was less interested in transcendentalism, as the movement was already splitting apart. He continued, however, to explore his ideas about nature, traveling to the Maine Woods, Cape Cod, and to Canada. These adventures found their places in articles, “Ktaadn, and the Maine Woods,” (1848), which was later to make up the beginning of his book *The Maine Woods* (published posthumously in 1864), “Excursion to Canada” (1853), and “Cape Cod” (1855).

With such works, Thoreau is recognized as one of the founders of the genre of American nature writing. Also published posthumously (in *Excursions*, 1863) is the lecture he developed from 1851 to 1860 and which was ultimately known as the essay “Walking” (1864), in which he outlined his thinking on mankind’s relationship to nature and the spiritual importance of leaving society for a time. Thoreau thought of the piece as one of his seminal pieces and it is one of the definitive works of the transcendental movement.

In response to growing national unrest regarding the abolition of enslavement, Thoreau found himself adopting a more stringently abolitionist stance. In 1854 he delivered a scathing lecture called “Slavery in Massachusetts,” in which he indicted the whole country for the evils of enslavement, even the free states where enslavement was outlawed, including, as the title suggested, his own Massachusetts. This essay is one of his most celebrated achievements, with an argument both stirring and elegant.

In 1835, Thoreau contracted tuberculosis and suffered from it periodically over the course of his life. In 1860 he caught bronchitis and his health began to decline. Aware of his impending death, Thoreau showed remarkable tranquillity, revising his unpublished works (including *The Maine Woods* and *Excursions*) and concluding his journal. He died in 1862, at the age of 44, of tuberculosis. His funeral was planned and attended by the Concord literary set, including Amos Bronson Alcott and William Ellery Channing; his old and great friend Emerson delivered his eulogy.



### 3.3 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS I (CYP I)

#### Fill in the Blanks

1. Thoreau's writing is influenced by his time spent at \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Thoreau spent his childhood in celebrating the natural beauty of the village in \_\_\_\_\_.
3. A trip along the \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ Rivers made Thoreau to consider a career as a poet of nature.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ prompted Thoreau to begin his own journal in 1837.
5. The first issue of the Transcendentalists' literary journal published Thoreau's poem titled \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Thoreau's famous experiment of living by the Walden Pond began on \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Thoreau's work titled \_\_\_\_\_ chronicles the trip that inspired him to become a poet of nature.
8. Thoreau defends individual conscience against the law of the masses in his influential essay titled \_\_\_\_\_.
9. Thoreau is recognized as one of the genre of \_\_\_\_\_.
10. In an essay titled \_\_\_\_\_ Thoreau indicted the whole country for the evils of slavery.

### 3.4 ABOUT WALDEN

*Walden* is not only the most popular of all Thoreau's works, it is also one of the best read and most influential of all books written in America. While its circulation has never equalled other internationally successful volumes as *The Last of the Mohicans* or *Huckleberry Finn*, it has probably stirred as many thoughtful and imaginative minds in many races as any classic of the nineteenth century.

The idea of returning back to the woods, or at least escaping from the currents of village life, had often floated through Thoreau's mind, and the example of his friend William Ellery Channing, who had lived alone on the Illinois prairie, must have been influential. The best explanation of his two-year sojourn (July 4, 1845-September 6, 1847) in the cabin which he built with friendly aid upon Emerson's land on the shores of Walden Pond, is documented in the book. He was a poor scholar seeking relief from the pressure of earning a living, so that he might devote his time and energy to study and writing. The personal necessity was not great as his need, as an independent mind, to prove what could be accomplished by simplifying life. Thoreau was a busy man. His excursions of several hours a day in the woods or field, or on the rivers, which were his laboratories for thought and observation, was as nearly obligatory as he could make it. Added to this the hours for reading and study and for the careful day-by-day revision of his notes taken in the field, little time was left for the laborious task of assembling and selecting his scattered paragraphs into books. He went to Walden Pond "to live



deliberately” but also to get time and privacy to write a book. “A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers” was written at Walden. ‘Walden’ itself was largely written there. Walden Pond, secluded and beautiful, was indeed an escape from his usual life, but an escape into the possibility of the maximum of intellectual labour and spiritual reflection, with the minimum necessity for money-making. Nor must it be forgotten that the Thoreau home was a boarding-house!

*Walden* itself is a tract on how to live and what to live for. Its author wished to show the world how the poor scholar could handle his economic problem. Then farmers, merchants, preachers, married men, with the same ideas as Thoreau, work out theirs in their own fashion. Like all great tracts, this work is both highly personal, in that the particular problem is individual, and universal in its application, since all men not entirely gross have aspirations to live a life which accords with their own inner necessities, which differ in kind and degree, but not in significance, from Thoreau’s. Indeed, it may be said that Thoreau’s challenge to mankind to learn how to live lest they should lose their souls in the quiet desperation of making a living, was probably never so timely as today.

*Walden; or Life in the Woods* as it was first entitled, is like the ‘Week,’ a compilation with additions from his ‘Journal.’ Much of it was written first as lectures, and at least one section as a magazine article, and then revised for his book. Items and reflections are taken from his ‘Journal’ as far back as 1839, and he was still using his daily notes for his manuscript a few months before its publication. This final manuscript has been lost but Thoreau’s work sheets for the book, about 1500 in number, are in the possession of Huntington Library. They show how laboriously he rewrote and rearranged his material in the attempt, never entirely successful, to make an organic whole, and with a purpose, often brilliantly realised, to point his sentences toward the absolute expression of vital truth. Thoreau’s strength was in the sentence and paragraph, not in the ordered whole, which is one reason why ‘Walden’ is one of the most quotable of books. Nevertheless, in spite of its occasional inconsequentiality, it is a real book, focussed upon a great philosophic idea, worked out in incidents always relevant, with descriptions which sometimes represent the sheer joy of observation rather than any controlling idea yet which always enrich the work. It is Thoreau’s most mature work.

### **3.5 “WHERE I LIVED AND WHAT I LIVED FOR”: SUMMARY**

Thoreau recalls the several places where he nearly settled before selecting Walden Pond. Where should his house be located? This is the question that Thoreau considers. He interacts with all the nearby farmers and imagined buying their houses and living there. He believes a place in the country to be best, far from the village. In his imagination, he lays out the plans of many houses and then decides against building them, because he says true richness is leaving things alone. He quotes the Roman philosopher Cato’s warning that it is best to consider buying a farm carefully before signing the papers.

The nearest Thoreau came to possessing a house was when he intended to buy the Hollowell farm despite the many improvements that needed to be made there, but then the

farmer's wife changed her mind not to sell. He discusses the virtues of the farm, but in the end is content not to have compromised his poverty by acquiring it, and he says he took with him the beauty of the landscape, which is the best part of the farm. Consequently, Thoreau gave up his claim on the property. Even though he had been prepared to farm a large tract, Thoreau realizes that this outcome may have been for the best.

Forced to simplify his life, he concludes it is best "as long as possible" to "live free and uncommitted." Thoreau takes to the woods, dreaming of an existence free of obligations and full of leisure. He proudly announces he resides far from the post office and all the constraining social relationships the mail system represents. Ironically, this renunciation of legal deeds provides him with true ownership, paraphrasing a poet to the effect that "I am monarch of all I survey." Thoreau's delight in his new building project at Walden is more than merely the pride of a first-time homeowner; it is a grandly philosophic achievement in his mind, a symbol of his conquest of being.

Thoreau begins living in the woods full-time, during nights as well as days on Independence Day, 1845. When Thoreau first moves into his dwelling on Independence Day, it gives him a proud sense of being a god on Olympus, even though the house still lacks a chimney and plastering. Independence Day has symbolic meaning as the day Thoreau becomes self-reliant and one of nature's inhabitants. The house, not yet finished, is glorious because it is a part of nature, with the wind blowing through it and the company of birds. Taking an optimistic view, he declares that his poorly insulated walls give his interior the benefit of fresh air on summer nights. He justifies its lack of carved ornament by declaring that it is better to carve "the very atmosphere," one thinks and feels, in an artistry of the soul. It is for him an immaterial, heavenly house, "as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers." He claims that a paradise fit for gods is available everywhere, if one can perceive it: "Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere."

He prefers to reside here, sitting on his own humble wooden chair, then in some distant corner of the universe, "behind the constellation of Cassiopeia's Chair." He is free from time as well as from matter, announcing grandiosely that time is a river in which he goes fishing. He does not view himself as the slave of time; rather he makes it seem as though he is choosing to participate in the flow of time whenever and however, he chooses, like a god living in eternity. He concludes on a sermonizing note, urging all of us to sludge through our existence until we hit rock bottom and can gauge truth on what he terms our "Realometer," our means of measuring the reality of things.

Thoreau's first impression of the pond, which is sometimes misty in the early morning, sometimes still and clear as when there is a gentle rain, is that it is like a "lower heaven," with the vista and mountains spreading out behind it. Though men are in the habit of imagining faraway lands, Thoreau finds that his new living place, so close by, has all the glories of nature to make him feel away from his previous life.

Morning is Thoreau's invitation to make his life simple and commune with nature.

Every morning he bathes in the pond, calling it a “religious exercise.” He calls morning the time that all important events, including poetry and art, occur. It is the time that “intelligences wake,” as say the Vedas. Thoreau urges each man to awaken fully and “elevate his life by conscious endeavor.” It is a man’s duty to make every moment of his life meaningful. Thoreau went to the woods to “live deliberately.” He has faith in simplicity as the path to spiritual wakefulness.

Thoreau laughs about the absurdity of a man who wakes from a nap and asks for the news when he is not really awake to life. He rails against the post-office, saying he has never read something truly important in a letter or even in a newspaper, which contains only gossip. Men often confuse the appearance of things with reality, Thoreau believes, but with true wisdom and unhurriedness it is possible to get past “petty pleasures” and perceive matters of true worth. God is in the present moment. In order to experience spiritual truth, one must spend one’s days as deliberately as nature.

### **3.6 “WHERE I LIVED AND WHAT I LIVED FOR”: ANALYSIS**

The title of this chapter combines a practical topic of residence (“Where I Lived”) with what is probably the deepest philosophical topic of all, the meaning of life (“What I Lived For”). Thoreau thus reminds us again that he is neither practical do-it-yourself aficionado nor erudite philosopher, but a mixture of both at once, attending to matters of everyday existence and to questions of final meaning and purpose. This chapter pulls away from the bookkeeping lists and details about expenditures on nails and door hinges, and opens up onto the more transcendent vista of how it all matters, containing less how-to advice and much more philosophical meditation and grandiose universalizing assertion. It is here that we see the full influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson on Thoreau’s project. Emersonian self-reliance is not just a matter of supporting oneself financially (as many people believe) but a much loftier doctrine about the active role that every soul plays in its experience of reality. Reality for Emerson was not a set of objective facts in which we are plunked down, but rather an emanation of our minds and souls that create the world around ourselves every day.

Thoreau’s building of a house on Walden Pond is, for him, a miniature re-enactment of God’s creation of the world. He describes its placement in the cosmos, in a region viewed by the astronomers, just as God created a world within the void of space. He says outright that he resides in his home as if on Mount Olympus, home of the gods. He claims a divine freedom from the flow of time, describing himself as fishing in its river. Thoreau’s point in all this divine talk is not to inflate his own personality to godlike heights but rather to insist on everyone’s divine ability to create a world. Our capacity to choose reality is evident in his metaphor of the “Realometer,” a spin-off of the Nilometer, a device used to measure the depth of the river Nile. Thoreau urges us to wade through the muck that constitutes our everyday lives until we come to a firm place “which we can call Reality, and say, This is.” The stamp of existence we give to our vision of reality—“This is”—evokes God’s simple language in the creation story of Genesis: “Let there be. ” And the mere fact that Thoreau

imagines that one can choose to call one thing reality and another thing not provides the spiritual freedom that was central to Emerson's Transcendentalist thought. When we create and claim this reality, all the other "news" of the world shrinks immediately to insignificance, as Thoreau illustrates in his mocking parody of newspapers reporting a cow run over by the Western Railway. He opines that the last important bit of news to come out of England was about the revolution of 1649, almost two centuries earlier. The only current events that matter to the transcendent mind are itself and its place in the cosmos. Thoreau's pleasure in considering where to live is, therefore, not in the actual acquisition of material goods to which he is averse, but in the contemplation of what a life could be like there. He seeks a place that is separate from society. For Thoreau, being close to nature is the best part of his choice of place to live. Acquiring the material possession of a house is something he must put up with in order to live in nature.

Thoreau's close observation of nature testifies to his profound relationship with it, characterized both by awe of its spiritual greatness and intimacy with its everyday workings. Thoreau criticizes society's taste for travel because they could be experiencing the full effect of their nearby surroundings, for which he has great respect. Nature is his spiritual guide, leading him in its simple natural rhythms toward his own spiritual path and his proper work. Transcendentalism sets out Thoreau's spiritual goals; self-reliance, and the simplicity it entails, is the method he uses to go after them. Interest in the news is a sign that a man is concerned with the petty dealings of society over his own spiritual life. The post-office is just another distracting modern invention. Thoreau emphasizes that men, especially his readers, can change their lives and awaken to the profound possibilities of everyday life if they emulate nature.

### **3.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS II (CYP II)**

1. "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers" was written at Walden. (True/False)
2. "Realometer" as per Thoreau is an escape from reality. (True/False)
3. Thoreau delivered his influential lecture "Slavery in Massachusetts" in 1831. (True/False)
4. Thoreau was influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson. (True/False)
5. Thoreau did not consider being close to nature as the best part of his choice of place to live. (True/False)
6. Thoreau appreciates society's taste for travel. (True/False)
7. Thoreau considers nature as his spiritual guide. (True/False)
8. *Walden* was published in the year 1850. (True/False)

### **3.8 THEMES**

#### **Nature**

Thoreau holds nature in great respect and sees nature as providing an inexhaustible source of wisdom, beauty, and spiritual nourishment. He has an intimate familiarity and comfort with nature and many chapters in the book are dedicated to his fond, painstaking observations of

the natural world, from the way the ice breaks up on the pond in springtime, to the habits of the rabbits and fish and geese, which he sees as cohabitating with him, to the war between two races of ants that takes place on the ground right outside his cabin. Nature becomes a central figure in his life as it provides him with shelter, food, fuel, and it fulfills all his other physical needs. Nature, open to all and free of excess, is the model for his life and the epitome of simplicity and independence.

### **Transcendentalism, Spirituality, and the Good Life**

As a Transcendentalist, Thoreau has faith in self-reliance over societal institutions and focusing on the goodness of humankind and the profound lessons it can learn from nature. He values individuality, conviction, and focus as cardinal virtues. He crafts a life with a perpetual sense of striving towards something greater, such that all of his activities take on spiritual significance. Even his washing himself in Walden Pond is nothing less than a “religious experience.” By quoting Hindu scripture he tries to establish the pond as part of the sacred water of the Ganges River. Nature’s activities, for him, are sacred rites, and he pays them due attention, believing that the present moment is the culmination of the spiritual and is as divine as all time. Furthermore, he holds that true richness has nothing to do with material wealth but with a hunger for truth and beauty. In the end, Thoreau finds living by these principles to be an essential duty, a challenge that people have an obligation to match. Walden is Thoreau’s attempt to wake ordinary men from their sleep and call them to live better lives, more deliberate and more fulfilled.

### **Solitude and Society**

Thoreau deeply values both solitude and society and brings these two seemingly contradictory impulses together in creative, paradoxical ways. On one hand, his purpose in going to Walden, where he stayed for more than two years, is to be alone, so he can “transact some private business.” The book is for the most part a record of a man’s time spent in solitude, and the reflections he has in that state. He stresses the importance of an independent life, in which he relies on no one for his everyday existence, and he writes that society’s changing taste is a distraction to personal development. Solitude leaves him open to commune with nature, yet he writes that he is really never alone because he always has the sweet company of the natural world. On the other hand, he entertains many guests in his cabin, sometimes one or two at a time and sometimes in groups of dozens. In addition, he lives not in the wilderness but on the edge of a pond close to the town, which he visits from time to time.

### **Self-reliance**

Thoreau’s life at Walden Pond embodies a philosophy set out most famously and directly in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay, “Self-Reliance”. Self-reliance is a set of ideals according to which one must have unfailing trust in oneself and confidence in one’s faculties, choosing individuality over conformity to society. By leaving society and living in solitude, Thoreau makes

the ultimate commitment to self-reliance. He stresses the importance of living independently, as he builds his own house and lives off his own land. Self-reliance is based on a critical stance toward society, which Thoreau believes forces people into making compromises that trap them and make them unhappy. Self-reliance places value on one's own worth and individuality.

## **Work**

Thoreau sees work as the basis of self-reliance, a source of spiritual fulfillment, and a path to a morally good life. His central motivation in going to Walden is to figure out what kind of life he should be living (what he calls his attempt to "live deliberately"), and in large part that attempt comes down to determining what kinds of work he should be pursuing. Thoreau believes that work should not be difficult or excessive or distract from one's proper pursuits but instead be indistinguishable from leisure, because all parts of life should be rewarding. The contentment and self-respect that a person earns through this kind of work, he believes, can elevate him and bring him closer to nature and to himself.

The individual must discover what work is right for him, Thoreau writes. He focuses on two kinds of work: physical labor and intellectual pursuits. On one hand, he builds his own house, a modest cabin made of wood and brick. He takes pride in earning his living by his own hands, and it is his physical labor that provides him with shelter, food, and the other necessities that make his time at Walden possible. On the other hand, he devotes himself to reading, has great reverence for literature and philosophy which he believes enrich him spiritually. Thoreau seeks a lifestyle that combines these two kinds of work, each with their own type of nobility, in a mutually beneficial and complementary way.

## **Simplicity over 'Progress'**

Thoreau believes that the best life is the simplest life. He rails against the luxuries that most men find so important, believing that they complicate their lives, and he criticizes the pretensions of his society, which spends so much time and energy pursuing an artificial and overblown notion of "progress." Thoreau argues for a separation between material wealth and spiritual growth, engaging in what he calls "voluntary poverty," which is how he believes the wisest people in history have lived. He seeks to discern the "necessities of life," the barest conditions under which he can thrive, and then to live that lifestyle. For food, he subsists mostly on rice and rye meal, he makes bread whose only ingredient is flour, and he advocates for vegetarianism, which lets him avoid the trouble of catching animals and the moral dubiousness of killing them. He keeps meticulous financial records and finds that he can build his house, which he can live in forever, for as much money as a townsman rents his home for a year. For clothing, he has only the fewest and most utilitarian garments. Thoreau sees this kind of living as purifying, leaving him time to pursue his true work and leaving his mind free.



### 3.9 AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM AND THOREAU

The heyday of Transcendentalism was in the 1830's and the 1840's and to later generations of Americans its interior life has seemed of greatest interest. The external story was not spectacular. It concerned mainly young people in the Boston and Cambridge area during the Age of Jackson who were mostly educated at Harvard, theologically trained, middle-class, and Puritan and Unitarian in background. A brief chronology would perhaps begin in 1832, when Emerson left the ministry, and proceed swiftly to 1836, the annus mirabilis of the movement, during which Emerson published *Nature*, the Transcendentalists' Bible, Ripley published *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion*, Brownson published *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church*, Alcott published *Record of Conversations on the Gospel*, and the Transcendentalist Club met for the first time, then move to 1837, when Emerson delivered his Phi Beta Kappa address on "The American Scholar" at Harvard, which Lowell called "an event without any former parallel in our literary annals"; to 1838, the year of Emerson's Divinity School Address at Harvard which touched off a great storm in religious circles; 1840, the founding of the *Dial*, a Transcendental magazine; 1841, the launching of Ripley's Brook Farm experiment; 1842, Alcott's experiment at Fruitlands; 1845, Thoreau went to Walden; and 1846, Thoreau went to jail. The Transcendental story, externally, centered largely on conversations, exchanges of letters, lecture engagements, publication dates, and journal entries. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, somewhat to their own surprise, becoming increasingly involved in abolitionism, attending rallies, participating in demonstrations, and delivering speeches at antislavery meetings.

Transcendentalism was a religious, philosophical, and literary movement and it is located in the history of American thought as post-Unitarian and freethinking in religion, as Kantian and idealistic in philosophy, and as Romantic and individualistic in literature. The religious impulse, however, was primary; piety concerned the Transcendentalists, especially in the beginning, even more than moralism. By the 1830's, the Unitarian consensus which educated and established people in the Boston area found comfortable and satisfying had lost its emotional appeal for thoughtful and sensitive young people.

The Transcendentalist revolt began as a quest for new ways of conceiving the human condition to replace old ways that no longer carried conviction. It also involved the search for new vocations since the clerical profession for which so many of the Transcendentalists had ceased to be a live option for most of them. Transcendentalism, in short, was mainly an enterprise undertaken by bright young Unitarians to find meaning, pattern, and purpose in a universe no longer managed by a genteel and amiable Unitarian God.

There was, to be sure, no one precise "cause" for the genesis of Transcendentalism. With the *New Views*, as with other patterns of ideas that suddenly catch on with sizable numbers of people, chance, coincidence, and the accidental concentration of several independent events probably explains what happened. Several tendencies of thought and action seem to have converged

in the 1830's in New England to precipitate the solution which we call Transcendentalism: the steady erosion of Calvinism; the progressive secularization of modern thought under the impact of science and technology; the emergence of a Unitarian intelligentsia with the means, leisure, and training to pursue literature and scholarship; the increasing insipidity and irrelevance of liberal religion to questioning young minds; the intrusion of the machine into the New England garden and the disruption of the old order by the burgeoning industrialism; the impact of European ideas on American traveling and studying abroad; the appearance of talented and young people like Emerson and Thoreau on the scene; and the imperatives of logic itself for those who take ideas seriously. Perhaps youth- if it is serious enough, sufficiently talented, adequately informed, and willing to work hard-is the indispensable element for stirring the various tendencies of thought into a new heady brew for the emerging generation to quaff. The Transcendentalists, at any rate, seem to have thought so. They were not radicals in the political sense; but the questions they asked of their country and their age were devastating. Many of the questions the Transcendentalists posed- and the answers they proposed-have passed into the mainstream of American critical thought and continue to challenge America's more conventional wisdom.

Thoreau occupies a unique position among transcendentalists. Thoreau's transcendentalism differs considerably from that of Emerson. He alienated himself from the church in order to keep on his religious quest with freedom. He lived out Emerson's doctrines of non – conformity and self – reliance and the individuality that Thoreau practiced even beyond that which Emerson advocated. Without bothering himself about the signs and symbols, revealed by nature, he plunged into the depths of nature. At every step in his life, he established commendable self – reliance. He said in a letter to Charles C. Morse in 1860: "I am in the lecture field, but my subjects are not scientific, rather transcendental and aesthetic." He did not preach transcendentalism, because he lived it and discovered it for himself. Thoreau held the concept of the immanence of God in nature and in man.

### 3.10 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. Why didn't Thoreau buy the Hollowell farm as he had originally intended?  
\_\_\_\_\_.
  - a It was too expensive
  - b It needed many improvements
  - c The seller pulled out
  - d It wasn't remote enough
2. Thoreau lived far from the constraining social relationships represented by \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a the town center
  - b the post office
  - c the theatre
  - d his family



3. On which holiday did Thoreau first move to Walden Pond? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a Memorial Day
  - b Independence Day
  - c Labor Day
  - d Easter Sunday
4. At Walden Pond, Thoreau sees time as a river in which he \_\_\_\_\_.
- a goes fishing
  - b dips his toes
  - c bathes
  - d dives and resurfaces
5. What term does Thoreau use for our internal means of measuring the reality of things? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a Still, small voice
  - b Conscience
  - c True Compass
  - d Realometer
6. What does Thoreau believe is necessary to understand what is truly worthwhile? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a Finding a fulfilling career path
  - b Forming deep connections with other people
  - c Gaining wisdom and living deliberately
  - d Experiencing worldly adventures
7. What does Independence Day, 1845 symbolize for Thoreau? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a The day he celebrates his nation's history
  - b The day he becomes a full-time farmer
  - c The day he becomes self-reliant and a part of nature
  - d The day he completes the construction of the house
8. What, in the chapter "Sounds," does Thoreau describe as having the roar of a fierce beast? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a A wolf
  - b A moose
  - c A train
  - d A riverboat
9. In what town did Thoreau spend most of his life? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a Boston
  - b Concord
  - c Plymouth

- d Providence
10. What college did Thoreau attend? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a Amherst  
b Harvard  
c Oxford  
d Yale
11. In what season does Thoreau conclude his stay at Walden Pond? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a Summer  
b Winter  
c Autumn  
d Spring
12. When did Thoreau move in to his house at Walden Pond? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a 1836  
b 1845  
c 1848  
d 1854
13. What, according to Thoreau, do the mass of men lead? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a Lives of quiet deprecation  
b Lives of quiet derivation  
c Lives of quiet desperation  
d Lives of quiet deviation
14. Which of the following was closest to Thoreau's house at Walden Pond? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a A canal  
b A mill  
c A railroad  
d A school
15. What was the approximate maximum number of visitors that Thoreau received in his house at a single time? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a One  
b Three  
c Thirteen  
d Thirty
16. Which crop did Thoreau raise in the greatest quantity? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a Beans  
b Peas  
c Potatoes  
d Turnips

17. What war was the United States involved in during Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond? \_\_\_\_\_
- a The Civil War
  - b The French and Indian War
  - c The Mexican War
  - d The Spanish-American War

### 3.11 ANSWER KEY (MCQs)

- |       |       |       |
|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. c  | 2. b  | 3. b  |
| 4. a  | 5. d  | 6. c  |
| 7. c  | 8. c  | 9. b  |
| 10. b | 11. d | 12. b |
| 13. c | 14. c | 15. d |
| 16. a | 17. c |       |

### 3.12 GLOSSARY

sophomore: a student in the second year of a course of study at a college or university

tumultuous: marked by disturbance

protégé: a young person who is helped or trained for their career by a more experienced

### 3.13 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

1. Why did Thoreau move to the woods of Walden Pond?
2. What is the significance of the title of the work?
3. Comment upon Thoreau's treatment of nature in "Where I Lived and What I Lived For."
4. Examine Thoreau as a social critic and moral prophet based upon your reading of "Where I Lived and What I Lived For."
5. Examine Thoreau as a Transcendentalist with reference to "Where I Lived and What I Lived For."
6. What does Thoreau mean when he says "to live deliberately?"

### 3.14 LET US SUM UP

"Where I Lived and What I Lived For" recounts Thoreau's lived experiences in a cabin on his own away from the civilised world. The chapter "Where I Lived and What I Lived For" is

significant because in this chapter, Thoreau identifies his location, Walden Pond. And explains that he chose this place because he “wished to live deliberately,” and to simplify everything in his life to the barest of necessities so that he could really live, that is, live away from the stifling constraint of modern life. Thoreau emphasises that nature exerts a spiritual influence on man and to live close to nature means to live freely. He also talks about his ideas of self-reliance, solitude, and transcendentalism in this chapter.

### **3.15 SUGGESTED READING**

*Thoreau's vision: the major essays* by Charles R. Anderson, Prentice Hall, 1973.

*Critical essays on American Transcendentalism* by Philip F Gura and Joel Myerson, G.K. Hall, 1982.

*Critical Essays on Henry David Thoreau's Walden* by Joel Myerson G.K. Hall 1988.



## “THE BATTLE OF THE ANTS” BY HENRY DAVID THOREAU

### STRUCTURE

- 4.0 Introduction
- 4.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 4.2 About Henry David Thoreau
- 4.3 Check Your Progress I (CYP I)
- 4.4 Introduction To “The Battle Of The Ants”
- 4.5 “The Battle of The Ants” : Summary
- 4.6 “The Battle of The Ants” : Analysis
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- 4.8 Glossary
- 4.9 Henry David Thoreau as a Nature Writer
- 4.10 An Assessment of *Walden*
- 4.11 Themes in *Walden*
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- 4.13 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.14 Examination Oriented Questions
- 4.15 Answer Key (CYP I, CYP II, MCQs)
- 4.16 Suggested Reading

### 4.0 INTRODUCTION

Dear Learner, after going through the previous lesson, you are now familiar with Henry David Thoreau. In this lesson, you will read another famous essay “The Battle of the Ants” written by him and appreciate Thoreau’s skilful use of the metaphor of battle of ants to comment upon the element of death and destruction caused by human warfare. In this lesson, you will notice how artfully insect imagery has been used by Thoreau to comment upon the human condition.

## 4.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME

The Objective of this lesson is to acquaint the learners with Henry David Thoreau's work *Walden* with special reference on the essay "The Battle of the Ants" from the chapter "Brute Neighbors".

After going through this lesson

- you will be familiarised with the essay titled "The Battle of the Ants," one of the best known essays of Henry David Thoreau from his work *Walden*.
- you will appreciate the use of first person narration as used by Thoreau to build the argument and to give a more subjective approach to the work.

## 4.2 ABOUT HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), the Transcendentalist was born of Jursey- Scots stock in Concord itself. Where Emerson theorized, Thoreau put his ideas into practice, notably in his Walden Pond venture in 1845-7 and in his one day's imprisonment in Concord Jail in 1846 for refusing to pay his poll tax to a government that supported the Mexican War. After graduation at Harvard in 1837, Thoreau had opened with his brother John on the principles of Bronson Alcott what would now be called a "progressive school," Concord Academy, in which the emphasis was laid, in a manner that would have won the approval of his contemporary Ruskin and his successors William Morris, John Dewey, A.S. Neill, and Bertrand Russell, less on desk-learning than on learning through doing, exploring nature rather than books.

He also tried lecturing and writing, contributing essays and poems to *The Dial* and following Emerson's lead in first entering observations in his *Journals*, preparing a lecture from them, and then revising the lecture into an essay suitable for print.

From 1841 to 1843 Thoreau lived in Emerson's house, serving his guide, philosopher, and friend as a general handyman. Then, in 1845, he began to put into practice the ideas he had been meditating upon in his lonely walks in the woods around Concord. Carlyle and Emerson were the origin of most of these ideas, but Thoreau was himself an original mind, in nothing more so than in his long-meditated resolve to be a "transcendentalist" in life as well as in theory, showing here a streak of "Yankee cussedness" which to say the least was un-Emersonian and which Harvard should have suppressed but luckily did not. Thoreau, like Lizzie Borden in the song, took an axe-and in March 1845, with the help of Hawthorne, Curtis and a few other friends, began to build himself a log-cabin on the wooded edge of Walden Pond, about two miles south of Concord. He lived alone there, a combination of Robinson Crusoe and Natty Bumppo, from July 1845 until September 1847, when he rejoined the Emerson household for a while, when Emerson himself was lecturing in Europe.

These two years spent by the Walden Pond were the most important in Thoreau's life. In his little new log-cabin, made with the sweat of his own brow, Thoreau meditated, Thoreau

fished, Thoreau read, Thoreau wrote. He wrote his book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, an account of a trip he had made in 1839 with his brother John in a home-made boat from Concord up into New Hampshire. This book was published in 1849, the author having to pay the cost of printing out of his meagre earnings as whitewasher, gardener, fence-builder and the other occasional jobs he had again taken up after he returned from Walden Pond. He also wrote there his essay on Carlyle and what was afterwards his most popular book: *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, published in 1854. This is at once his self-justification for his seemingly eccentric mode of living and an indictment of the busy commercial world of the mid-nineteenth century, an indictment whose relevance has only increased with the years.

For Thoreau Walden Pond was his audience, and he addressed the calm waters in the stately periods of an orator, enlivened by aphorisms such as “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can let alone” and “I have learned that the swiftest traveller is he that goes afoot,” aphoristic bait which it would have taken a dull fish indeed not to grasp. He made two brief excursions from his log-cabin during 1846: one, the first of three visits to Maine described in the posthumous collection *The Maine Woods* (1864); and secondly, his day in Concord Jail for refusing to pay his poll tax, which episode resulted in his essay *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, a classic protest against governmental interference with individual liberty which is said to have formed the basis for Gandhi’s passive resistance movement in South Africa and India many years later. This was first delivered as an oration to the Concord Lyceum in 1848, then recast as an essay in the opening number of Elizabeth Peabody’s *Aesthetic Papers* (1849), a venture which it hoped would succeed *The Dial*.

Thoreau died in early middle age, twenty years before his mentor Emerson. His contributions to *The Dial* and two abolitionist pamphlets *Slavery in Massachusetts* (1854) and *A Plea for Captain John Brown* (1860) besides *Walden* and *Week* are his famous works.

#### 4.3 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS I (CYP I)

Dear learner, let us now stop for some time. Hope you have read the previous section thoroughly and now you will be able to answer a few questions. So here is an exercise for you. Just in case if you are not able to get all the answers correct you can re-read the lesson and also consult the Answer Key.

1. Henry David Thoreau was born at \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Thoreau was associated with the literary movement called \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Thoreau was imprisoned for \_\_\_\_\_ day/days for refusing to pay poll tax.
4. Thoreau’s work titled \_\_\_\_\_ was published posthumously.
5. Gandhi’s passive resistance movement was inspired by Thoreau’s work titled \_\_\_\_\_.

6. Thoreau lived in Emerson's house from \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Thoreau refused to pay the poll tax because the government supported the \_\_\_\_\_ War.
8. *Walden* is subtitled \_\_\_\_\_.
9. Thoreau's two abolitionist papers are titled \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
10. In his proposed scheme of learning for "progressive school", Thoreau focused more on exploring \_\_\_\_\_ rather than books.

#### **4.4 INTRODUCTION TO "THE BATTLE OF THE ANTS"**

"The Battle of the Ants" is one of Thoreau's most celebrated works. In this short extract, Henry David Thoreau describes a literal battle between ants where red ants are fighting against black ants. Thoreau narrates the battle in a very meticulous manner by describing the details of the war, as if it is an actual battle taking place between humans. As the work *Walden* is based amidst nature, Thoreau uses insect imagery to comment upon war, a human phenomenon. The overall tone of the work is largely humorous because Thoreau uses the trivial incident of the battle of the ants to link it with the human aspect of warfare all the while conscious about the destruction and loss of human life which accompanies war.

#### **4.5 "THE BATTLE OF THE ANTS": SUMMARY**

The essay "The Battle of the Ants" extracted from *Walden*, is a description of the war of the ants. The minute observation of the war has manipulated Thoreau's thoughts to a great deal. He gives the conclusion to the mankind – war is destructive and painful not only during the war itself but also after the war. After all, any kinds of destruction does not carry any principle of life. One day when the author went out to his wood pile, he observed two ants fighting. One was red and small, and the other ant was black and large. They fought fiercely. When the author looked further, he was surprised to find a war between two races of ants: the red ants and the black ants was going on in his wood pile. Mostly, two smaller red ants fought with one larger black ant. The whole area turned into a battlefield with dead and dying ants. Both sides were equally determined to fight a deadly fight.

The author adds that this is the first battle which he has witnessed and compares the red ants to the Republicans and the black ants to the Imperialists. They fought soundlessly and more seriously than human soldiers. Then the author observed a couple embracing each other and determined to fight till the end of the day or their lives. The red fighter was in the enemy area. He had cut off one feeler of the enemy. The black ant was dashing him from side to side and he had killed several red ants. Both parties seemed to have decided not to move back. They were fighting either to win or to die. At that time a single red ant arrived there getting excited. He had not lost any of his limbs. He arrived there like Achilles to avenge or rescue his Patroclus. When he



got an opportunity, he sprang upon the black ant. Now the three of them were fighting for life. The author imagined that there were musical bands playing their national songs to excite the slow fighters and to cheer the slow and dying fighters. They were like human beings and the more he thought of them to be like humans, the less difference one would find between them. Such a battle had never taken place there. They were fighting for principle heroically and like patriots. The results of this battle would be important and memorable. The writer took up the chip on which the three were struggling, carried it into his house and placed it under a glass. He held a microscope and saw that the red ant had cut the foreleg of the enemy and severed the feeler of the enemy. But his own breast was torn away by the black ant. After half an hour he found that the black ant had cut off the heads of the red ants and was carrying them as trophies, as the signs of victory. Then he raised the glass and the black ant went off over the window-sill in a crippled state. The author did not know who won, or what the cause for the battle was. But his feelings were stirred as if witnessing the struggle and ferocity of human war. The writer thought of the battle all the daylong and he was sad at the ferocity and the widespread destruction.

#### **4.6 “THE BATTLE OF THE ANTS” : ANALYSIS**

This extract is written in the 1<sup>st</sup> person narrative. The narrator is the writer himself. The story is set equally in two places –the author’s woodpile and in his home. In the 1<sup>st</sup> person narrative the The author recounts a fierce battle between two large ants, one red and the other black, in a wood-pile. The characters are red and black ants and so there is no dialogue. The ants were engaged in a bellum, with the red pitting against the black, and often two red ones to one black. The battle was the only one he had ever witnessed, with the red republicans and black imperialists engaged in deadly combat without any noise. The battle was characterized by pertinacity and a “Conquer or die” battle-cry. There is a comparison between the ants and humans, and one particular ant to the Greek mythological hero, Achilles. The narrator has symbolized the combatants to republicans & imperialists. The author draws a comparison with the historical Concord Fight. The Concord Fight is considered the most significant fight in American history, with two patriots killed and Luther Blanchard wounded. The ants were known for their “fire!” and thousands shared the fate of Davis and Hosmer. The battle was fought for patriotism and heroism, and the results will be as important and memorable as those of the battle of Bunker Hill. The author never learned the victorious party or the cause of the war, but felt excited and harrowed by witnessing the ferocity and carnage of the human battle before their door. Ant battles have been celebrated for centuries, with Huber being the only modern author to witness them. A great and small species fought on a pear tree, with a courtier named Nicholas Pistoriensis present. Olaus Magnus recorded a similar battle, where small ants buried their own soldiers but left giant enemies’ bodies as prey. This occurred before the passage of Webster’s Fugitive-Slave Bill.

#### **4.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS II (CYP II)**

Dear learner, here is another exercise for you to make an assessment of your progress. You can take

another break from reading and try to tick the correct option in the questions given below. You can refer to the Answer key to see if you have marked the responses correct.

Tick the correct option

1. “The Battle of the Ants” is an extract from “Brute Neighbors”. (True/False)
2. “The Battle of the Ants” employs a serious tone. (True/False)
3. Thoreau uses insect imagery in “The Battle of the Ants”. (True/False)
4. The two fighting ants observed by Thoreau were of red and black colour. (True/False)
5. Thoreau compares the Red ants to the Imperialists. (True/False)
6. Thoreau alludes to Greek mythological hero Achilles in the “The Battle of the Ants”. (True/False)
7. By the end of the battle of the ants, Thoreau was certain of the cause of the battle. (True/False)
8. Thoreau uses the incident of the battle of the ants to comment upon the ferocity of human war. (True/False)
9. “The Battle of the Ants” is written in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person narrative. (True/False)
10. In “The Battle of the Ants” the author draws a comparison with the historical Concord Fight. (True/False)

#### **4.8 GLOSSARY**

woodpile: a stack of wood stored for fuel

stump(s): the bottom part of a tree left projecting from the ground after most of the trunk has fallen or been cut down

incessantly: without interruption; constantly

combatant(s): a person or nation engaged in fighting during a war.

duellum: combat between two contenders, duel

bellum: war, warfare

legions: a division of 3,000–6,000 men, including a complement of cavalry, in the ancient Roman army.

Myrmidons: a follower or subordinate of a powerful person, typically one who is unscrupulous or carries out orders unquestioningly.

Vale(s): a valley (used in place names or as a poetic term).

strewn: untidily scattered.

internecine: destructive to both sides in a conflict.

tumble: fall suddenly, clumsily, or headlong.

gnaw: bite at or nibble something persistently.

feelers: an animal organ such as an antenna or palp that is used for testing things by

touch or for searching for food.

pertinacity: a quality of sticking with something, no matter what foe: an enemy or opponent.

perchance: by some chance; perhaps.

Achilles: one of the great heroes of Greek mythology.

Patroclus: childhood friend and close wartime companion of the hero Achilles in Greek mythology

assiduously: with great care and perseverance.

carbuncle(s): a severe abscess or multiple boil in the skin

ferocity: the state or quality of being ferocious

ghastly: causing great horror or fear.

saddle-bow: the arch in or the pieces forming the front of a saddle.

obstinacy: stubbornness

pontificate: (in the Roman Catholic Church) the office or period of office of a pope or bishop.

#### **4.9 HENRY DAVID THOREAU AS A NATURE WRITER**

In his writings, Henry David Thoreau repeatedly talked about contact with wild places. He spurred a nonanthropocentric viewpoint and displayed a protoecological sensibility, as he endeavored to show, through his writing, the interrelatedness and interdependence of all things in the natural world. Even to this day, Thoreau's work remains the baseline and standard for nature writing. Much of Thoreau's work is based on his rambles and discoveries in his native Concord, Massachusetts, and this work falls into the broad category of "nature writing."

Thoreau's published narrative about his time spent in the "wilderness" became a landmark text of American literary history as it is widely considered the "model for a new literary form known as 'nature writing.'" In *Walden* Thoreau uses his autobiographical exploration of time spent in the woods as an instrument to state his alliance with the natural world, and his opposition to political and social policies of the country in which he finds himself. Thoreau uses himself in nature as his theme, and from that larger theme he explores the natural environment in ways that the genre of nature writing has since imitated, adopted, and expanded. Nature writing is a literary art, but it's also as rigorous as natural science. Like the sciences of biology or botany, nature writing has a similar allegiance to verifiable fact and careful observation. Unlike the sciences, however, nature writers *interpret* their observations through aesthetic language. They are mindful of the role that storytelling and dramatic narration play in our psychic and cultural well-being.

All nature writers see Thoreau as the originator of nature writing in the U.S. Like Thoreau, nature writing is not only concerned with accurate and factual representations of

nature, but also with the impact of nature upon humans, humans upon the natural world, and the relationship among the humans within nature. In the nature writing of today, we see Thoreau's influence as nature writing is still an activity that is inseparable from the writers' observations of *themselves*. Thoreau's nature writing is significant not only for its wilderness impressions but for Thoreau's deliberations on the relationship between civilization and wild spaces.

#### 4.10 AN ASSESSMENT OF WALDEN

When, on 4 July 1845, Henry David Thoreau moved to some land at Walden Pond owned by his Concord neighbour Ralph Waldo Emerson in order to "transact some private business" he was unaware that he had set in motion one of the masterpieces of American literature. His twenty-six months at Walden, as artistically created and re-created over the next seven years, resulted in *Walden; or Life in the Woods*, published in 1854. John Greenleaf Whittier called the book "very wicked and heathenish"; Emerson found it "cheerful, sparkling, readable, with all kinds of merits, & rising sometimes to very great heights" and praised its author as "the undoubted King of all American Lions"; contemporary reviewers nearly all commented favourably.

*Walden* has a long gestation. In March 1846, Thoreau noted in his journal that "some of my townsmen had expected of me some account of my life at the pond." He returned to his journal for materials and on 10 and 17 February 1847 lectured before the Concord Lyceum on "The History of myself." He continued adding to this account up until the time he left Walden Pond in September 1847. He then dropped the *Walden* manuscript to work on lectures and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which he finished in February 1849. After a series of revision, *Walden* was published on 9 August 1854.

In general, the response of reviewers to *Walden* was very positive. Although most of the reviews were short, general, or both, they did contain such effusions as "one of the most remarkable books for originality of thought and beauty of style yet written in our day" ; "one of the most remarkable publications of the day"; "a prose poem ... (with) classical elegance, and New England homeliness, with a sprinkle of Oriental magnificence in it" ; "the most readable and original volume we have seen in a long time"; "[s]ometimes strikingly original, sometimes merely eccentric and odd, it is always racy and stimulating"; and "one of the most original, eccentric and suggestive books which the season has brought out."

#### 4.11 THEMES IN WALDEN

The body versus spirit argument of *Walden* was perhaps recognized as the book was called "a picturesque and unique continuation of the old battle between the flesh and the spirit." "n "Higher Laws" Thoreau himself overtly stated this dichotomy as being of interest to him: "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both." But the *Boston Atlas* found that Thoreau's pursuit of higher laws had led to his loss of

humanity: while praising the “strong, vigorous, nervous truth” of the spiritual passages of *Walden*, the *Atlas* complained that “there is not a page, a paragraph giving one sign of liberality, charitableness, kind feeling, generosity, in a word- HEART.” In *Walden*, body had lost to spirit and there was a “total affection of human affection.”

Another dichotomy in *Walden*-that of philosophy versus practicality-was recognized by reviewers. Although Thoreau gave plenty of evidence in *Walden* that good ideas must be built upon solid bases, not all reviewers noticed this. Some, like the Boston *Daily Evening Traveller*, simply pointed out the combination of “many shrewd and sensible suggestions” and “a fair share of nonsense” in the book. To the *Providence Daily Journal*, since the practical incidents of Thoreau’s life were not remarkably stirring, he has filled up the pages with his philosophy, which is shrewd and eccentric. In the English *Westminster Review*, George Eliot called attention to “that practical as well as theoretical independence of formulae, which is peculiar to some of the finer American minds.” A few reviewers saw in *Walden*’s philosophical passages vestiges of transcendentalism. Elizabeth Stoddard, writing in the *Daily Alta California*, called *Walden* “the latest effervescence of the peculiar school, at the head of which stands Ralph Waldo Emerson.”

Most reviewers touched on the theme of individual versus social responsibility in *Walden*. But while they did discuss it, few recognized the truly antisocial basis of Thoreau’s individualistic philosophy. That this theme is a major one in *Walden* can be seen by the generations who have made one of the book’s most famous lines to be “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.”

Following upon the previous theme is the one of physical isolation versus social involvement. Thoreau had made it clear which he preferred: “I had this advantage, at least, in my mode of life, over those who were obliged to look abroad for amusement, to society and the theatre, that my life itself was become my amusement and never ceased to be novel.” He made this point over and over in *Walden*, sometimes by using paradox and sometimes by using humour. Again, most reviewers missed the antisocial implications of this theme, choosing instead to harp upon what the *Boston Atlas* called “the one great, fatal error, which completely vitiates the experiment,” that Thoreau was “no true hermit ... He only played savage on the borders of civilization.” In other words, while Thoreau denounced society in print, in life he snuck back into town for meals and companionship.

Thoreau compares the ant battles to human wars, in an effort to show the nature of humans. According to him, the wars by humans are because of wealth possessions, Thoreau focuses his attention on individual combatants. He observes small red ant fight with a large ant and interprets this to mean their philosophy is to either conquer or die. According to him, this is the same case with humans who employ all the available tactics in their bid to conquer. In addition, humans use propaganda in the human wars so that they can win their battles. Lastly, he ridicules human wars and the behaviors of the citizens of conflicting nations. They will sing

their respective rhythmical music to excite them while their combatants are dying in the war fields.

#### 4.12 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. What, in the chapter “Sounds,” does Thoreau describe as having the roar of a fierce beast? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. A wolf
  - b. A moose
  - c. A train
  - d. A riverboat
2. In which town did Thoreau spend most of his life? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Boston
  - b. Concord
  - c. Plymouth
  - d. Providence
3. What college did Thoreau attend? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Amherst
  - b. Harvard
  - c. Oxford
  - d. Yale
4. In what season does Thoreau conclude his stay at Walden Pond? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Summer
  - b. Winter
  - c. Autumn
  - d. Spring
5. When did Thoreau move in to his house at Walden Pond? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. 1836
  - b. 1845
  - c. 1848
  - d. 1854
6. What, according to Thoreau, do the mass of men lead? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Lives of quiet deprecation
  - b. Lives of quiet derivation
  - c. Lives of quiet desperation
  - d. Lives of quiet deviation
7. Which of the following was closest to Thoreau’s house at Walden Pond? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. A canal
  - b. A mill
  - c. A railroad
  - d. A school
8. What was the approximate maximum number of visitors that Thoreau received in his house at a single time? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. One
  - b. Three
  - c. Thirteen
  - d. Thirty
9. Which crop did Thoreau raise in the greatest quantity? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Beans
  - b. Peas

- c. Potatoes
  - d. Turnips
10. What war was the United States involved in during Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. The Civil War
  - b. The French and Indian War
  - c. The Mexican War
  - d. The Spanish-American War
11. For what was Thoreau put into jail by the town constable? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Perjury
  - b. Tax evasion
  - c. Treason
  - d. Trespass
12. Which of the following is not the name of a pond Thoreau describes? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Flints' Pond
  - b. Golden Pond
  - c. Goose Pond
  - d. White Pond
13. When Thoreau encounters a woodchuck in the woods, how does he react? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. He wants to paint a picture of it
  - b. He wants to speak with it
  - c. He wants to capture it and keep it for his pet
  - d. He wants to eat it
14. Which poet made frequent visits to Thoreau's cabin at Walden? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. William Ellery Channing
  - b. Emily Dickinson
  - c. Walt Whitman
  - d. William Wordsworth
15. Between what creatures does Thoreau witness a battle? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Ants
  - b. Mice
  - c. Birds
  - d. Cats
16. Which philosopher pays a lengthy visit to Thoreau's cabin at Walden? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Amos Bronson Alcott
  - b. George Santayana
  - c. John Dewey
  - d. William James
17. To what does Thoreau partly attribute John Field's poverty? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. His physical handicaps
  - b. His small farm
  - c. Unfair discrimination by local employers
  - d. His Irish heritage
18. Approximately how deep is Walden Pond at its deepest point? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. 10 feet
  - b. 50 feet
  - c. 100 feet
  - d. 500 feet



19. Why do a large group of men arrive at Walden Pond in the winter of 1846–1847? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. To chop down a number of trees
  - b. To clear the pond of ice for commercial sale
  - c. To play a game of ice hockey
  - d. To pressure Thoreau into paying the debts he has accumulated in back-taxes
20. Which of the following does Thoreau value most highly? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Fame
  - b. Love
  - c. Money
  - d. Truth
21. What, as Thoreau describes it at the end of the work, is the sun? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. A lantern in the sky
  - b. A morning star
  - c. A red dwarf waiting to happen
  - d. A symbol of our lives
22. What was the title of Thoreau's first published book? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. A Week on the Merrimack and Concord Rivers
  - b. "Civil Disobedience"
  - c. Nature
  - d. Walden
23. What cause did Thoreau take up most earnestly in the 1850s? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Abolitionism
  - b. Labor Reform
  - c. Temperance
  - d. Women's Suffrage
24. What is Thoreau's interaction with the loon mentioned at the end of "Brute Neighbors"?
- a. He is imitating it
  - b. He is painting it
  - c. He is hunting it
  - d. He is playing with it
25. What color is the ice of Walden Pond? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Bluish
  - b. Yellowish
  - c. Pure White
  - d. Greenish

#### 4.13 LET US SUM UP

"The Battle of the Ants" is an extract from chapter 12 "Brute Neighbors" in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. One of the best nature writers of America, Henry David Thoreau, in this extract describes a battle between two races of ants which serves as a comment on the destructive nature of war. The extract emphasises how war is detrimental to human life and well-being.

Thoreau gives us an account of an epic battle of ants. It's an ugly fight, with each ant becoming dismembered in the process. This gruesome, but really memorable, image leads Thoreau to consider the futility of human war, be it the Napoleonic Wars or even the American Revolution considering the large number of people who died in these wars.



#### 4.14 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

1. Why does Thoreau make allusions to historical battles?
2. How does Thoreau blur the lines between natural and historical events? Illustrate from the text.
3. What is the effect of comparing the actual battle of the ants to classical Greek and American wars?
4. Why does Thoreau describe the wounds of the ants in such detail? Provide examples.
5. What links to human activities does Thoreau make in this extract?
6. Comment on Thoreau's humour based on your reading of "The Battle of the Ants."
7. Comment on the genre of nature writing with special emphasis on Henry David Thoreau as a nature writer.

#### 4.15 ANSWER KEY CYP I

1. Concord
2. Transcendentalism
3. one
4. *The Maine Woods*
5. "Civil Disobedience"
6. 1841-1843
7. Mexican
8. "Life in the Woods"
9. *Slavery in Massachusetts, A Plea for Captain John Brown*
10. nature

#### CYP II

1. True
2. False
3. True
4. True
5. False
6. True
7. False
8. True

9. False  
10. True

### MCQs

- |       |       |       |
|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. c  | 11. b | 21. b |
| 2. b  | 12. b | 22. a |
| 3. b  | 13. d | 23. a |
| 4. d  | 14. a | 24. d |
| 5. b  | 15. a | 25. a |
| 6. c  | 16. a |       |
| 7. c  | 17. d |       |
| 8. d  | 18. c |       |
| 9. a  | 19. b |       |
| 10. c | 20. d |       |

#### 4.16 SUGGESTED READING

Henry David Thoreau: A Biography *by Milton Meltzer. Twenty-First Century Books, 2006*

*The works of Thoreau* by Henry Seidel Canby. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946

*Henry David Thoreau's Walden* by Harold Bloom. Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.



**A.K. RAMANUJAN: “ECOLOGY”****STRUCTURE**

- 5.0 Introduction
- 5.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 5.2 About the poet
- 5.3 Poem : Text
- 5.4 Check Your Progress (CYP)
- 5.5 Structure of the poem
- 5.6 Analysis of the poem
- 5.7 Themes
- 5.8 Glossary
- 5.9 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 5.10 Examination Oriented Questions
- 5.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.12 Answer Key (CYP, MCQs)
- 5.13 Suggested Reading

**5.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear learner, Unit I familiarised you with the concept of ecocriticism. Now, in Unit II, you will learn about certain other aspects of this critical approach. So, in this lesson, you will come to know about A.K. Ramanujan, an eminent India poet. This lesson focuses on his poem “Ecology” which deals with concerns such as ecology and environment, co-existence, mother nature, etc.

**5.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME**

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint you with

- the structure of the poem “Ecology” by A.K. Ramanujan.
- the critical appreciation of the poem

- the thematic concerns of the poem

After going through this lesson, you will

- get another perspective on the concept of ecocriticism
- be able to appreciate the structure of the poem “Ecology”
- be able to critically analyse the poem
- delineate the thematic concerns of the poem
- appreciate “Ecology” as a poem written in the literary/critical tradition of ecocriticism.

## 5.2 ABOUT THE POET

A.K. Ramanujan, born in 1929, stood as a distinguished Indian poet, scholar, linguist and translator, proficient in both English and Kannada. His acclaim arises from his adeptness in connecting Indian culture and literature with the contemporary era, skilfully intertwining conventional styles with present-day subjects. His literary creations notably encompass a tapestry of language, cultural allusions, and the probing of intricate human encounters and he is highly autobiographical and thought-provoking. Ramanujan’s adeptness in seamlessly moving across cultures and languages, coupled with his profound perceptions into the complexities of human existence, solidified his stature as one of the most revered literary luminaries of his time. An important theme that one encounters in his poems is Hindu heritage weaved within textual sensitivity with its cerebral literalism, distinct imagery steeped in nostalgia. Ramanujan’s expression is distinguished for excellence, epigrammatic brevity, austerity and classical simplicity. Irony is a conspicuous feature of Ramanujan’s poetry. Many of his famous works include “Of Mothers,” “Among Other Things,” “Obituary,” “Love Poem for a Wife I,” “Love Poem for a Wife II” and “History.” Psychological realism is one of the prominent distinguished features of Ramanujan’s poetry, well exemplified in “Looking for a Cousin on a Swing”. A.K. Ramanujan is a widely read poet in India along with western and eastern influences on modern Indian poetry in Indian languages, with his poetry a conflation of the best literary traditions of the Indian and Western worlds. A. K. Ramanujan died in Chicago, on July 13, 1993 as a result of adverse reaction to anesthesia during preparation for surgery.

A.K. Ramanujan stands out as an eminent poet in the realm of Indian English poetry as a poet gifted with a varied poetic sensibility, blessed with a treasure trove of memories which the passage of time refused to corrode, a skilful artist who maintained a perfect balance between the traditional and the modern. He is credited for having kept intact his originality despite being subjected to various influences both Indian and Western. Despite staying in America, he maintained the status of equilibrium by not forgetting his own Indian culture. This proves that he successfully managed himself to live in two cultures simultaneously.

## 5.3 POEM : TEXT

The day after the first rain,  
for years, I would home

in a rage,  
for I could see from a mile away  
our three Red Champak Trees  
had done it again,  
had burst into flower and given Mother  
her first blinding migraine  
of the season  
with their street-long heavy-hung  
yellow pollen fog of a fragrance  
no wind could sift  
no door could shut out from our black  
pillared house whose walls had ears  
and eyes,  
scales, smells, bone-creaks, nightly  
visiting voices,  
and were porous like us,  
but Mother, flashing her temper  
like her mother's twisted silver,  
grandchildren's knickers  
wet as the cold pack on her head,  
would not let us cut down  
a flowering tree  
almost as old as her, seeded,  
she said, by a passing bird's  
providential droppings  
to give her gods  
and her daughters and daughters' daughters basketsful  
of annual flower  
and for one line of cousins  
a dower of migraines in season.

#### **5.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (CYP)**

Learner, now it is the time for you to take a break and engage with the text for a while.

Go through this exercise and try to recollect what all you have read. You can check your answers in the Answer Key provided.

1. A.K. Ramanujan was born in the year \_\_\_\_\_.
2. A.K. Ramanujan is proficient in English and \_\_\_\_\_.
3. A.K. Ramanujan's famous works are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Psychological realism is exemplified in his poem "Among Other Things" (True/False)
5. A.K. Ramanujan is an eminent Indian English poet (True/False)
6. A.K. Ramanujan has maintained a perfect balance between tradition and the modern in his poems (True/False)
7. In the poem "Ecology" the poet could see from a mile away three \_\_\_\_\_ trees.
8. The blooming of flowers aggravates which condition in the mother? \_\_\_\_\_.

## **5.5 STRUCTURE OF THE POEM**

The poem "Ecology," extracted from A.K. Ramanujan's collection of poems titled "Second Sight," published in 1986. The poem appears to be narrated by either the poet himself or a fictional persona deeply devoted to his/her mother. This narrator expresses unwavering loyalty to mother, reflecting a strong emotional connection. "Ecology" is a poem that can be interpreted as a singular sentence, yet each stanza encapsulates a distinct concept. These ideas are intertwined and seamlessly in transition from one stanza to the next. Ramanujan has communicated the ideas of the poem through his incorporation of the literary devices and features of style like irony, symbolism and imagery. The phrase "Flash her temper" stands as an instance of irony, as she vehemently opposes the notion of felling the tree. In this context, the literal definition of "Ecology" isn't adhered to. Instead, the poem's descriptive note seems to convey the notion that a specific type of tree can possess both unfavourable and favourable aspects, thereby suggesting its preservation rather than removal.

## **5.6 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM**

The poem "Ecology" by A.K. Ramanujan delves into the intricate relationship between a son's commitment to his mother and her deep dedication to ecological values, which introduces a nuanced tension between their priorities. The narrator's frustration is palpable as he witnesses his mother suffering from severe migraine attacks, an excruciating form of headache often accompanied by nausea and vomiting. These attacks are triggered by the potent fragrance emitted by the Red Champak flower's pollen during its blooming phase. The intense aroma that it infuses the surroundings extensively. Despite the closed doors of the narrator's house, the fragrance manages to spread inside the house. The walls of the house, which can

absorb a multitude of sensory experiences—sounds, sights, voices, and even the noise of new shoes—are helpless in stopping the pervasive cloud of pollen from the Champak trees.

This imagery underscores the relentless nature of the pollen's intrusion and its ability to penetrate even the most seemingly resistant boundaries. While the poet contemplates removing the tree to alleviate her suffering, his mother opposes the idea due to her strong religious and emotional attachment to the tree. She explains that the tree shares her age and has been enriched by chance, as a passing bird's droppings served as fortunate fertilizer. This occurrence is regarded as an auspicious sign. On the positive note, the tree bestows numerous baskets filled with flowers for offerings to her deities and for generations of her female descendants, including daughters and their offspring. Yet, it also leaves a distressing migraine inheritance to a specific branch of cousins. The pollen fog, akin to a dense and substantial fog, signifies the airborne golden pollen particles that envelop the atmosphere, shrouding the land. This conflict arises from the clash between the mother's sentimental connection and the practical need to address her health issues.

The poet aims to illustrate the contrast in perspectives between individuals of the older generation (the mother) and those of the newer generation (the poet). The elderly individuals are characterized by their emotional connections, memories, and deeply held beliefs associated with the environment.

According to the poet, the Red Champak Trees hold little value as its pollen spread through the air, contaminating the atmosphere and the city. Even houses and the human body are unable to thwart their entry. These pollens are accountable for causing intense pain that afflicts the poet's mother. Lacking any personal attachment to the environment or the trees, the poet opts to remove them. Conversely, the mother's viewpoint starkly contrasts with the poet's stance. For her, the tree isn't merely a tree; it symbolizes a positive omen for her household. The flowers of the Red Champak Trees are offerings presented to the deities and bestowed upon their daughters and descendants. It's this sentiment that leads her to perceive her own suffering as a small sacrifice, willingly endured in reverence to the tree's significance.

## **5.7 THEMES**

In "Ecology" by A.K. Ramanujan, the conventional interpretation of the term "ecology" is not being conveyed; instead, the poem encapsulates a range of nuanced meanings, associations and thematic concerns, some of which are:

1. Ecology and Environment
2. Co-existence
3. Dint of Hindu Mythology
4. Memories and Past
5. The institution of Family

- ## 6. Mother – Nature

## 5.8 GLOSSARY

1. **Rage:** Intense and uncontrollable anger
2. **Migraine:** A severe, throbbing headache, often accompanied by nausea, sensitivity to light, and other symptoms.
3. **Burst into flower:** Suddenly bloom or blossom, often referring to plants or flowers opening up.
4. **Sift:** To separate and sort through fine particles or substances by using a sieve or similar tool.
5. **Porous:** Having small holes or spaces that allow liquids or gases to pass through; permeable.
6. **Flashing:** Emitting sudden and brief bursts of light; quickly appearing and disappearing.
7. **Providential:** Occurring by divine intervention or seemingly fortunate and timely occurrences.

## 5.9 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

- How many Red Champak Trees were in the poet's sight? \_\_\_\_\_
  - seven
  - two
  - nine
  - three
- To cut or not to cut, this dilemma reflects which sort of dilemma? \_\_\_\_\_
  - Hamletian
  - Horatian
  - Homeric
  - Aristotelian
- Which of the following elements is not illustrated through the poet's memory?  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - home
  - banana leaves
  - pollens
  - flowering trees
- Words such as pollution, destruction, extinction emphasize the use of \_\_\_\_\_ language:
  - Emotive
  - Personified
  - Contrasting
  - Ironic
- Who composed the poem "Ecology"? \_\_\_\_\_
  - R.K. Narayan
  - Langston Hughes
  - A.K. Ramanujan
  - Kamala Das
- How often do the champak tree burst into flowers? \_\_\_\_\_
  - Weekly
  - fortnightly





## 5.11 LET US SUM UP

After the successful reading and re-reading of this lesson , you will be able to distinguish A.K. Ramanujan as a prominent leading Indo-Anglican poet, the other two being Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das. The combination of Indian and Western rudiments has illumined his poetry, by comparing the South Indian Brahmin roots to his ultramodern life in America. His poetry has evolved from Indian experience and sensibility with all its recollections of images, history, original places, heritage, family and beliefs. At the same time, his works include diverse forms of literary devices like irony, skepticism, psychological realism, contrast, metaphors and personification. Through his writings, Ramanujan could elicit the warmth of the traditional family life and the closeness of long-remembered connections. More frequently in his poetry, he introduces conflicts, contrasts, sense and surprise.

In “Ecology,” A. K. Ramanujan skillfully employs vivid imagery and emotive- figurative language to underscore the rich Hindu heritage and its correlation with the tress and deities. Through metaphors and personification, Ramanujan gives voice to nature through the underpinned mother-son relationship and highlights its suffering at the hands of human neglect, desolation and exploitation. The poet’s juxtaposition of beauty of nature with human destruction effectively conveys the poem’s underlying concern about the importance of environmental awareness, sustainability and responsibility.

## 5.12 ANSWER KEY

### CYP

1. 1929
2. Kannada
3. “Of Mothers” “Obituary”
4. False
5. True
6. True
7. Champak
8. Migraine

### MCQs

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. d | 6. d  |
| 2. a | 7. d  |
| 3. b | 8. c  |
| 4. b | 9. d  |
| 5. c | 10. c |

## 5.13 SUGGESTED READING

Ramazani, Jahan, and A. K. Ramanujan. "Metaphor and Postcoloniality: The Poetry of A. K. Ramanujan." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1998, pp. 27–53.

A.K. Ramanujan: A Critical Assessment. dspace.nehu.ac.in › jspui › bitstream. Kumari, Richa. *A Critical Study of A.K. Ramanujan's Poetry*. Delhi: Shree Publishers .2016.

Chandran, K. Narayana. "The Collected Poems of A.K. Ramanujan," *World Literature Today*. 70, 762. 1996.



## **FACTORIES ARE EYESORES BY BALDOON DHINGRA**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 6.0 Introduction
- 6.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 6.2 About the poet
- 6.3 Poem: Text
- 6.4 Check Your Progress (CYP)
- 6.5 Structure of the poem
- 6.6 Analysis of the poem
- 6.7 Themes
- 6.8 Glossary
- 6.9 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 6.10 Examination Oriented Questions
- 6.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.12 Answer Key (CYP, MCQs)
- 6.13 Suggested Reading

### **6.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear Learner, as you continue your reading of the various aspects of literature and ecology, you will now be introduced to another aspect in the poem “Factories are Eyesores” written by a distinguished pre-independence Indian poet BaldoonDhingra. In this lesson, you will learn about Baldoon Dhingra’s ecological vision as he points out that severe environmental pollution is caused by factories which also look ugly in the midst of nature, hence are eyesore.

### **6.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME**

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint you with

- the structure of the poem “Factories are Eyesore”
- the critical appreciation of the poem
- the thematic concerns of the poem

The reading of this lesson will

- familiarise you with the poet and his poem “Factories are Eyesores”
- sharpen your ecological awareness by making you aware about the environmental hazards of setting up factories
- make you critically analyse the notion of progress which comes at the cost of nature

## 6.2 ABOUT THE POET

Balloon Dhingra was a prominent pre-independence Indian poet celebrated for his contributions to literature. Beyond his role as a poet, he was recognized as an art historian, writer, and resident of Paris during the 1940s-60s. His tenure in Paris coincided with his service as an Indian representative to UNESCO. An educationist and dedicated spiritual seeker, Dhingra's poems exude optimism and promise, featuring an inherent rhythm that captivates the listener. Dhingra's extended stay in Paris significantly influenced his poetic style, resulting in a lyrical approach reminiscent of Western poets. Balloon Dhingra published novels, translated works, and even issued a biography of Amrita Sher Gill. He also held significant positions as well. He regarded theatre as a real art form and participated in it wilfully. “A National Theatre for India” is yet another published book by Dhingra published with Padma Publications Limited in 1944. Other important works by the eminent writer include “Asia through Asian Eyes” (1959), “Wisdom of Asia” (1959) which foretells the parables, poetry, proverbs, stories and epigrams of the Asian peoples, “Search for Roots” (1977) and “Songs of Meera: Lyrics of Ecstasy” published in 1977 by Orient Paperbacks. His thematic focus cantered on neutral subjects, showcasing his affection and admiration for nature, marked by compassion and deep emotion. Besides, his other prominent poetic work includes “Mountains” with the imagery of natural scenic mountains. His noteworthy poetry collections include “Symphony of Love,” “Beauty's Sanctuary,” and “Comes Ever the Dawn.” Through his work, Dhingra not only contributed to the world of poetry but also bridged cultural influences, crafting a unique artistic voice that resonates with readers across borders. Balloon Dhingra's eco-critical, social and environmental ramifications are shared by many other notable poets like Dilip Chitre, Keki N Daruwalla, Shubho Tagore, Bharati Sarabhai, Kamala Das, Ira De, Leela Dharamraj, Deb Kumar Das amongst others, representing the Indo-Anglican poetic tradition. Compiled in *The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglican Poetry* which is the first comprehensive anthology of English verse written by Indians, compiled and edited by Vinayak Krishna Gokak. The editor regards his conscientious exploration as “Indo- Anglian poetry, like the rest of modern Indian poetry, is Indian first and everything else afterwards. It has voiced the aspirations, the joys and sorrows of the Indian people.”

## 6.3 POEM: TEXT

‘The factories, eyesores as you say,

Make iron lines against the sky.

Standing to eastward, gaunt and high

They belch black smoke by night and day,  
 Blots on the landscape, as you say.’ ‘  
 Weary and desperate with toil,  
 Man labours in that acrid space,  
 Time and again he turns his face  
 Away from grimy smoke and soil  
 To pray he shall have done with toil.  
 ‘Man works beneath, until he drops  
 Out of the world of wheels one day.  
 Factories are eyesores, as you say.’  
 ‘Palm-leaf parasols sprouting like freak- mushrooms  
 Brood over platforms that are empty.’  
 ‘As the panda points out Dasasvamedh.  
 I listen avidly to his legend-talk  
 Striving to forget what I chanced to see:  
 The sewer- mouth trained like a cannon  
 On the river’s flank.’  
 ‘Poles scattered on the river to provide some room  
 For birds to perch on when attacked by thirst;’

#### 6.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (CYP)

Dear learner, now that you have read the poet and his poem, you can now have a breather. Before proceeding to the analysis and thematic concerns of the poem, you can solve the exercise given below to make a self-assessment of what you have read.

1. Baldoon Dhingra was a resident of Paris during the years \_\_\_\_\_.
2. His stay in Paris coincided with his services as Indian representative to \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Baldoon Dhingra wrote a biography of \_\_\_\_\_.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ is the title of a work published by Baldoon Dhingra in 1944 (*A National Theatre for India/ Second Sight*).
5. “Search for Roots” and “Songs of Meera” Lyrics of Ecstasy” were written by \_\_\_\_\_ (Baldoon Dhingra/ A.K. Ramanujan).
6. The factories’ black smoke is described as \_\_\_\_\_ on the landscape.

7. The poem “Factories are Eyesores” is composed in \_\_\_\_\_ lines.
8. “Factories are Eyesores” has a strong ecological concern (True/False)
9. What does the word ‘eyesore’ mean? \_\_\_\_\_.

## **6.5 STRUCTURE OF THE POEM**

Baloon Dhingra has composed his eco-sensitive poems with commitment and honesty. The lines of the poem embody the poet’s eco-centric ideology, urging individuals driven by excessive ambition in this technological age to reflect on the current and potential hazards stemming from the escalating smoke, which possesses a sole inclination to disperse into the natural surroundings’ air.

## **6.6 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM**

The poem portrays the poet’s mixed feelings about nature and progress. He simultaneously agrees and disagrees with those who appreciate the beauty of the landscape. It seems he aims to present himself as a nature enthusiast, employing a common belief of environmentalists: that factories are unsightly. The poet follows the potential of producing artistry from unattractive elements in his poetry, leading to the reconsideration of the assertion that “factories are eyesores.” In this way, the poet presents a nuanced perspective that acknowledges the impact of industrialization on nature while also recognizing the potential for beauty to emerge from unexpected sources. The factories are labelled as eyesores due to the sooty smoke discharged from their chimneys, which stains the verdant landscape. The poet employs the phrase “iron lines against the sky standing in the east” to depict the sombre, ebony smoke intermittently disrupting the landscape’s lushness. The tall, imposing factories, with their ominous appearance, expel substantial plumes of smoke and flames that mar the landscape’s allure.

In vivid detail, the poet paints a portrait of weary and desperate factory workers who toil within the hazardous atmosphere. These laborers face monotony amid the unpleasant factory conditions. Periodically, they turn away from the ashen smoke and grime in search of respite. The poet showcases the transformation of ugliness into beauty catalysed by technological advancement. The image of a chimney shaft, initially unattractive, becomes illuminated by sunlight when rays cascade from mountain peaks bathed in the sun’s brilliance. The poet contemplates how painters like Claude Monet might perceive the unsightliness of smoke-emitting factories. This consideration leads to the question of whether such an eyesore could inspire Monet to create a picturesque representation of the landscape. This illustrates the concept that beauty can emerge from the most unlikely sources. Consequently, the established maxim of environmentalists – that “factories are eyesores” – loses its credibility, as the poet underscores the potential for beauty to spring forth from the unlikeliest of origins.

## 6.7 THEMES

- Ecology and Environment
- Commitment to environmental praxis
- Nature's disharmony and imbalance
- Technocracy

## 6.8 GLOSSARY

1. Eyesore: an unpleasant sight in a public sphere
2. Marred: to harm or damage
3. Gaunt: weak, lanky, skinny, spare
4. Belch: to let out a lot smoke out
5. Blots: a thing or someone's opinion that spoils your happiness

## 6.9 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. Name the painter about whom Dhingra has made a mention in his poem. \_\_\_\_
  - a) Fra Lippo Lippi
  - b) Michelangelo
  - c) Claude Monet
  - d) Frida Kahlo
2. Factories quoted as eye-sores because \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) they cause eye sores
  - b) factories cause eye irritation
  - c) the black smoke emanating from the factories blackens the green landscape
  - d) the workers of the factories turned blind
3. The factories, as eyesores you say, Make \_ lines against the sky. \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) blue
  - b) iron
  - c) black
  - d) metallic
4. The poem "Factories are Eye-sores" is written by \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) Gieve Patel
  - b) Baldoon Dingnra
  - c) Kamala Das
  - d) Nizzim Ezekiel



5. How do thing of ugliness turn bright according to Baldoon Dingra?\_\_\_\_\_.
- When the bright rays of the Sun touches the chimney shaft
  - with the help of imagination
  - when portrayed by fanciful painters
  - none of the above

#### 6.10 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

1. Explain the usual ecological dictum of the environmentalists as reflected in “Factories as Eyesores.”

**Ans:** In the poem, the poet presents an ambivalent attitude towards nature and technological development by pointing out at the ugly sight of the dusty factories at the lap of serene nature and the technological implications of setting up of the factories in the midst of natural green landscapes. By depicting the environmental degradation through pollution and the severe adverse consequences affecting the factory workers.

2. Illustrate the environmental stance held by Baldoon Dhingra in his poetry.
3. What does the poem “Factories are Eyesores” reveal about the poet?

**Ans.** Baldoon Dingra’s poem “Factories are Eyesores” reveals the ambivalent attitude of the poet towards nature and development. The poet at once agrees and disagrees with those conscious of the beauty of the landscape. It appears, his effort is to create for himself the image of a nature lover for which he makes use of the usual dictum of the environmentalists, ‘factories are eyesores.’ The factories are eye sores because the black smoke emanating from the chimneys blackens the greenery.

The beauty of the landscape thus gets spoiled by technical advancement. The factories are referred to as eyesores because the black smoke emanating from the chimneys blackens the greenery of the landscape. The poet says that the factories make “iron lines against the sky standing in the east.” “The iron lines” is suggestive of the grim black smoke which the factories emit intermittently disfiguring the greenness of the landscape. The grim tall factories with their devilish appearance send out large amounts of smoke or flames marring the beauty of the landscape.

The poet draws a graphic picture of the weary and desperate factory workers toiling amidst the deadly and lethal atmosphere. The workers are desperate with their monotonous toil in the unpleasant atmosphere of the factory. Every now and then they turn their face away from the grim smoke and soil to seek relief.

The poet reveals how beauty could be created out of the ugliness generated by

technical advancement. He pictures how the chimney shaft a thing of ugliness grows bright with light when the mountain tops bright with the sun flush down a spark of light.

The poet wonders what impression the ugliness of the smoke belching factories would have made on a painter like Claude Monnet or how it would have inspired him to make a beautiful painting of the landscape. The poet brings home the truth that beauty could be created out of ugliness. Thus the environmentalist's dictum 'factories are eye sores' loses its credibility.

### 6.11 LET US SUM UP

Balloon Dhingra, a significant pre-independence Indian poet, art historian, writer, and UNESCO representative, made significant contributions to literature. His eco-critical themes align with other Indo-Anglican poets, reflecting in "The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglican Poetry." Dhingra's eco-sensitive poems convey his commitment and honesty, embodying an eco-centric ideology. He urges reflection on the environmental impact of escalating smoke. The poem "Factories are Eyesores" explores Dhingra's mixed feelings about nature and progress. He presents himself as a nature enthusiast but also recognizes potential beauty in unexpected places. Factories, initially labelled as eyesores, become sources of inspiration. The poet vividly describes weary factory workers, highlighting the transformation of ugliness into beauty through technological advancement. Dhingra questions environmentalist assertions, suggesting that even factories can inspire artistic representations. The poem revolves around themes of ecology, commitment to environmental praxis, natural imbalance, disharmony and technocracy.

### 6.12 ANSWER KEY

#### CYP

1. 1940s-1960s
2. UNESCO
3. Amrita Sher Gill
4. *A National Theatre for India*
5. Balloon Dhingra
6. blots
7. 22
8. True
9. an unpleasant sight in a public place

#### MCQs

- |      |      |      |
|------|------|------|
| 1. c | 2. c | 3. b |
| 4. b | 5. a |      |

### 6.13 SUGGESTED READING

Chandra, A. "AN INVESTIGATION OF ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS IN THE SELECT POEMS OF K. V. DOMINIC AND BALDOON DHINGRA", *Research Journal of English*, 5(3). 2020

Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature", *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, London. Verso, 1997.

Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna, "*The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets*", Ed. Mehrotra. Oxford University Press, 1992.

Daru N. Kekiwalla, "Collected Poems", 1970-2005, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006, Print.



## **DILIP CHITRE: “FELLING OF THE BANYAN TREE”**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 7.0 Introduction
- 7.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 7.2 About the poet
- 7.3 Poem: Text
- 7.4 Structure of the poem
- 7.5 Check Your Progress (CYP)
- 7.6 Analysis of the poem
- 7.7 Themes
- 7.8 Literary Devices
- 7.9 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 7.10 Examination Oriented Questions
- 7.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 7.12 Answer Key (MCQs)
- 7.13 Suggested Reading

### **7.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear Learner, let us now introduce you to another poem written in the same vein of ecocriticism, that is, “Felling of the Banyan Tree” written by Dilip Chitre. This lesson will familiarise you with the life of Dilip Chitre, an eminent bilingual poet writing in English and Marathi. This lesson also offers a critical analysis of the poem which will enhance your appreciation of the concept of ecocriticism.

### **7.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME**

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint you with

- the critical appreciation of the poem

- the thematic concerns of the poem

After a careful reading of this lesson, you will

- get acquainted with Dilip Chitre, his life and works
- appreciate Dilip Chitre as a nature poet as embedded in this poem
- recognize the stylistic, thematic, and critical aspects of this poem
- explain the striking use of imagery and metaphor in this poem

## 7.2 ABOUT THE POET

Dilip Purushottam Chitre (1938–2009) was a prominent bilingual poet who wrote both in English and Marathi. And he was also a painter and filmmaker. Dilip Chitre was born in Baroda on 17th September, 1938. His family moved to Mumbai in 1951 where he published his first collection of poems in 1960. Chitre was the most important influence behind the little magazine movement in Marathi.

Some of his works include *Ekun Kavita* or Collected Poems published in three volumes in the nineties. His collection of English poems is “Travelling in the Cage.” Chitre was also a well-known and prolific translator and one of his famous translations was the devotional writings of Tukaram in the 17th century. *Anubhavamrut* by Dnyaneshwar is also a famous translation by Chitre.

Most of Chitre’s poems are autobiographical in nature and a variety of moods range from the lyrical and meditative to the incantatory, reflecting a continuous crisis of the inner life. The reality which had been created by Chitre in his poems is that of a romantic self which converts to its own symbol, a metaphor of nothingness and meaning. His poems express a broad range of heightened intense consciousness often in opposition and conflict.

Chitre’s adopted the dramatic monologue as it developed out of Browning through Pound and Eliot. He took it a step further by carrying the imagery of emotion to radical extremes by further reducing the suggestion of narration to bare minimum. His poems hold together a fragmented reality. Chitre’s poetry expresses an intimately subjective, inner world which ignores the physical and social world except as a stimulus of the eye and imagination.

Chitre made one feature film and several documentary and short films. And he received several Maharashtra State Awards, the Ministry of Human Resource Development’s Emeritua Fellowship, the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program Fellowship, the Indira Gandhi Fellowship, etc. After a long bout with cancer, Dilip Chitre died at his residence in Pune on 10 December 2009.

## 7.3 POEM: TEXT

“Felling of the Banyan Tree”

My father told the tenants to leave

Who lived on the houses surrounding our house on the hill  
One by one the structures were demolished  
Only our own house remained and the trees  
Trees are sacred my grandmother used to say  
Felling them is a crime but he massacred them all  
The sheoga, the oudumber, the neem were all cut down  
But the huge banyan tree stood like a problem  
Whose roots lay deeper than all our lives  
My father ordered it to be removed  
The banyan tree was three times as tall as our house  
Its trunk had a circumference of fifty feet  
Its scraggy aerial roots fell to the ground  
From thirty feet or more so first they cut the branches  
Sawing them off for seven days and the heap was huge  
Insects and birds began to leave the tree  
And then they came to its massive trunk  
Fifty men with axes chopped and chopped  
The great tree revealed its rings of two hundred years  
We watched in terror and fascination this slaughter  
As a raw mythology revealed to us its age  
Soon afterwards we left Baroda for Bombay  
Where there are no trees except the one  
Which grows and seethes in one's dreams, its aerial roots  
Looking for the ground to strike.

#### **7.4 STRUCTURE OF THE POEM**

It is an autobiographical poem: Dilip Chitre's exploration of a time when he was uprooted from Baroda to the city then called Bombay and modern-day Mumbai. The banyan tree is a metaphor for his life, for the family's upheaval. And the man responsible for the move is none other than the father, representing all that is masculine, dominant, forward-looking, and destructive in contrast to the grandmother, representing all that is feminine - the past, nurturing, religious and conservative. This patriarchal versus matriarchal theme is central to the poem; the speaker appears to favour the latter but is helpless to stop the inevitable momentum of progress, as put forth by the father.

## 7.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (CYP)

Dear learner, I am sure you have enjoyed reading the poem “Felling of the Banyan Tree”. Now, before we proceed to the analytical aspects of the poem, take a break and refresh your mind by trying to solve the exercise given below. This will also help you to recollect what you have read in the previous sections.

1. The full name of Dilip Chitre is \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Dilip Chitre was born in the year \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Dilip Chitre was a bilingual poet writing in \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Dilip Chitre was born in Mumbai (True/False)
5. Dilip Chitre’s first collection of poems was published in 1960 (True/False)
6. Dilip Chitre has translated the devotional writing of \_\_\_\_\_.
7. There is no autobiographical element in DilipChitre’s poems \_\_\_\_\_ (True/False)
8. In the poem “Felling of the Banyan Tree” the grandmother considered the tree to be \_\_\_\_\_.
9. The Banyan tree was a problem because of its \_\_\_\_\_. (roots/leaves)
10. Soon afterwards, the poet and his family left for \_\_\_\_\_. (Bombay/Baroda)

## 7.6 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

“The Felling of the Banyan Tree” was first published in Dilip Purushottam Chitre’s book *Traveling In A Cage* in 1980 .

“The Felling of the Banyan Tree” refers to a particular time in a family’s history when a drastic decision was taken by the father of the narrator/poet. This decision involved the demolition of houses on a hill and the cutting down of a huge tree which stood for centuries on the same spot.

The narrator/poet articulates that his father asked all the tenants to leave their house so that they could proceed with its demolition. All the houses except for the one in which the poet’s family resided and a banyan tree considered holy by his grandmother were demolished. The trees were cut down, including several medicinal and sacred ones. However, the cutting of the enormous banyan tree that was so tall and had deep roots was a big problem. Still, the father gave the order to cut the tree.

The tree was thrice the size of the narrator/poet’s house, and its trunk had a circumference of about fifty feet. Its aerial roots were thirty feet long and touched the ground. They started by shredding the branches, which caused the insects and birds to leave the tree. Fifty men had to constantly chop its trunk. Everyone saw the tree’s ring that showed its age of

about two hundred years. The people witnessed this slaughter with fear and fascination. The poet expresses that soon after that, they moved to Mumbai from Baroda, where they could not see many trees. If they could see some trees, it was in their dreams only.

“The Felling of the Banyan Tree” explores a special time in the life of the narrator/poet, when family roots were torn out, and when the old way of life gave way to the new. The first line informs that the decision was taken by the patriarch, the father, and the energy which directly affects things is, therefore, masculine.

In opposition to this masculine approach is that of the feminine, represented in the family by the grandmother, a spokesperson for nature. She introduces a religious element, based on tradition, which tells that to harm a tree is an actual crime. The speaker focuses on the names of the trees that are, to put it rather violently, ‘massacred’ by the father.

And in the shape of the banyan there is the symbol of family itself, the great rooted tree representing centuries of living, of connection between earth and heaven.

The great banyan, helpless to resist, is hacked at by dozens of men. It’s like something of the terror of a battle or war. In fact, this felling of the tree does seem to foretell the coming environmental struggles.

The two emotions, the narrator/poet experiences are terror and fascination. The former is based on sadness and fear for the future, the latter on the awesome sight of a massive tree coming crashing to the ground, revealing its rings and ancient history.

The family moves to the city and the speaker now is hard hit it seems, for the only trees available are those in the subconscious. But this tree is angry perhaps because of the way the move has happened. And there’s no telling if the roots will find what they need: nourishment from the earth.

“The Felling of the Banyan Tree” is a free verse poem of 3 stanzas, with 25 lines in total. There is no set rhyme scheme and the metre varies somewhat, bringing different rhythms to each line.

## **7.7 THEMES**

The central theme of the poem is uprootedness, the idea of leaving a family home. The secondary theme is that of ecosystems and their destruction, specifically that of felling trees for profit, in the name of progress. In the poem, the two are inextricably linked - the narrator/poet’s moving home coincides with the tree being cut down. The two are fused together.

The poem, Felling of the Banyan Tree, is focused on a specific time in the family’s history when an important decision taken by the father involved demolishing the house on the hills and cutting down a huge tree that had stood there for ages. In this autobiographical poem, the poet Dilip Chitre explores the time when he was uprooted from Baroda and sent to Mumbai.



The tree is the metaphor he used for his life and the upheaval moving to a different place caused.

## 7.8 LITERARY DEVICES

### **Tone**

The poem style is conversational. It is like a short story being told. Overall, the tone is tinged with slight sadness and even anger at the thought of the tree being cut down in fact killed.

### **Language/Diction**

Words reinforce the idea of a masculine versus feminine theme, of destruction versus conservation:

demolished/massacred/removed/terror/slaughter.

sacred/deeper/revealed/fascination.

### **Metaphor**

The banyan tree is a metaphor for the speaker's family history.

In the Hindu religion, the banyan tree (batbriksha) is a symbol of the Triumvirate of Lord Vishnu (the bark), Brahma (the roots) and Lord Shiva (the branches). It brings life and fertility. This deeper religious significance adds another layer of meaning to the poem.

## 7.9 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

- Q.1 Who wrote the poem 'The Felling of the Banyan Tree?' \_\_\_\_\_.
- Emily Dickinson
  - Dilip Chitre
  - Dilip Shukla
  - William Shakespeare
- Q.2 Dilip Chitre is a winner of which award? \_\_\_\_\_
- Sahitya Akademi
  - Best Actor
  - Film Fare
  - None of the above
- Q.3 In which languages did Dilip Chitre write his poems? \_\_\_\_\_
- Marathi
  - English
  - Hindi
  - Both A & B
- Q.4 Dilip Chitre's major translations from Marathi into English include \_\_\_\_\_.
- An Anthology of Marathi Poetry (1945-65)
  - Says Tuka (1991)
  - Both A & B

- d. None of the above
- Q.5 Dilip Chitre lived and taught in \_\_\_\_\_ and the USA.
- a. England
  - b. Beijing
  - c. Russia
  - d. Ethiopia
- Q.6 Who ordered to cut down trees? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Poet
  - b. Grandmother
  - c. Grandfather
  - d. Father
- Q.7 Why were the tenants told to leave the house? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. To demolish the houses
  - b. To plant trees
  - c. To call the new tenants
  - d. None of the above
- Q.8 Who used to say that the trees are sacred? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Mother
  - b. Father
  - c. Son
  - d. Grandmother
- Q.9 Where does the banyan tree still exist? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. In the memory of the poet
  - b. At the village
  - c. In the memory of the villagers
  - d. All of these
- Q.10 How many days the woodcutters take to cut the banyan tree?\_\_\_\_\_.
- a. 3
  - b. 5
  - c. 6
  - d. 7
- Q.11 How old was the banyan tree? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. 100 years
  - b. 200 years
  - c. 500 years
  - d. 2000 years
- Q.12 How does the poet describe the trunk of the banyan tree?\_\_\_\_\_.

- a. Massive
  - b. Small
  - c. Attractive
  - d. None of the above
- Q.13 How many men were there to cut down the tree? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Thirty
  - b. Fifty-five
  - c. Forty-five
  - d. Fifty
- Q.14 'But the huge banyan tree stood like a problem' (Identify the figure of speech)? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Simile
  - b. Metaphor
  - c. Personification
  - d. None of the above
- Q.15 Which two cities are mentioned in the poem? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Bombay & Delhi
  - b. Bombay & Bangladesh
  - c. Bombay & Baroda
  - d. Baroda & Pune
- Q.16 'We watched in terror and fascination this slaughter' is an example of \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Alliteration
  - b. Simile
  - c. Repetition
  - d. Antithesis

## 7.10 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

**Q.1 Identify the lines that reveal the critical tone of the poet towards the felling of the tree.**

**Answer:** There are various expressions that reveal the critical tone of the poet towards the felling of the tree in the poem:

"It's scraggy aerial roots fell to the ground"

"Sawing them off for seven days, and the heap was huge"

"Insects and birds began to leave the tree" "Fifty men with axes chopped and chopped"

"We watched in terror and fascination this slaughter"

**Q.2 Identify the words that help you understand the nature of the poet's father.**

**Answer:** There are many words that help you understand the nature of the poet's father in the poem. The poet's father was a practical man. As the entire family was moving to Baroda, the father removed all the trees and demolished the surrounding property. He wasn't emotional but was a man of action.

"the structures were demolished"

"but he massacred them all"

"My father ordered it to be removed"

**Q.3 'Trees are sacred my grandmother used to say'— what does the poet imply by this line?**

**Answer:** There were numerous legends surrounding the sheoga, the neem, the oudumber and most of all, the banyan tree. In Hinduism, these trees have mythological significance. Old people who are religious consider cutting down these trees to be a sin as they worship the trees based on the holy scriptures. They say that cutting down a peepal or neem tree would bring ill fate. Numerous stories are present in our mythology that plague our society with various superstitions. Hence, the poet is trying to convey the fears and beliefs of various religious people like his grandmother.

**Q.4 'No trees except the one which grows and seethes in one's dreams'— why is the phrase 'grows and seethes' used?**

**Answer:** In the climax, the poet moves to Baroda along with his family. The poet notices a banyan tree, and remembering the tree which was in his garden, he rushes towards it. Now, as the tree is dead in reality, as his father cut it down, its memories remain in the faded dreams of the poet. The banyan tree is personified by the poet as this tree is the one which grows in his dreams. The tree seethes, which means to boil in his dream. The tree might be in anguish, as it was cut down, and hence boils due to anger as it grows well in the dreams of the poet though it was dead in reality.

**Q.5 How does the banyan tree stand out as different from other trees? What details of the tree does the poet highlight in the poem?**

**Answer:** The Banyan tree is one of the most religious trees as per Hindu mythology. It is well known that Buddha attained self-realisation in Bodhi Gaya under a banyan tree. There are numerous such stories with accounts of the tree and its mysterious, hanging aerial roots. The poet likes the figure of the banyan tree and says, "The great tree revealed its rings of two hundred years". The explanation about the banyan tree creates a picture of mystery. The aerial roots of the tree dangling from above reaches the ground. They are the main proof of the number of decades lived by the tree. It is a hard and strong tree which requires more

effort to cut it. When this occurs, the slaughter of the banyan tree is watched with fascination and terror.

**Q.6 What does the reference to raw mythology imply?**

**Answer:** The banyan tree is mythological, as his grandmother calls its name, along with a few other sacred trees. A sentiment is created in the poet and the reader while reading the poem. When the banyan tree is cut down according to the poet's father's order, a mystery is disclosed. The aerial roots of the banyan tree were brought down from the old trunk, which had a circumference of fifty feet. It is an age-old tree which has imbibed all the knowledge of these years inside it. When it is cut down, the poet feels that all the mythology is revealed. The concealed darkness, and the enlightenment it possessed for a long time are highlighted in this situation.

**Q.7 'Whose roots lay deeper than our lives'— what aspect of human behaviour does this line reflect?**

**Answer:** The life cycle of a banyan tree is a special one as it grows as an epiphyte. It lives for about 200 years or even 400-450 years. The average life of humans is 70-80 years, in contrast. It is noted that a single banyan tree may survive several generations of humans. The tree contains strangled roots knotted in its huge trunk, which has grown for centuries. The tree transcends the life of humans and grows with the knowledge it witnesses all the while. The poet has compared the life of humans to that of a banyan tree. All the mythical hugeness makes it a mystery. Humans are thrown into surprise and bewilderment at the knowledge that it contains in its trunks, growing its aerial roots to reach the ground. It has become a mythological representative of the life it has led for centuries, witnessing all the life of humans who perished around it by standing erect and tall as a mute witness to it all.

**Q.8 Comment on the contemporary concern that the poem echoes.**

**Answer:** The poet is worried about the changing traditions which are affected by modern ideology. The value of trees in the earlier days is not a concern to the people of modern society. The age-old culture is breaking apart, giving way to western studies and science. The religious values taught to a child from childhood are paid no heed. Life in the current world is busy not only consuming space and time but our lives as well. The values raised by our traditions are treated as old and outdated. The poet has written the poem based on the changes our society is going through.

**7.11 LET US SUM UP**

The poem describes the felling of a massive banyan tree on the family property. Over the course of a week, 50 men chopped at the tree's trunk and branches with axes, revealing the

tree's age of 200 years through its rings. The tree was an important part of the landscape, but was cut down to make way for new construction. After witnessing the tree's destruction, the family left for Bombay, where trees are scarce except those that grow in dreams, with aerial roots searching for ground.

## 7.12 ANSWER KEY

### CYP

1. Dilip Purshottam Chitre
2. 1938
3. English and Marathi
4. False
5. True
6. Tukaram
7. False
8. sacred
9. roots
10. Bombay

### MCQs

- |       |       |       |
|-------|-------|-------|
| 1) b  | 2) a  | 3) d  |
| 4) c  | 5) d  | 6) d  |
| 7) a  | 8) d  | 9) a  |
| 10) d | 11) b | 12) a |
| 13) d | 14) c | 15) c |
| 16) d |       |       |

## 7.13 SUGGESTED READING

*Travelling in a Cage*; Clearing House; Mumbai; 1980

“The Reasoning Vision: Jehangir Sabavala's Painterly Universe”, *Introduction and Notes on the paintings by Dilip Chitre*, Tata-McGraw-Hill, New Delhi, 1980



**GIEVE PATEL: “ON KILLING A TREE”****STRUCTURE**

- 8.0 Introduction
- 8.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 8.2 About the poet
- 8.3 Poem: Text
- 8.4 Structure of the poem
- 8.5 Check Your Progress (CYP)
- 8.6 Analysis of the poem
- 8.7 Themes
- 8.8 Glossary
- 8.9 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 8.10 Examination Oriented Questions
- 8.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.12 Answer Key (CYP, MCQs)
- 8.13 Suggested Reading

**8.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear learner, in the previous lesson, you read about Dilip Chitre’s subjective painful account of the felling of a tree. In this lesson, somewhat similar concerns are explored in the poem “On Killing a Tree” written by Gieve Patel. This lesson will provide you a brief biography of Gieve Patel along with the critical analysis and themes of the poem.

**8.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME**

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint you with

- the structure of the poem “On Killing a Tree”
- the critical appreciation of the poem

- the thematic concerns of the poem

After going through this work, you will

- know about the poet Gieve Patel and the concerns marking his works
- be able to recognise the interconnectedness of nature and literature
- analyse the structure and thematic concerns of the poem

## 8.2 ABOUT THE POET

Gieve Patel was born on 18 August 1940 in Bombay/ Mumbai. His father was a dentist and his mother was the daughter of a doctor. He was educated at St. Xavier's High School and Grant Medical College, Mumbai. After becoming a doctor, he initially worked in a government hospital in his native village of Nargol in southern Gujarat. Then shifted to Mumbai from where he retired in 2005. Besides, a medical professional, he carved a niche for himself as a creative writer, poet and painter. He is recognized as one of the important painters who portrayed the social reality parallel to the prominent painters of the Baroda School. Through his paintings, Patel explored contemporary life, with a focus on its complexity and beauty.

He was actively involved in the Green Movement in an effort to protect the environment. His poems speak of deep concerns for nature and expose man's cruelty to it. His notable poems include, *How Do You Withstand* (1966), *Body* (1976), *Mirrored Mirroring* (1991) and *On killing a tree*. He also wrote three plays, titled *Princes* (1971), *Savaksa* (1982) and *Mr. Behram* (1987). He died from cancer in Pune, on 3 November 2023, at the age of 83.

## 8.3 POEM: TEXT

“On Killing a Tree”

It takes much time to kill a tree,

Not a simple jab of the knife

Will do it. It has grown

Slowly consuming the earth,

Rising out of it, feeding

Upon its crust, absorbing

Years of sunlight, air, water,

And out of its leperous hide

Sprouting leaves.

So hack and chop

But this alone won't do it.

Not so much pain will do it.

The bleeding bark will heal



And from close to the ground  
Will rise curled green twigs,  
Miniature boughs  
Which if unchecked will expand again  
To former size.  
  
No,  
  
The root is to be pulled out –  
  
Out of the anchoring earth;  
It is to be roped, tied,  
  
And pulled out – snapped out  
  
Or pulled out entirely,  
Out from the earth-cave,  
  
And the strength of the tree exposed  
  
The source, white and wet,  
The most sensitive, hidden  
For years inside the earth.  
  
Then the matter  
  
Of scorching and choking  
  
In sun and air,  
Browning, hardening,  
Twisting, withering,  
And then it is done.

#### **8.4 STRUCTURE OF THE POEM**

Gieve Patel uses images to describe the killing of a tree that are violent and resemble the act of murder in order to shock people who do not think of the killing of plants as being acts of violence at all. They are complacent in their perspective, believing that only the killing of animals represents death. Therefore, through this poem, Patel seeks to show vividly that trees are as much a part of Life, as much alive as any animal and as such, killing trees requires the same intensity and violence, as killing animals. The poet uses clinical terminology to describe the act of killing a tree, and makes it closely resemble the deliberate act of killing an animal. “On Killing a Tree” may also be seen as a conservation poem, bringing home through dramatic

images, the urgency of the need to stop the de-forestation that is changing climactic patterns and brining in the Green House effect, which potentially, may endanger life itself on the planet Earth, through the phenomenon of Global Warming.

### 8.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (CYP)

Dear learner, a reading of the preceding sections in this lesson has familiarised you with the nature of the poem “On Killing a Tree” as well as with Dilip Chitre, the poet. You can now take a break from the reading of this lesson and attempt to answer the questions. Make sure to check the Answer Key to see whether you have got the answers correct.

1. Gieve Patel was born in \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Professionally Gieve Patel was a \_\_\_\_\_. (teacher/doctor)
3. Besides being a poet, Gieve Patel was also a \_\_\_\_\_. (painter/singer)
4. Gieve Patel was actively involved in the \_\_\_\_\_ Movement in an effort to protect the environment.
5. *Princes* is a \_\_\_\_\_ written by Gieve Patel. (play/novel)
6. Gieve Patel’s notable works include \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Gieve Patel describes the killing of a tree as a \_\_\_\_\_ act.
8. Gieve Patel links the act of cutting a tree with that of a murder. (True/False)
9. Gieve Patel tries to convey that trees are not living beings. (True/False)

### 8.6 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

The title of the poem is simple and appropriate as it contains the major concern of the poet – merciless and callous felling of trees. It indicates appropriately that the poem is about the process of killing of the tree. The entire poem explains the view that killing a tree is not a simple, short or easy process. Trees have tremendous strength and a great instinct for survival.

“On Killing a Tree” is a poem which presents a graphic picture of the total annihilation of a tree. In the poem the tree symbolizes Nature. Modern man out of his indiscriminate greed and selfishness roots out nature and its very spirit. Man’s greed is not quenched by the mere physical process of killing a tree. Man realizes that it is not easy to kill a tree because it has grown slowly consuming the earth and absorbing water, air and sunrise for years. The mere act of hacking and chopping is not sufficient to kill a tree. The tree does not seem to feel any kind of pain because the bleeding bark seemed to heal all the time. The tree overcomes man’s onslaught by branching off small stems close to the ground and resumes life and grows again to its former size. Knowing a tree’s power to come to life again, man decides to pull out the root of the tree. Like a

butcher, he makes several cuts in the tree and cuts it down. He then cuts it into several convenient pieces. Still his greed is not quenched. Man is determined not to allow Nature a second life. He makes a deep cavity on the earth and roots out the tree which uses anchored safety inside the earth. The earth has so far protected and fed the tree like a mother. But, the cruel man uproots this safety. After pulling the tree down, the man further subjects it to various processes of rendering it fit for commercial purposes. He further tortures the tree by scorching and choking it in sun and air. He also subjects the tree to various methods such as browning and hardening. With this, the total killing of the tree is complete. Man is ensured that the tree has no second life. “And then it is done” says the speaker triumphantly. The poet describes man’s cruelty to nature with bitter irony and detachment. But his own sympathy is with Nature. The poem is a telling commentary on one of the major environmental issues that encounters modern man.

## **8.7 THEMES**

“On Killing a Tree” conveys the message that trees are living beings just like any other form of life. They have strong survival instincts and can withstand any type of assault, trauma or crisis. It is not easy to kill them, for they have a never-say-die attitude to life.

The poem is a condemnation of the human callousness in chopping down trees to grow crops, build cities and make products. Although the poem presents itself as a guide on how to kill a tree, it is actually a passionate plea not to cut down trees.

The poem also applauds the sturdiness and resilience of trees in that they take all kinds of attacks and wounds in their stride but refuse to die. They may be wounded, scarred or maimed, but they bounce back into life by healing themselves in due course of time. One wonders if human beings can ever have that kind of attitude to life.

## **8.8 GLOSSARY**

Jab: thrust with sharp object like knife or sword, poke

Consuming: use up, eat up or drink up

Crust: hard outer portion, external covering

Absorbing: suck up, soak up or take in

Leprous: covered with scales, resembling leprosy

Sprouting: to begin to grow, to shoot forth

Hack: cut, slice, chop with heavy blows, insensitive

Twigs: slender shoot of a plant or tree

Miniature: small or reduced in size

Boughs: main or larger branches of a tree

Scorching: burning slightly, with heat, drying up

Choking: to stop breath by squeezing or strangling

Withering: shriveling, fading, decaying

## 8.9 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. On killing a tree is written by \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) Arthur Rimbaud
  - b) William Shakespeare
  - c) John Keats
  - d) Gieve Patel
2. It takes much time to kill a tree. The statement indicates \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) a sense of impatience that it takes such effort to kill a tree
  - b) a sense of irony that it is not a simple task to kill a tree
  - c) a sense of defeat that it takes time to kill a tree
  - d) a sense of joy that the tree cannot be easily killed
3. The poem 'On Killing a Tree' is based on the theme that \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) adversity is a blessing in disguise
  - b) in spite of all odds, life tries to recreate itself
  - c) struggle is life
  - d) it is useless to cry over spilt milk
4. "A simple jab of the knife" can't do what? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) It cannot kill a tree
  - b) It cannot hamper a tree's growth
  - c) It cannot hurt a tree
  - d) It cannot stab a tree
5. The tree is too hard to be destroyed with \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) sudden pull of the rope
  - b) a simple blow of the knife
  - c) the destruction of leaves and branches
  - d) the severance of the bark
6. The tree has grown by feeding itself on the nutrition provided by \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) the sun
  - b) water
  - c) air
  - d) the earth
7. By consuming the nutrients of the earth, the tree has grown \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) at a rapid rate
  - b) very slowly
  - c) slowly
  - d) fast

8. The observation about the growth of the tree is \_\_\_\_\_.
- the tree grows slowly
  - the tree does not grow at all
  - the tree grows steadily
  - the tree grows rapidly
9. The word, 'crust' here refers to \_\_\_\_\_.
- the outer part of bread
  - the earth's solid exterior
  - the bark of the tree
  - the scaly covering on a skin
10. A tree grows by absorbing \_\_\_\_\_.
- sunlight
  - water
  - air
  - all of the above
11. The bark of the tree is described as 'leprous hide' because it is \_\_\_\_\_.
- soft and smooth
  - wounded by the knife
  - rough and has marks
  - glossy and shining
12. The expression 'leprous hide' refers to \_\_\_\_\_.
- the tree's bark
  - smooth skin
  - the leper's skin
  - none of the above
13. The expression, 'leprous hide' is a fine example of \_\_\_\_\_.
- irony
  - simile
  - metaphor
  - assonance
14. Leaves sprout out of the tree's \_\_\_\_\_.
- green twigs
  - white root
  - leprous hide
  - dry stem
15. The poet uses the expression, 'Sprouting leaves' to suggest the idea of \_\_\_\_\_.
- approaching death
  - a vibrant life

- c) continuous life-cycle
  - d) producing a new replica
16. Hacking and chopping can cause a tree \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) much pain
  - b) little pain
  - c) not so much pain
  - d) pleasure
17. How does a tree overcome hacking and chopping? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) by producing small green stems close to the ground
  - b) by sprouting small branches
  - c) by expanding again to former size
  - d) all the three
18. The purpose of killing the tree is not fulfilled in spite of \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) inflicting pain
  - b) chopping
  - c) hacking
  - d) all of the above
19. The epithet, 'hack and chop' clearly reveals \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) resilience of the tree
  - b) a philosophy of violence
  - c) greater violence against nature
  - d) sympathy for the tree
20. The bark of the tree bleeds because of \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) stabbing
  - b) choking
  - c) uprooting
  - d) hacking and chopping
21. The figure of speech used in the expression, 'Not so much pain will do it' is \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) hyperbole
  - b) hyperbaton
  - c) imagery
  - d) personification
22. The bark that bleeds \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) heals itself
  - b) becomes leprous
  - c) dies of shock
  - d) becomes dry

23. The phrase, 'bleeding bark' brings before our eyes the condition of a \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) dying branch
  - b) growing new shoots
  - c) severed bark
  - d) withering tree-stump
24. The literary device used in the phrase, 'bleeding bark' is \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) alliteration
  - b) personification
  - c) allusion
  - d) metaphor
25. Curled green twigs rise from \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) the chopped tree
  - b) close to the ground
  - c) the top of the tree
  - d) uprooted tree
26. A twig is a \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) sapling
  - b) big branch
  - c) tender shoot of a tree
  - d) stem of the young tree
27. Miniature boughs will expand again to their former size if \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) unchecked
  - b) checked
  - c) repeatedly chopped
  - d) uprooted
28. The growth of 'miniature boughs' is suggestive of the \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) undying strength
  - b) futile act of killing
  - c) birth right of a tree
  - d) lively attitude of the poet
29. In order to kill a tree successfully, it is to be \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) stabbed
  - b) hacked
  - c) uprooted
  - d) chopped
30. The root of the tree is \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) green and dry
  - b) white and wet

- c) green and wet
- d) white and dry

## 8.10 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

**Q.1 It takes much time to kill a tree’ – Why does it take much time to kill a tree? According to the poet, how is the tree finally killed?**

**Answer:** A tree has grown slowly consuming the nutrients from the earth. It has fed upon the crust and also absorbed sunlight, air, and water over the years. Roots are deep-rooted. It has the strength to heal its bleeding bark. It has the resistance to survive against any outside assault. So, it takes much time to kill a tree.

A simple jab of night, hacking, and chopping cannot kill a tree. To kill a tree, roots have to be pulled out by tying a rope. They have to be exposed in the sun and air for scorching and chocking. Finally, when they will turn into brown, hard, twisted, and withered, the tree will die completely.

**Q.2 In what way does the poet describe the relationship between trees and the air?**

**Answer:** The tree establishes a wonderful give and take relationship with the atmosphere, taking what it needs, while giving back what the atmosphere requires. In all of Nature, the poet seems to suggest that we witness the mutually interdependence of its aspects.

**Q.3 What are the poetic devices used in the poem “On killing a Tree?”**

**Answer:** The poem has been written in enjambment style where the lines run into more than one sentence. It may also be noted that the poem is in free verse style (there are no rhyming words or rhyme scheme).

**Q.4 What awareness do we get from Gieve Patel’s poem, “On Killing A Tree?”**

**Answer:** The poem “On Killing a Tree” is Patel’s wake-up call to the citizens of the 21st century to think again, before they heartlessly chop trees. It’s time to become conscious of the irreversible damage we are un- thinkingly doing to our home planet, Earth. It’s also time to take a more holistic view of Life on Earth and not consider trees and plants to be lower life forms that it is ok to treat without compassion, but rather as equally important aspects of Nature. Only this change in attitude can ensure that our beautiful green planet will continue to be inhabitable for our future generations.

**Q.5 What kind of images does the poet make use of?**

**Answer:** Much of the imagery is borrowed from the human body, and skin, leprosy, veins, roots, all evoke striking pictures in the mind of the reader, as the physical



body is something that everyone is acutely aware of.

**Q.6 Why does the poet use the expression ‘to kill’ rather than ‘to cut’ a tree?**

**Answer:** The poet uses the expression ‘to kill’ rather than ‘to cut’ as he wants to equate the life of a tree with the life of a human being. The word ‘kill’ involves moral feeling where as ‘cut’ does not involve moral feeling.

**8.11 LET US SUM UP**

The poet through this poem ironically conveys a thoughtful message on saving trees. He says that trees are living beings just like human beings or any other form of life. Throughout the poem, the poet has described various effective steps to completely kill or destroy a tree. This is with the objective to stop the killing of trees by sensitizing people towards to importance of trees in our life by the effective use of irony in the poem.

**8.12 ANSWER KEY  
CYP**

1. Bombay
2. doctor
3. painter
4. Green
5. play
6. *Mirrored Mirroring and Body*
7. violent
8. True
9. False

**MCQs**

- |      |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. d | 11. c | 21. b |
| 2. b | 12. a | 22. a |
| 3. b | 13. c | 23. c |
| 4. a | 14. c | 24. a |
| 5. b | 15. d | 25. b |
| 6. d | 16. a | 26. c |
| 7. c | 17. d | 27. a |
| 8. a | 18. d | 28. a |
| 9. b | 19. c | 29. c |

10. d

20. d

30. b

### **8.13 SUGGESTED READING**

*Collected Poems* by Gieve Patel. Paperwall Media & Publishing Pvt.Ltd 2018.



**VIHANG NAIK: “THE BANYAN CITY”****STRUCTURE**

- 9.0 Introduction
- 9.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 9.2 About the poet
- 9.3 Poem: Text
- 9.4 Structure of the poem
- 9.5 Check Your Progress (CYP)
- 9.6 Analysis of the poem
- 9.7 Poetic Techniques
- 9.8 Themes
- 9.9 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 9.10 Examination Oriented Questions
- 9.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 9.12 Answer Key (CYP, MCQs)
- 9.13 Suggested Reading

**9.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear Learner, after going through a few poems written in the ecocritical tradition, hope you are now familiar with the concept of ecocriticism. Now let us move to the next poem “The Banyan City” which will further enhance your familiarization with the concept by offering a different viewpoint.

**9.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME**

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint the learner with

- the structure of the poem “The Banyan City”
- the critical appreciation of the poem
- the thematic concerns of the poem

After going through this lesson,

- your familiarisation with the concept of ecocriticism will be enhanced
- you will be able to appreciate Vihang Naik as a writer
- you will be able to offer critical analysis of the poem as well as appreciate the various poetic devices used in the poem

## 9.2 ABOUT THE POET

Vihang A. Naik or Vihang Ashokbhai Naik, a modern bilingual poet from Gujarat, India, authored many collections of poetry in English and Gujarati, besides translating poems from Gujarati into English.

Vihang A. Naik was born on September 2, 1969 at Surat, in Gujarat into a Gujarati family in Surat. From Surat, he moved to Baroda, Ahmedabad and other cities out of Gujarat. He did his matriculation from a local school in Vadodara, obtained a bachelor's degree in arts (English Literature and Philosophy) and master's degree (English Literature and Indian Literature in English Translation) from Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. He taught English in various colleges of North Gujarat. He retired in 2019.

Naik has translated his own Gujarati Poetry "Jeevangeet" into English. His poetry is included in various anthologies, literary journals and magazines such as Anthology of Contemporary Indian Poetry, The Dance of the Peacock, The Indian P.E.N., The Journal of Poetry Society (India), The Journal of Literature and Aesthetics, Indian Literature, The Brown Critique, Poetry Chain, Kavya Bharati, The Journal of Indian Writing In English, Coldnoon: Travel Poetics, Muse India etc. He passed away in 2021.

## 9.3 POEM: TEXT

Poem: The Banyan City

To unearth the roots  
of a banyan  
is never easy.  
Chop or hack. The old banyan  
with the roots spread  
over a century.  
This aged city,  
facing the withered glory,  
now wrinkled, cracked,  
weather-beaten,  
with dim eyes,  
has stood the time.

The heavy breath,  
breathing. A river turns  
into a gutter. There is humming  
of vehicles. The city mumbles.  
You grapple for meaning  
in the traffic of noises.  
The old banyan  
is no more. You can no longer click  
that tree at the crossroad, combing  
the National Highway number eight  
when you enter Vadodara.  
The roots won't die.  
You witness rebirth  
in the mould of stone. A sculpted ghost.

#### **9.4 STRUCTURE OF THE POEM**

‘The Banyan City’ by Vihang Naik is an eight stanza poem divided into uneven sets of lines. The shortest stanza is one line, and the longest stretching up to six. There is no specific rhyme scheme in ‘The Banyan City’ but the lines are all of a similar length, giving the poem a visual and rhythmic unity of full and half-rhyme in the poem. The latter, half-rhyme, also known as slant or partial rhyme, is seen through the repetition of assonance or consonance.

The latter, half-rhyme, also known as slant or partial rhyme, is seen through the repetition of assonance or consonance. This means that either a vowel or consonant sound is reused within one line or multiple lines of verse. For example, “humming” and “mumbles” in lines two and three of the fourth stanza. Or, “noises” and “no” in lines five and six.

Full rhyme is the traditional means of rhyme that is most commonly associated with poetry. It generally appears at the end of lines but can occur within the line itself (then known as internal rhyme).

In the first stanza of ‘The Banyan City,’ the speaker begins by making a simple statement about a banyan tree. It is that if one chooses to, “unearth[ing]” the roots is not an easy task. These lines, as well as the rest of those that make up the poem, are short and choppy. This structure, in coordination with enjambment, encourages a reader to move quickly from line to line and stanza to stanza.

#### **9.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (CYP)**

Dear learner, let us stop for a minute. Now that you have read the poet and the poem,

you can take a moment to go through the exercise given below.

1. Vihang A. Naik is a poet hailing from \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Vihang A. Naik is a bilingual poet writing in \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Vihang A. Naik did his Masters' degree in \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Vihang A. Naik translated his Gujarati work \_\_\_\_\_ into English.
5. To unearth the roots of a banyan tree is very easy as per the poem \_\_\_\_\_.

(True/False)

6. "The Banyan City" is a poem in eight stanzas \_\_\_\_\_. (True/False)
7. The shortest stanza in the poem is \_\_\_\_\_ line(s) long.
8. The poet has made use of enjambment in the poem \_\_\_\_\_. (True/False)

## 9.6 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

'The Banyan City' by Vihang Naik compares the state of a city and a banyan tree through parallel imagery, depicting them as weathered, yet durable.

The poem begins with the narrator referring to a banyan tree and how hard it is to uproot it. The only way to get rid of it is to cut it down. The tree is old, gnarled, and becoming more and more decaying as time passes. The tree is cut down, metaphorically alluding to the end of the city itself. But, the poem ends optimistically with the speaker describing rebirth and the possibilities of the future.

In the first stanza of 'The Banyan City,' the narrator begins by making a simple statement about a banyan tree. If one chooses to, "unearth[ing]" the roots is not an easy task. These lines, including the rest of those that make up the poem, are short and irregular.

The next lines imitate the rhythm of the poem. The phrase "Chop or hack" point out that rather than uprooting the tree, the only way to bring it down is to cut it. The violence of the short phrase is contrasted with the next two and a half lines that speak of history and time. The tree represents the history of the poet's city Vadodara.

The next stanza comprises five lines and refers to an "aged city." The comparison between the banyan tree and the city is clear. Naik uses similarly tinted language calling the city as "withered" and "wrinkled" as the tree and city both appear "weather-beaten."

In the third stanza, the narrator adds that the city, despite its age and appearance has "stood the time."

The two images merge together in the fourth stanza. Here, the narrator describes how the

“river” which one would find by a banyan tree, turns into a “gutter” and the breathing of natural spaces is juxtaposed through the use of personification with the “humming” and mumbling of the city and its vehicles. Both the city and the tree are alive, in their own way.

The fifth stanza of ‘The Bayan City’ is of two lines long : “You” struggle to find meaning in life in amongst the “traffic of noises.” The choice of “you” rather than “I” or “we” makes the reader/listener a part of the poem to consider himself/ herself in the city, amongst its rushing traffic and rundown exterior. The narrator’s use of the word “traffic” in the second line of this stanza relates to the vehicles in the previous stanza, but on a larger scale, it underscores the density of general noise in the world and how difficult it can be to organize one’s thoughts with so many others attempting to do the same and influence others.

The sixth stanza is only one line, leading the reader/listener quickly into the seventh stanza. In this the narrator refers to the city of Vadodara and the National Highway, placing the poem in a very specific location. ‘The Banyan City’ also gets darker in these lines. The narrator describes how the Banyan tree , an integral part of the cityscape, from the first stanza is gone. It’s been cut down and now “You can no longer click / that tree at the crossroad.”

‘The Banyan City’ ends on a more optimistic note for both the tree and the city. Vihang Naik refers to the tree as having “roots” that “won’t die.” Despite being cut down, the roots live on. Then, as one moves through the city “you” see the rebirth occurring, the tree will live again, and with the passage of time, so too will the city

## **9.7 POETIC TECHNIQUES**

Vihang Naik also makes use of several poetic techniques: alliteration, enjambment, and caesura. Caesura, occurs when a line is split in half with punctuation or without punctuation. For example, line four of the first stanza “Chop or hack. The old banyan” or line three of the fourth stanza “of vehicles. The city mumbles.”

Alliteration occurs when words are used in succession, or at least appear close together, and begin with the same letter. For example line two of the seventh stanza “at the crossroad, combing” or “withered,” “wrinkled” and “weather-beaten” in lines -two, three and four.

Enjambment occurs when a line is cut off before its natural stopping point. Enjambment forces a reader down to the next line, and the next, quickly. One has to move forward in order to comprehend a phrase or a sentence.

## **9.8 THEMES**

Vihang Naik highlights the glorious past of the places he lives in, and also his sadness to see the engulfing pollution and the deteriorating condition of the towns. In fact, he is a poet with metropolis concerns: “The hustle and tedium of urban living, the pressures of workplace, the ennui of domesticity, the unrest in the modern society, the distorted image of the nation, and the fast changing values- all breed angst, ire and a sense of alienation or aversion towards the milieu in the

modern poets.(Kanwar Dinesh Singh). The poetry of Vihang Naik bears a witness to this fact. He is quite alive to the problems of the place he is living around. “The Banyan City,” “Ambaji,” “Gujrat,” Ahmedabad etc. , are the significant poems which exhibit his love and serious concerns simultaneously. The Banyan City, a symbolical poem, is reflective of his concerns about his city Vadodara, ‘the aged city, facing the withered glory, now wrinkled, cracked.’ He feels proud and disheartened at other times to see the sad plight of his city that has stood the time.

The heavy breath, breathing. A river turns

into a gutter.

Another concerned theme is ecological awareness. It goes without saying that pollution has defiled the beautiful landscape of the country. There is lack of ecological consciousness in them. Such people, lost in the tangled ways and means of life, “grapple for meaning /in the traffic of noses.” The smoke pollutions seem to have blurred their vision as “There is humming of vehicles. The city mumbles”. However, the poet is confident and optimistic enough to regain the healthy environment because “The roots won’t die” sending across a positive message of rebirth and regeneration of environment and dying cities, highlighting his ecological concerns.

### 9.9 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. The poet feels that the \_\_\_\_\_ of a banyan tree are difficult to uproot.
  - a. roots
  - b. branches
  - c. trunk
  - d. none of these
2. The roots of banyan tree have spread over a \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. trunk
  - b. Soil
  - c. earth
  - d. century
3. Who has stood the test of time? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. poet
  - b. banyan tree
  - c. city
  - d. none
4. \_\_\_\_\_ turns into a gutter.
  - a. City
  - b. River
  - c. Tree
  - d. Sea
5. The number of national highway is \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. two
  - b. five
  - c. eight
  - d. forty-eight

### 9.10 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS



1. Write a critical appreciation of the poem “The Banyan Tree.”
2. What is the central argument of the poem “The Banyan Tree?”
3. Write a detailed note on the poetic techniques used in the poem “The Banyan Tree.”
4. What does the banyan tree symbolize?

**Answer:** The Banyan tree represents eternal life, because of its ever-expanding branches. The country’s unity is symbolized by the tree’s huge structure and its deep roots. The tree is also known as Kalpavriksha, which means ‘wish fulfilling tree’.

5. Why is Vadodara called Banyan city?

**Answer:** The name of Vadodara is derived from the root word ‘Vad’, meaning the Banyan Tree, an important part of the heritage of the city as it had abundance of banyan trees, which have withered away due to industrialization and rise of skyscrapers.

### 9.11 LET US SUM UP

The poem begins with the speaker referring to a banyan tree and how hard it is to unroot it. The only way to get rid of it is to cut it down. This occurs later on in the text, but in the meantime, the language surrounding the tree is expanding to describe a specific city in India. It too is old, weathered, and becoming more and more dilapidated as time passes.

Eventually, the tree is cut down, metaphorically alluding to the end of the city itself. But, the poem ends optimistically with the speaker describing rebirth and the possibilities of the future. Through simple, image-rich language Vihang Naik uses an extended metaphor to compare an old Banyan tree to a city. ‘The Banyan City’ speaks on themes of time, life, death, and rebirth.

### 9.12 ANSWER KEY

#### CYP

1. Gujarat
2. English and Gujarati
3. English Literature and Indian Literature in English Translation
4. “Jeevangeet”
5. False
6. True
7. one
8. True

### MCQs

- |      |      |      |
|------|------|------|
| 1. a | 2. d | 3. b |
| 4. b | 5. c |      |

### 9.13 SUGGESTED READING

Naik, Vihang A. Poetry Manifesto (New & Selected Poems). New Delhi: Indialog Publication Pvt. Ltd., 2010.

Singh, Kanwar Dinesh. Contemporary Indian English Poetry Comparing Male & Female Voices .New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors , 2008.



## AN INTRODUCTION TO S. HAREESH AND HIS WRITINGS

### STRUCTURE

- 10.0 Introduction
- 10.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 10.2 Life and Works
- 10.3 S. Hareesh and his Fiction
- 10.4 Check Your Progress (CYP)
- 10.5 Plot
- 10.6 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 10.7 Examination Oriented Questions
- 10.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 10.9 Answer Key (CYP, MCQs)
- 10.10 Suggested Reading

### 10.0 INTRODUCTION

Dear learner, after the successful reading of first two units, we now come to the third unit. This unit will explore the novel *Moustache* written by S. Hareesh. In this lesson, you will read about S. Hareesh, his life and works as well as the plot of the novel.

### 10.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME

The objective of this lesson is to introduce the learners with the writer of this novel. At the same time, it will familiarize the learners with the main plot and important characters in the novel.

After reading this lesson, you will become familiar with

- the life and works of S. Hareesh as well as his writing style and the major themes in his works
- the main plot and important characters in the novel *Moustache*

### 10.2 LIFE AND WORKS

S. Hareesh has won numerous literary awards such as the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for Best Story Writer and the Kerala State Film Award for Best Screenplay. Despite being one of the most famous prose writers of Malayalam literature in the contemporary period, his

writings have been prone to controversy throughout his career.

This novel was earlier published in Malayalam and titled *Meesa* (Moustache). It was serialised in the Malayalam literary weekly *Mathrubhumi* and it attracted controversy for supposedly hurting Hindu religious sentiments. As a result, S. Hareesh withdrew the novel from the weekly. The novel received the recognition it deserved after it was translated into English under the title *Moustache* by Jayasree Kalathil in 2020, two years after its initial publication in Malayalam. The English translation was bestowed with the JCB Prize for Literature in 2020. Further, the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for Novel, for the year 2019, was conferred upon Hareesh for *Meesa* in 2021. Apart from this novel, S. Hareesh's major works include *Aadam* (Short story anthology), "Jallikattu" (Screenplay), "Nanpakal Nerathu Mayakkam" (Screenplay), "Rasavidhyayude Charithram" (Short story anthology), and "Aedan" (Screenplay) among others.

### 10.3 S. HAREESH AND HIS FICTION

The publication history of *Meesha* (in Malayalam) or *Moustache* is an urban legend in Kerala. The novel was being serialised in *Matrubhumi Weekly*. Some parts of the book offended certain right-wing groups who threatened the author and his family. Hareesh decided to withdraw his novel. The book also met with widespread protests by certain Hindu organisations owing to things stated by a certain character about Hindu women in the book. The Kerala state government stood by Hareesh and he was soon approached by DC Books to publish the novel. *Meesha* is now widely available across Kerala and with its English translation, many more have read it since. A similar trajectory followed the Tamil writer, Perumal Murugan in December 2014, after the publication of an English translation of his 2010 novel *Madhorubagan* (One Part Woman), Murugan was attacked by caste groups who were reportedly insulted by his story of a childless couple, the woman consenting to sex with a stranger at a temple festival's fertility ritual. He had declared then that Perumal Murugan the author, was dead and would not publish any more. He was then transferred out of a government college in Nammakal, where he'd taught Tamil literature for nearly 15 years, to Chennai, as there were threats to his life. Hareesh's novel, however, is more expansive in its imaginative breadth and vision. Malayalam author S. Hareesh won the coveted JCB Prize for Literature 2020. Translated in English by Jayasree Kalathil and published by HarperCollins India, the book has been praised for its impeccable confluence of myth and magic and described as "a fine work of Indian fiction by a highly regarded Malayalam author" by Tejaswini Niranjana, chair of the jury panel.

Set in the Kuttanad region of Kerala, *Moustache* narrates the story of Vavachan who hails from the Pulaya Dalit community of landless labourers. Vavachan is selected to perform a small role in a local play for which he is encouraged to grow his moustache. After the play, he refuses to shave off the moustache and decides to grow it further. The moustache is a marker of caste identity. Only upper caste men could sport moustaches. All attempts to persuade Vavachan to shave off his moustache are unsuccessful. Expectedly, the upper castes are angered by his

misdeemeanour. The village folk are terrified by his moustache. They compare him to Ravana. A search is launched for Vavachan but he is nowhere to be found. He resurfaces in people's stories and village gossip. The rest of the novel vividly describes Vavachan's various attempts to escape his detractors and stories of those he meets while on the run including his love for Seetha and a desire to leave for Malaya. The primary narrator in the novel is a father who shares these stories with his five-year-old son, Ponnu, thus adding another layer of narrative complexity.

In many ways, Vavachan is like a local Don Quixote. There are several stories about him. Women sing about his strength while working in the fields. Men spin yarns about imaginary fights where they stood at a distance quietly observing his strength. The region is abounding with stories about the man with his ever-growing moustache. The cops try to catch him and fail. Vavachan becomes a local legend. Everyone has a story about Vavachan but whose story do you want to believe? Have they seen or known Vavachan at all? Besides a strong indictment of caste hierarchies and oppression, Hareesh's novel is also about the inner life of stories and the art of storytelling. Hareesh perhaps feels that the storyteller is also a creator. Stories are kept alive by people. Some of these stories gradually transform into myths and fables. The novel incorporates local songs, legends, myths and integrates them all in a metafictional whirlpool.

The novel addresses a wide range of issues plaguing the society at large through the symbol of a moustache, which withholds connotations of both gender and caste. Hareesh's work is expansive and piercingly relevant. And in many ways is a fine literary example of a modern classic. In the book, the main character Vavachan gets to play the role of a policeman for his big moustache in a drama. The impact of it is such that the audience remains enthralled and later starts making up stories about him. And all this even though he has no single dial.

In an interview with Indian Express, the author had expounded on his procedure and inspirations. When asked about the research that went on to crafting multiple narratives, he said, "These are stories I grew up with. I have heard them from my childhood. So, I did not have to carry out any research before writing the novel. But I did wander around a lot, meeting a lot of old people who had stories to tell. I also found the works of Kavalam Viswanatha Kurup interesting. (Kurup, a native of Kavalam in Kuttanad, has written novels set in the region — Kayal, Kayalrajavu — and a study, Kuttanadinte Thanimayum Pattukalum). His use of myths attracted me."

"Stories surround us," he says. He prefers the company of ordinary people over intellectuals—"the idle banter of men hanging out at junctions or make-shift walls might be politically incorrect, gossip-filled or even anti-women, but the storytelling is marvellous."

Hareesh finds it ridiculous that some readers—under the influence of social realism—question the logic in pulp fiction such as yakshi katha and ghost stories. "I find those stories highly entertaining. I like superstitions in stories. My pleasure lies in hearing and telling stories". The story remains the fundamental aspect of a novel for him—"Leave the characters to their own

whims,” he requests. Kalathil expresses a differing opinion. She cannot translate if she disagrees with the politics of a story. However, the right politics is rendered useless if a good storytelling technique doesn’t strengthen it, she adds. They arrive at a consensus that “politics should be the totality of a novel.”

Meesha began a side-project when Hareesh lacked the courage to tackle a novel-in-mind about two people, Paremmakkal Thoma Kathanar and Kariatt Yausep Malpan, who travelled from Kottayam to Rome, then back to Goa in the 1780s. They recorded their experience in Varthamanappustakam, the first travelogue in an Indian language. Writing by hand, he was unsuccessful in outsourcing the digitisation— “because my handwriting is so bad that it is indecipherable even to me”—and eventually typed out Meesha himself.

Contrary to Hareesh’s impromptu writing routine—“a concrete plan dampens the pleasure in writing”—Kalathil is highly systematic and begins her day at 4:00am. She became a part-time translator by sheer accident when she attempted translating N. Prabhakaran’s Oru Malayali Bhranthante Diary (now published in the collection The Diary of a Madman), to keep herself busy as she waited in various government offices in Kerala, to settle her dad’s affairs after his death.

Both Hareesh and Kalathil grew up on stories—“A quintessential feature of every child brought up in rural Kerala,” Kalathil asserts. Our stories, she says, are exchanged in unsystematic ways, not through books or the Western sit-me-down- bedtime stories, but through mundane activities—a neighbour bringing a snack passes on 10 stories; women de-seeding tamarind together exchange a “festival of stories.” She indulged in a fair share of stories through performing arts at the neighbouring temple—ottam thullal, chakyar koothu. Hareesh notes that women standing on either side of walls and exchanging stories is a common sight in Kerala.

### **Translator’s Dilemma**

Initially, Kalathil was anxious about the polyphony of the narrative when approached for translation of Meesha. But she was attracted to “Hareesh’s unique, playful and irreverent style that defies expectations of a good narrative in fiction.” She struggled with the chapter narrated as folk songs because she kept reading her English versions in the Malayalam tune, until Hareesh suggested giving them a new life, as they are sung differently, and reinvented by different communities.

Being a birdwatcher and animal lover from a young age, Kalathil found the research for translating Meesha greatly enjoyable. She pored over her collection of books on birds by Induchoodan, Salim Ali, R. Vinod Kumar, snakes by Tony Phelps and Dileepkumar, and even scientific reports on Kuttanad’s below-sea-level farming system, and the mechanics of dredging up land from the lakes to make fields, in preparation. Hareesh, on the other hand, took long walks around Kuttanad to get a sense of place, and interacted with the older generation to get a

sense of time, while writing Meesha. He struggled with finding the local names of plants and fishes that he knew by sight. A serendipitous twist led him to research reports done over 15 years at the Natural Science department at MG University. Translating fish-names was tricky, added Kalathil, as the same name points to different species in different parts of Kerala; finally, she mapped scientific names to local names.

“We think of Kerala as a small, geographical area with a uniform culture and language. But as a native speaker of upper-caste Malayalam from the hilly parts of Malabar, I had to negotiate—in Malayalam itself—several cultural and linguistic imaginaries to translate a book like *Moustache*,” she explains. “As a migrant writer living in the colonisers country, I am constantly faced with demands to explain myself, to italicise my otherness. It is a demand I have learned to resist.”

Hareesh is eager to talk about the people who crossed paths with him— a glutton who loved buffalo meat, his friend’s grandfather who had a pet crocodile that obeyed his commands, a man who sported a moustache after acting as a policeman in a play, and his own grandfather who survived the 1924 Kerala floods by growing banana plants on a hill.

These ordinary men get a new lease of fictional life in the complex world of feudal Kuttanad in Meesha. With varied textures — there is a chapter told through *nadan patt* (folk songs) — ample swearing and a prominent male gaze, Hareesh’s writing juxtaposes beauty with violence, bountiful nature with unpardonable ecological damage, and strong women with insecure, egoistic, cruel men. Here, girls are reborn as mushrooms, ancestral spirits guide the way, otters lead guerilla warfare and shapeshifters roam free.

The protagonist Vavachan is an oppressed caste Pulayan whose rebellious act of keeping a moustache irks dominant caste men. But his fame spreads faster. Women desire him, men describe his fights, and policemen fail to nab him. Vavachan transfigures into the mythical ‘Meesha/Moustache’, flaunting a magical, giant moustache where eagles nest and frogs lay eggs. He has read Kaalan’s (God of Death) ledger and can appear in two places at the same time.

While writing Meesha, Hareesh was inspired by the *nadan patt* Chengannuraadi. The folk song with nearly 10,000 lines was popularised orally by Mariamma chedathy, a sweeper in SB College, Chengannur. Similar to Vavachan, an oppressed caste man Aadi is both a hero and villain, and becomes a larger-than-life figure through songs. “I decided to follow this method of unravelling the story of Meesha through songs, and stories within stories. Surrealism being a base nature of our local stories, gave me a lot of freedom in writing.” Resplendent with characters, and talking animals that meet and part frequently (you might run into a character again after 80 pages), this spiralling, non-linear narrative worked well for Hareesh— “the non-linearity helps explore the possibilities of fiction.”

#### **10.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (CYP)**

Dear learner, as the preceding sections have made you aware of the life and works of



S.Hareesh, you can stop here for some time to assess how much you have retained. You can try to attempt the exercise given below and if you are not able to get the answers correct, no need to worry! You can re-read the sections as well as consult the Answer Key.

1. The novel *Moustache* was originally published in \_\_\_\_\_.
2. S. Hareesh has won the Kerala State Film Award for \_\_\_\_\_.
3. S. Hareesh is an eminent name in \_\_\_\_\_ literature.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ translated the novel *Moustache* into English.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ are short story collections by S. Hareesh.
6. *Moustache* was serialised in the Malayalam literary weekly titled \_\_\_\_\_.
7. *Moustache* attracted controversy for hurting Hindu religious sentiments. (True/False)
8. “Jallikattu” is a short story collection by S. Hareesh. (True/False)

## 10.5 PLOT

The novel has a frame narrative that involves the speaker narrating stories to his son Ponnu, who is five years old. The speaker actively embarks on digressions and deviations and thus the novel follows the conventions of an oral storytelling session. The speaker tries in vain to appease his son with stories from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Arabian stories, Panchatantra, and Kathasaritsagara, among others. Finally, the speaker fuses the influences from these stories into the orally transmitted stories abounding in Kuttanad that he has heard over his life. In the many nights that follow, the speaker narrates the legend of Moustache blending legends, myths, folklore and history with imagination.

S. Hareesh weaves the seemingly disconnected events narrated in the novel around a well-made frame. The fragmentary narration follows Vavachan being engulfed by the constructed entity of the Moustache and chronicles his quest to find Seetha and escape to Malaya. Thus, the novel vacillates back and forth from the twenty-first century where the speaker narrates the legends associated with the Moustache and the twentieth century when Moustache held away across Kuttanad.

The novel is as much the lore of Moustache as it is the lore of the numerous other characters such as Ouseph, Seetha, Chella, Paviyan, Avarachan, the last crocodile, Kuttathi, and most importantly Kuttanad itself. S. Hareesh’s poetic prose paints a vivid picture of Kuttanad and is inseparable from the locale as even his comparisons link the characters and spirits to the terrain’s flora and fauna. Like a storyteller, completely immersed in the locale’s specificities, Hareesh narrates stories to a listener who is assumed to be well-versed with the specificities of Kuttanad and its culture.

Though Moustache mentions many historical events—cultural reformation by Sree



Narayana Guru and Ayyankali, reclamation of land, Punnapra-Vayalar uprising—and figures—Luka Mathai, N. N. Pillah, Tipu Sultan—there is a lack of explicit dates, which Hareesh admits was intentional. “The majority of Vavachan’s story takes place in a span of 10 years (around 1939-1947) but I wanted to stretch time to show the growing nature of myth-making. I wanted it to transcend time.”

The postmodern self-reflexive and self-conscious narrative traces the numerous conceptions attached to Moustache as he is continuously created and recreated. Moustache was born during a stage performance directed by Ezhuthachan in Neendoor, Upper Kuttanad, during the early twentieth century. Vavachan is a man belonging to the Pulaya community, which is a Dalit community. The Dalit communities of his time were barred from growing moustaches. Vavachan was made to grow a moustache for Ezhuthachan’s musical drama. He was present on stage only for two scenes and had no real dialogues apart from a few grunts and roars. But the brief appearance of the Moustache-garbed Rakshasa-like figure rekindles a mysterious fear that was deeply ingrained in the audience. This becomes evident as people, who had come from faraway places to watch the moustached “Pulayan police” (Hareesh 37), flee the scene on hearing him roar. Notably, the majority of the audience who were appalled at the display of Dalit vitality and virility were from the “upper” caste. Thus, Moustache was born out of the fears and desires of the people of Kuttanad: the paranoia about the other by the upper caste and the desire for agency and retaliation by the lower caste.

In fact, Vavachan’s moustache becomes a metaphor for the structures of feelings that governed the people of Kuttanad in that era. Vavachan refuses to shave his moustache after the performance and thus, the aura of power and darkness persists and pervades the persona of Vavachan as he transforms into a beacon of Dalit resilience. Moustache is fed by the beliefs that abound in the space of Kuttanad and he soon asserts independence from the biological self of Vavachan and reigns across the endless fields and water bodies of Kuttanad. This is stated indirectly when he says there shall be ‘No more performances’ (43), which reveals that Vavachan has metamorphosed into the Moustache and it is not an interim transformation anymore. Moustache ultimately dies as he becomes insignificant with the advent of modernisation which altered popular beliefs.

Moustache seeks to embark on Malaya after he is introduced to this alternate space where “there’ll be no more troubles” (12). Moustache’s other major pursuit is of Seetha. The novel blends Ramayana into the narrative and we see Moustache, who is likened to “Ravana, the ten-headed king of Lanka” (37), is irrevocably in love with Seetha, a woman of obscure origin who was brought to the Lanka-like Kuttanad by Kathu. We find parallels to Seetha from Ramayana who dared to defy Ravana with the Seetha in this novel as “unlike anyone else before, Seetha ignored the moustache and looked Moustache straight in the eye” (317).

Among the most fascinating aspects of Hareesh’s novel lies in showing how easily the myth of a person can be built by word of mouth, rumours, and the blurring of news and

propaganda. *Moustache* is far from an easy novel to read. The explicit treatment of gender violence in the novel, for example, is hard to read, and goes with the morbid masculinity that Hareesh heaps on to the making of his protagonist. But the author does not gloss reality over with political correctness. Its success lies in its daring ambiguous quality: it can be read as history, as a text on climate change and ecology, even a work of psychology. This spacious scope of the novel makes it quite the tour de force in, if not Malayalam alone, certainly among translated literature in India.

## 10.6 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. In which Indian language was S. Hareesh's novel *Moustache* originally written? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Tamil
  - B) Malayalam
  - C) Telugu
  - D) Kannada
2. Which prestigious literary award was S. Hareesh's *Moustache* shortlisted for? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) JCB Prize for Literature
  - B) Booker Prize
  - C) Sahitya Akademi Award
  - D) Pulitzer Prize
3. What is the occupation of the protagonist in the novel *Moustache*? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Farmer
  - B) Teacher
  - C) Policeman
  - D) Priest
4. Which of the following themes is prominently explored in S. Hareesh's writings, including *Moustache*? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Romance
  - B) Political Thriller
  - C) Casteism and Society
  - D) Science Fiction
5. S. Hareesh faced controversy related to *Moustache*. What was the primary reason for the controversy? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Religious sentiments
  - B) Political criticism
  - C) Linguistic complexity
  - D) Plagiarism accusations

6. In which year was *Moustache* originally published? \_\_\_\_\_.  
A) 2017  
B) 2018  
C) 2019  
D) 2020
7. What socio-cultural issue forms the crux of *Moustache* by S. Hareesh? \_\_\_\_\_.  
A) Environmental degradation  
B) Gender equality  
C) Caste-based discrimination  
D) Economic inequality
8. Which Indian state is S. Hareesh from? \_\_\_\_\_.  
A) Karnataka  
B) Kerala  
C) Tamil Nadu  
D) Andhra Pradesh
9. Before gaining recognition as a writer, what was S. Hareesh's profession? \_\_\_\_\_.  
A) Farmer  
B) Teacher  
C) Fisherman  
D) Software Engineer
10. Which literary magazine did S. Hareesh contribute to, showcasing his early writing talent? \_\_\_\_\_.  
A) Granta  
B) Outlook  
C) Mathrubhumi Weekly  
D) India Today

## 10.7 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

**Question 1:** Explore the significance of the moustache as a symbol throughout the novel. How does the protagonist's moustache become a metaphor for societal expectations, masculinity, and identity within the context of caste-based discrimination and the rural landscape depicted in the story? Analyze its role in shaping the protagonist's self-perception and the portrayal of power dynamics in the narrative.

**Answer:** The moustache in *Moustache* symbolizes various facets of masculinity, societal expectations, and identity. It serves as a metaphor for the protagonist's struggle with conformity to traditional norms, especially within a caste-dominated society. It represents a mark of authority and masculinity, revealing the power dynamics and the pressure on individuals to conform to societal standards. As the protagonist's moustache

becomes the focal point of ridicule and defiance, its transformation parallels his own journey of asserting personal identity and challenging societal norms, ultimately transcending the physical aspect to embody a rebellion against caste-based discrimination.

**Question 2:** Discuss the narrative structure and storytelling techniques employed by S. Hareesh in *Moustache*.

**Answer:** S. Hareesh employs a multi-layered narrative structure that intertwines folklore, mythology, and the protagonist's personal odyssey. The non-linear storytelling technique allows for a deeper exploration of the cultural landscape and societal dynamics, blending past and present, myth and reality. This technique enriches the narrative by contextualizing the protagonist's struggles within broader cultural and historical contexts, highlighting the complexities of caste, power, and identity. The fusion of storytelling methods amplifies the thematic depth, enabling a nuanced portrayal of societal hierarchies, individual agency, and the interplay between tradition and modernity.

**Question 3:** Reflect on the controversy surrounding the novel *Moustache* and its impact on the literary landscape.

**Answer:** The controversy surrounding *Moustache* stemmed from its portrayal of caste-based discrimination and its perceived depiction of certain religious practices. The novel's language, cultural references, and portrayal of sensitive subjects provoked strong reactions, leading to its temporary withdrawal. This controversy underscores the complexities of artistic freedom, censorship, and the portrayal of socio-cultural issues in literature. It sheds light on the challenges faced by authors who seek to confront societal taboos and provoke critical conversations about sensitive topics. Ultimately, the controversy sparked debates about the role of literature in addressing uncomfortable truths and the need for open discourse on deeply ingrained societal norms.

**Question 4** How does the non-linear storytelling, blending folklore, mythology, and the protagonist's personal journey, contribute to the overall thematic depth and cultural resonance of the novel?

**Question 5** Examine how these narrative elements intertwine to create a rich tapestry of social commentary and character development.

## 10.8 LET US SUM UP

*Moustache* by S. Hareesh is a poignant tale that navigates the journey of a lower-caste protagonist, Vavachan, in rural Kerala, India. Set against the backdrop of caste-based discrimination and societal norms, the novel follows Vavachan's quest for dignity and self-assertion, symbolized by his cherished moustache. Through vivid storytelling and rich cultural references, Hareesh intricately weaves folklore, mythology, and the

protagonist's personal struggles to create a compelling narrative that explores the complexities of identity, power, and societal expectations. Ultimately, *Moustache* is a profound exploration of individual defiance and the battle against entrenched societal hierarchies, encapsulating the resilience and defiance of those seeking liberation from oppressive norms.

## 10.9 ANSWER KEY CYP

1. Malyalam
2. Best Screenplay
3. Malyalam
4. JayasreeKalathil
5. "Aadam" and "RasavidhyayudeCharithram"
6. *Mathrubhumi*
7. True
8. False

## MCQs

- |     |    |    |
|-----|----|----|
| 1B  | 2A | 3D |
| 4C  | 5A | 6C |
| 7C  | 8B | 9A |
| 10C |    |    |

## 10.10 SUGGESTED READING

*Moustache* by S. Hareesh, Trans. by Jayasree Kalathil (2020).

"Shock and Awe" by Deepa Bhashti, *Himal Southasian Review*, 2021.



## PLACE, MAGIC REALISM AND THEMES IN *MOUSTACHE*

### STRUCTURE

- 11.0 Introduction
- 11.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 11.2 Kuttanad, Biodiversity and Environment
- 11.3 Magic Realism in the novel
- 11.4 Check Your Progress (CYP)
- 11.5 Major Themes
  - 11.5.1 Women in a masculine world
  - 11.5.2 The presence of hunger
  - 11.5.3 Man and nature
- 11.6 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 11.7 Examination Oriented Questions
- 11.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 11.9 Answer Key (CYP, MCQs)
- 11.10 Suggested Reading

### 11.0 INTRODUCTION

Dear learner, in the previous lesson you read about S. Hareesh as well as the plot of the novel *Moustache*. In this lesson, you will read in detail about the various thematic concerns of the novel as well as introduced to the concept of magic realism and how it is used in the novel.

### 11.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME

- a) The objective of this lesson is to acquaint the learners with the context and the setting of the novel *Moustache*.
- b) This lesson will also acquaint the learner with the aspects of magic realism in the novel.

After going through this lesson, you will

- be acquainted with the context and the setting of the novel *Moustache*.
- be able to describe magic realism and interpret its use by major writers from across the world as well as by S. Hareesh in this novel.

## 11.2 KUTTANAD, BIODIVERSITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

S. Hareesh's novel *Moustache* is preceded by an author's note which contains an objective geographic analysis of Kuttanad, and an examination of the space's social, economic and cultural factors. The emphasis given to the various facets of the space in the author's note testifies that the space itself is an integral character of the novel. It is a delta region that has formed out of the confluence of the Vembanad Lake along with many rivers. The region is marked by "coastal backwaters, intricate network of rivers and canals, vast stretches of paddy fields, marshlands, ponds and oozy black soil" (Hareesh ix).

Kuttanad is a much photographed region for its lush paddy fields, backwaters and canals. It is also referred to as the rice bowl of Kerala. It is perhaps the only place where below sea level farming is practised. The region is well known for its geographic peculiarities. These geographical details are integral to the novel. Hareesh turns the geographical setting of the novel into a contemplation about the character and his actions. Vavachan's story runs parallel with the ecological changes in the region. Landscape inhabits the character.

Often called the 'Rice Bowl of Kerala,' Kuttanad lies below the sea level, where growing paddy is an everyday struggle with keeping the water in or out of the shapeshifting fields. The people making their lives around the fields are poor, often surviving on kanji-water. This fragile physical and human landscape is both stage and actor in the novel and the site for Hareesh's inquiries into ecological concerns. The novel maps the names and people of the villages that ebb and flow with the changes in the story. Is Vavachan a metaphor for Kuttanad, or vice versa, one often wonders!

Agriculture has been the major economic engagement in Kuttanad for centuries and this has earned it the sobriquet - The Rice bowl of Kerala. The Pulaya community had been bound to the site of paddy cultivation as slave workers till the abolition of slavery in 1854 (Thaliyath 1030). Thus, the Pulayas and other castes who were shunned to the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy were linked to the land in the form of institutional slavery and were traded with the land.

K.Satchidanandan aptly notes in the novel's prologue that the novel "narrates the history of the social transition of this fertile region (Kuttanad) in Kerala during colonial times." Despite abolishing slavery, the colonial policy of the British led to the concentration of land in the hands of a select few from the "Upper" caste. Figures such as Pallithanam Luca Mathai owned vast tracts of land and had close links with the colonial administration. Thus, landlords exerted control over the Pulayas who were landless agrarians. In effect, the site of paddy cultivation becomes a site of institutionalised exploitation by the caste-based feudal patriarchy. As explicated through the lines, "Mud had an innate truth" (Hareesh 265), farming has been made possible in the below-sea-level region of Kuttanad due to the intimate connection that the agricultural labourers had with the land. Recorded history states how Kuttanad was made suitable for cultivation and subsequently human civilisation through the construction of embankments,

bunds, canals, drainage systems and consequently the polder system of paddy cultivation. Historically, the Pulaya community has been the largest community in Kuttanad to be engaged in agricultural work and has been instrumental in the making of Kuttanad.

There exists a multiplicity of orally transmitted narratives about the origin of Kuttanad. One narrative has it that Kuttanad originated from the phrase “Kuttan kuthia naadu” (“History of Kuttanad City”) which is based on the belief that Kuttanad is a land-based ecological network that was dredged up from the water-based ecological network that once existed there. Thus, we can never completely substantiate any of these legends but Hareesh masterfully integrates the historical nature of such legendary narratives into the novel as expounded in Nadar’s speech “Kuttanad is the only place in the world which is entirely made by human beings. God had only created swamp and water” (Hareesh 145).

Apart from paddy cultivation, seasonal occurrences, like floods, famines etc. are integral to the novel. Thus, as Kalathil opines in the translator’s note the novel is as much about the Moustache as much as it is about the “environment and biodiversity, its water, fish, birds, snakes, crocodiles, paddy, coconut, banana and tapioca” (Kalathil).

### **11.3 MAGIC REALISM IN THE NOVEL *MOUSTACHE***

Magic realism is a literary genre that blends elements of magical or fantastical occurrences with realistic settings, characters, and events. It involves the infusion of supernatural or extraordinary elements into an otherwise ordinary or mundane narrative without disrupting the coherence of the story. This genre presents the magical or surreal aspects as natural parts of the characters’ lives and the world they inhabit, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy.

The origins of magic realism can be traced back to Latin American literature, particularly with the works of authors like Gabriel García Márquez, Alejo Carpentier, and Jorge Luis Borges. While elements of magical realism can be found in folklore, myths, and storytelling traditions worldwide, its formal literary expression became prominent in Latin American literature during the mid-20th century.

#### **Key attributes of magic realism include**

**Coexistence of the Mundane and the Magical:** Magic realism involves the seamless integration of magical or fantastical elements into an otherwise realistic and everyday setting. Extraordinary occurrences are presented matter-of-factly within the context of the narrative.

**Blurring of Boundaries:** The genre challenges the distinction between the ordinary and the supernatural, making it difficult for readers to differentiate between what is real and what is magical. This blurring of boundaries creates a sense of ambiguity and wonder.

**Cultural and Social Commentary:** Magic realism often serves as a tool for exploring cultural, historical, or social issues. It can be used to comment on societal norms, traditions, or political realities within a specific cultural context.



Emphasis on Detail and Vivid Imagery: Writers of magic realism employ vivid and detailed descriptions to bring the magical elements to life, creating a rich and immersive reading experience.

These are a few examples of magic realism in world literature:

*One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez: This novel is a quintessential example of magic realism, depicting the fantastical history of the Buendía family in the fictional town of Macondo. García Márquez seamlessly blends magical events with the everyday lives of the characters.

*The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende: Allende's novel incorporates elements of magic realism as it follows the lives of the Trueba family, exploring themes of love, politics, and social upheaval against a backdrop of magical occurrences.

*Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie: Rushdie's novel intertwines the magical elements of the protagonist Saleem Sinai's life with the historical events of post-colonial India, employing magic realism to address political and social issues.

*Beloved* by Toni Morrison: Morrison's novel utilizes magical realism to explore the traumatic legacy of slavery in America, blurring the boundaries between the real and the supernatural as the story unfolds.

These works, among others, showcase the diverse ways in which magic realism is utilized to weave together elements of fantasy and reality, offering unique perspectives on cultural, historical, and social themes.

In this novel, the narrative seamlessly integrates elements of magic realism, infusing the story with surreal and fantastical occurrences against the backdrop of a realistic setting. The novel delicately blurs the lines between the mundane and the extraordinary, incorporating instances that transcend natural laws and logic, enriching the narrative with a sense of wonder and mystique. One notable example of magic realism in the novel is the mystical "Khabar Lahari" or the News Waves. This phenomenon portrays the transmission of news through a peculiar form of waves that carry information across vast distances without any tangible communication devices. The existence of these waves, though fantastical, is treated as an accepted part of the characters' lives, blending the supernatural into the everyday occurrences of the story.

*Moustache*, titled Meesha in the original Malayalam, follows a long literary tradition in the language and is best described as magic realism. Around the same years that Gabriel Garcia Marquez was working on his magnum opus, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in Colombia, a book that continues to define the genre, in Kerala, O V Vijayan was writing his masterpiece, *Khasakinte Ithihasam (The Legends of Khasak)*. Vijayan's debut novel might not have drawn international attention, but it inaugurated a new phase in Malayalam literature that was influential

enough for some critics to divide the language's literary history into pre- and post-Khasak. As a genre, magic realism remains popular in Malayalam culture, not just in literary works, but also in cinematic forms. Marquez and other Latin American writers were translated into Malayalam well before they were available in other South Asian languages. Thanks to the abundance of reading rooms and libraries in Kerala, these books were easily found even in small villages.

Magic realism is a much-maligned term. While there are certain attributes that could be applied to Hareesh's writing, his magic realist fable-like narration is more home grown and not imitative of Latin American fiction or Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a writer much loved in Kerala. For those familiar with Malayalam cinema, some of veteran filmmaker G Aravindan's films such as *Kummatty* (1979) would also augur well in this regard. Hareesh is an inheritor of this tradition though his work and artistic sensibility are not derivative. *Moustache* firmly demonstrates what a poor civilisation we would be in the absence of stories and storytellers. In the success of this novel lies the victory of the art of the story.

However, it would not be correct to say that this access was what led to Malayalam's adoption of the genre. The expression of inner experiences without resorting to the continuous and linear narrative is a storytelling tradition long practiced in most cultures, Southasia and Marquez's Colombia included. The oral tradition of rich folklore culture across the Subcontinent, and even more Brahminical works from mythology, the epics and allegorical works like *Panchatantra*, employ narrative styles that formally resemble magic realism. Hareesh's *Moustache*, translated into English by Jayasree Kalathil, is a notable addition to these storytelling traditions.

Vavachan, the novel's protagonist, is a Pulayan, from a Dalit caste in southern India. He is recruited to play a policeman in a play directed by a travelling playwright and director, solely based on his thick moustache that has somehow escaped the barber's blade. This also gives him the name 'Moustache.' When he appears on stage, the facial hair on his dark skin looks fearsome enough to terrify the audience. He reminds the audience of the mythical demon king Ravana, though his role is otherwise inconsequential in the play. After the theatre group packs up and leaves, Vavachan refuses to shave off his moustache, triggering a period of turmoil, violence and fear in the Kuttanad region where the story is set.

Often called the 'Rice Bowl of Kerala,' Kuttanad lies below the sea level, where growing paddy is an everyday struggle with keeping the water in or out of the shapeshifting fields. The people making their lives around the fields are poor, often surviving on kanji-water. This fragile physical and human landscape is both stage and actor in the novel and the site for Hareesh's inquiries into ecological concerns. The novel maps the names and people of the villages that ebb and flow with the changes in the story. Here the character of Vavachan often stands as a metaphor for the place itself.

The novel's social concerns are equally urgent. That a Pulayan man could not sport a moustache was among the many restrictions imposed on dispossessed castes by upper-caste

communities in Kerala in the first half of the 20th century, the period when the novel's main parts are set in. Among the most infamous of such caste atrocities was the 'breast tax,' imposed by upper-caste Namboodiris, where women other than those from the upper castes were allowed to cover their upper bodies only if they paid this tax. The amount was decided by measuring the breasts by hand, and the rates were too prohibitive for the disadvantaged women to afford them.

Vavachan's rebellion to be allowed to keep his moustache, and the changes that ensue, reminds one of the stories of Nangeli, a woman who is said to have chopped off her breasts and presented them on a banana leaf to the men who came to measure her after she had decided to rebel against the breast tax. The incident, documented more extensively as a legend than in written history, reportedly triggered a change in the laws, timed with a fresh influx of missionaries into the region in the beginning of the 19th century. Marking this memory of resistance, Hareesh's missionaries in the novel grow coconut orchards and refuse to employ women who will not cover their breasts. They give Christian names to the Pulayans working in the fields, and "when they went back home in the evenings and retrieved their old names, their prayers were heard by Jesus anyway."

Additionally, the novel presents instances where characters encounter mystical creatures and supernatural occurrences. The mythical creature "Aripnam," a mystical beast believed to inhabit the forests, serves as both a symbol of fear and fascination for the characters. The portrayal of this creature blurs the boundaries between reality and folklore, adding an air of enchantment to the narrative.

Furthermore, the novel's depiction of Vavachan's mysterious moustache growth, defying conventional norms of hair growth and possessing uncanny abilities, adds an element of magical realism. Vavachan's moustache becomes a symbol of intrigue and fascination, symbolizing the inexplicable and the fantastical within the fabric of the story.

Stories employing magical realism in Malayalam literature have often been avenues for commenting on pressing socio-political questions. Often, not much 'happens' by way of plot. The subplots may not seem like they have much to do with the main character, but there are subtle threads weaved across stories that go around in circles. Vijayan's *Khasak* remains a classic example of using local paradigms to grapple with universal problems, making the literature very open to multiple readings. For instance, in the valley surrounding the village Khasak, we come across the dragonflies that the character Appu-Kili catches and ties to leashes of yarn. The frail insects are mere toys for Appu-Kili, but they also represent the fragility of people's lives and mental states in the novel. The deep valleys and mountains, the flowers that bloom and the gathering of seasons in the village stand in for human acts of betrayal, love, desire and longing, a subtle reference to Tamil Sangam poetry where geographies were assigned to every emotion.

Among the few such Malayalam writings available in translation to readers in English, *Moustache* revels in intertextuality with references to Hindu epics, historical events, and current

affairs. Johny Miranda with *Jeevichirikkunnavarkku Vendiyulla Oppees* (Requiem for the Living, in English), Benyamin's well-known work *Goat Days* and K R Meera's feminist novels have used tools of the magical realism genre to address questions of personal freedom and the blurring of lines between lived experience and imagination. There have been valiant attempts like Deepan Sivaraman's play *The Legends of Khasak* and films like Shaji N Karun's *Olu (She)* and Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Jallikattu*, whose screenplay was written by Hareesh based on his short story Maoist. But the genre does not allow easy rendering to stage and screen. Like in a work of poetry, each reading of a text in the genre is like an onion skin that peels to a different layer of nuance, a quality that makes novels like *Moustache* nearly impossible to analyse to satisfaction.

In keeping with the features of the magic realism genre, *Moustache* is a story in metaphors. Moustache's mother dies of a snake bite, and, as revenge, he loads a boat with dead snakes while crossing the fields. Hair becomes the metaphor for personal agency among the disadvantaged; the moustache is sometimes an umbrella, sometimes a nest for bees and birds and sometimes gets entangled in the roots of trees that line the canals. With every popular retelling of Moustache's story, his body hair shrinks and grows in people's minds and "their minds worked, eagerly and energetically, to ensure that Moustache's story would have the ending that they desired." Caste colours every single story within the story, and every metaphor extends to each other, making the narrative a web of intense complexities.

As the pages turn, Vavachan is transformed from a puny, shrunken man into a hyper-macho Yeti-like figure who is at once a myth and a fantasy to be in fear of. He is both a rebel who needs to be brought back in line for the upper caste and a braveheart for his defiance of caste norms. He is also both hero and villain, as he travels across Kuttanad in search of Seetha, a woman he wants (love is a refined emotion the author denies the characters who are seen expressing baser feelings) and the road to Malaya where he believes there is wealth to be gained. This subaltern Ramanan also becomes the Rama, in search of his Seetha. These dualities Moustache is given only enhances the mystery surrounding him. Here too, Seetha is a woman scorned, and here she spreads the smallpox pestilence like the red seeds of the manjaadi tree. The novel's unnamed narrator, quite like a sutradhar, invents the stories of Moustache, Baker Saheb the white man, Seetha, and a multitude of other minor stories, that stand alone, yet feed the making of the Moustache myth. The narrator's son Ponnu is the audience he must entertain at bedtime. Often the novel operates on the meta level, with the story of a story that becomes a legend being told to Ponnu and the reader.

Among the most fascinating aspects of Hareesh's novel lies in showing how easily the myth of a person can be built by word of mouth, rumours, and the blurring of news and propaganda. Reading this within the current political landscape of India and elsewhere, it is hard not to see Hareesh's clever use of such trajectories to comment on the cult of personalities and the effect they can have on societies. Moustache is oblivious to the power he wields on people's hopes and fears; he decides, for instance, that the songs about him that people sing while working

on the fields have nothing to do with him. But the myth and the cult of personality that feed off each other has repercussions, in the novel and in our post-truth world of politics.

Once Vavachan's myth is built to Frankensteinian proportions, the narrator discovers the many ways in which the legend of the moustache has inspired real-life people. Was Air India's icon inspired by the big moustache? Moustache never made it to Malaya and eventual fortune. Real-life figures walk through the later parts of the novel. Are the incidents concerning them true to life? At this point, one wonders, does it matter what is factual and what is fertile imagination?

The novel is far from an easy novel to read. The explicit treatment of gender violence in the novel, for example, is hard to read, and goes with the morbid masculinity that Hareesh heaps on to the making of his protagonist. But the author does not gloss reality over with political correctness. Its success lies in its daring ambiguous quality: it can be read as history, as a text on climate change and ecology, even a work of psychology. This spacious scope of the novel makes it quite the tour de force in, if not Malayalam alone, certainly among translated literature in India.

These instances of magic realism in *Moustache* serve to enrich the narrative, adding depth and layers to the storyline by seamlessly blending the magical with the ordinary. They contribute to the novel's enchanting atmosphere, inviting readers to ponder the mystical elements woven into the realistic portrayal of life in Kerala's rural landscape.

#### 11.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (CYP)

Dear learner, before moving on to the thematic concerns of the novel, let us take a short break where you can try to answer the questions given below. This will also refresh your mind and you will be able to approach the next sections with more attention.

1. The author's note to the novel contains an objective geographic analysis of \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The protagonist of the novel is \_\_\_\_\_.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ is called the 'Rice Bowl of Kerala'.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ community has been the largest community in Kuttanad to be engaged in agricultural work.
5. Magic realism is a literary genre which blends the elements of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
6. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Midnight's Children* are quintessential examples of the genre of \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Magic realism blurs the lines between reality and fantasy. (True/False)

8. In *Moustache*, the mystical “KhabarLahiri” is one notable example of magic realism.

(True/False)

## 11.5 MAJOR THEMES

### 11.5.1 Women in a masculine world

*Moustache* by S. Hareesh presents a multi-layered portrayal of women within the context of a deeply traditional and patriarchal society. The representation of women in the novel is complex, reflecting both their resilience and the challenges they face within the societal constructs.

At the forefront, women in the novel often navigate constrained roles dictated by the traditional values and expectations of the society depicted. They are frequently bound by cultural norms that limit their autonomy and agency. For instance, Vavachan’s wife, Janu, embodies the archetype of a dutiful wife, adhering to societal expectations despite her inner turmoil and desires for more freedom. Her character represents the struggles faced by many women, confined by their roles within a rigidly structured society.

The novel presents a graphic portrait of the gender dynamics that existed in the feudal patriarchy of Kuttanad. Both men and women from “lower” castes such as the Pulaya caste were engaged in agricultural labour but gender roles defined the work that they did in the fields, as explicated through the lines “Men worked the soil with long-handled grub hoes, snorting deeply like bulls, and others broke the clods, while women raked the roots and weeds” (Hareesh 211). The act of consumption and the manner of eating become markers of gender power dynamics as the men are served first with the women and children having to make do with what is leftover. Hunger is a recurrent motif in the novel and has been deemed as being regular amongst the oppressed communities such as the Pulayas. The novel portrays how the oppressed classes, like the Ulladan tribal folk who were forced away by the Nair and would later die of hunger, were forced to seek alternatives for survival.

The translator of the book, Jaysree Kalathil has personally lived through distress caused by violence and abuse, and explored the representation of gender and caste in literature and cinema for her PhD. She found it difficult to write Seetha’s rape. But “this story can’t be told in sanitised terms,” she insists—“*Moustache* is a masculine world with atrocious people doing atrocious things. But it is never gratuitous. Hareesh’s entire project in *Moustache*, as I read it, is to unearth the toxicity of masculinity that flourishes within patriarchal systems of power and expose its impact on women, Dalits, and nature.”

Unlike in the novel, where Seetha’s rape is seen through the lens of assertion of male dominance rather than as a heinous act (it’s not even called a ‘rape’), Hareesh does not shy from calling a spade a spade when asked about his titular character— “Vavachan rapes a woman. He also lives through bad times; he is a man of contradictions.”

The women in *Moustache*, though never achieving a redemption or escape, protest in



small ways against their patriarchal cages. Kuttathi, a sex worker, conveniently forgets to return a gold chain; Seetha, contrary to her love sung in songs, spits on Vavachan; Chella, Vavachan's mother, is unperturbed by her husband's cruelty and poverty. "We have a misconception that only the educated, urban woman reacts to male dominance," says Hareesh. He was inspired by the ordinary women around him—nurses, salaried women and daily wage earners—who manage their household expenses, and live under the dominance of their often-unemployed husbands. "Our (Kerala's) community owes a lot to women, especially nurses, who bettered living conditions for themselves, and their family members. Yet, men dominate." He shares a passing joke that the statue of Jesus, situated at a prominent junction in Kottayam, should be replaced with that of a nurse, because of their immense contribution.

Women were subject to institutionalised sexism through caste-based practices such as Pulappedi and Mannapedi. Further, Paviyan venting his anger, for being called an 'irupathettichar' (Hareesh 259), through the physical abuse of Chella and the children depicts the unequal power dynamics within the patriarchal family structure.

However, despite these constraints, the novel also portrays women with strength, resilience, and a quiet assertion of their own desires and aspirations. Characters like Vavachan's wife, Yashodhamma, and Ravi's grandmother, Chedathy, exhibit inner strength and wisdom that often defy societal norms. These women, while operating within the confines of their roles, subtly challenge conventions through their actions and decisions.

Hareesh's portrayal of women is intricate, offering glimpses into their multifaceted nature, their resilience in adversity, and the silent resistance they employ within a society that largely dictates their actions and identities. Through various female characters, the novel offers a nuanced exploration of the struggles, aspirations, and complexities of women's lives in a traditional setting, showcasing their endurance and quiet rebellion against societal expectations.

### **11.5.2 The presence of hunger**

In S. Hareesh's novel *Moustache*, the theme of hunger operates on multiple levels, serving as a metaphorical device that encompasses various aspects beyond mere physical appetite. The depiction of hunger in the novel goes beyond the literal sense, encompassing emotional, cultural, and societal dimensions.

At its core, hunger in the novel symbolizes a yearning for fulfillment, whether it be the physical hunger for food or the emotional hunger for freedom, dignity, and identity. The characters grapple with different forms of hunger, reflecting their desires, ambitions, and struggles within the confines of a rigid societal structure.

The scarcity of food and the struggle for sustenance are palpable throughout the narrative, reflecting the harsh realities faced by the characters. The famine and scarcity of resources exacerbate the physical hunger, highlighting the struggle for survival and the desperation that ensues.

However, beyond the literal hunger for food, the novel delves into the hunger for dignity, respect, and individuality. Characters like Ravi and Vavachan yearn for a sense of selfhood and autonomy, longing to break free from societal expectations and predetermined roles. This hunger for agency and self-determination propels the characters' actions and decisions, leading to moments of rebellion and self-assertion. In addition to caste, gender politics, ecological damage and social reformation, the "season of hunger" is a constant undercurrent in *Moustache*. Vavachan himself is in search of the road to Malaya (a land supposedly without hunger).

"Until the 1980s, hunger was undoubtedly a big reality in Kerala, even in financially privileged households. Rice shortages were frequent. In Kottayam regions, palm trunks would be slashed, powdered and eaten as porridge. Two meals a day meant you were rich. Starvation was rampant, especially in feudal Kuttanad. Women would take their evening wages of paddy, and make kanji for the kids at night". There is a ghost who asks for food, and a man who eats several rounds of sadya at funerals and weddings—sentiments which "erupted from a fear of shortage." Jayashree points out that *Moustache* also shows the two sides—hunger and gluttony. Pothan Mappila's love for buffalo meat becomes an act of gender exploitation when he deprives his wife and son of proper meals. "Even though fish and vegetation were in plenty, hunger was a stark reality," she added.

Moreover, the novel explores the cultural hunger for tradition and identity amidst a changing landscape. The characters grapple with preserving their cultural roots and traditions, craving a sense of belonging and continuity in the face of modernity and societal upheaval. In essence, the theme of hunger in the novel transcends the physical need for sustenance, encapsulating the characters' aspirations, struggles, and desires. It serves as a potent metaphor for various forms of yearning, be it for food, freedom, identity, or cultural preservation, offering a layered exploration of the human condition within the socio-cultural milieu depicted in the novel.

### **11.5.3 Man and nature**

The theme of man and nature intertwines deeply, portraying a symbiotic yet conflicted relationship between humans and the natural world. The narrative vividly depicts the intricate connections and tensions that exist between characters and their environment, highlighting both the dependence on and exploitation of nature.

The novel presents nature as a powerful and relentless force that shapes the lives of the characters. The lush landscape of Kerala, with its rivers, forests, and agricultural lands, serves as a backdrop that influences the characters' livelihoods, traditions, and daily existence. The characters' lives are intricately woven into the natural surroundings, depicting an intimate connection where their survival is intertwined with the land.

However, alongside this dependence, the novel also portrays the exploitation and degradation of nature at the hands of humans. The rampant deforestation, the exploitation of



natural resources, and the disruptive impact of modernization on the environment are depicted vividly. Characters like Vavachan, involved in clearing the forests, embody the conflict between man's pursuit of progress and the consequences it inflicts upon the natural world.

Nature protects, nourishes and ravages humans in *Moustache*. "The floods saved me and my grandfather," says Hareesh. "I would've been physically harmed had not the 2018 floods arrived, with which the controversy surrounding Meesha fizzled out. I was aware of the savarna politics in Kerala, but realised its depth then," he recollects, "Now, the hushed whispers of communal hatred have grown louder. I struggle to talk to close friends and relatives about the Sabarimala issue because they get too emotional."

Pachupillah, a character in *Moustache*, has traces of Hareesh's grandfather. The hill cultivation of banana plants, which remain undestroyed in the 1924 floods, give them financial security. Pachupillah bribes his way into folk songs as *Moustache*'s best friend (something Vavachan, who hasn't met Pachupillah, always wonders about) by sealing a deal with the songsters in exchange for rice and tobacco, and makes himself forcibly immortal, unlike other nadan patt heroes who grow organically into mythical proportions. Such invention and reinvention—and in Pachupillah's case, a battle against fate—of characters occur frequently in *Moustache*, to pay tribute to Kerala's oral storytelling tradition of skewed truths, overlapping stories of different characters and multiple endings.

The supernatural, men and fauna—weevils, spit-eating rasboras, guilty sardines, lily trotting jacunas and migrant birds—co-exist in the mangroves and winding waterscapes. The story grows into apocalyptic proportions when man turns against nature. Kalathil reveals that the chapter *The Last Crocodile*, was mentally taxing to translate—"The annihilation of crocodiles by Baker Saheb and the destruction of the natural world by the toxic masculine forces, is as important as the caste and gender issues that the novel explores."

Hareesh becomes vocal at the mention of environmental impact. "Environmental destruction of nature is done on a day-to-day basis in Kuttanad, at a visible level—levelling paddy fields, making new roads, and reclaiming land from water bodies. Until the 1940s, crocodiles were plentiful in Kuttanad. I have mentioned only a few stories about Baker Saheb's crocodile-hunts," he says. He quotes Arundhati Roy about the size of Vembanad lake being less than 60% of what it was hundred years ago. The same colonial master, Baker Saheb, also finds a mention in Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

Furthermore, the novel explores the complexities of traditional livelihoods tied to the environment, such as fishing and agriculture, and the changing dynamics brought about by technological advancements and societal shifts. This juxtaposition highlights the tension between preserving age-old practices rooted in harmony with nature and succumbing to the pressures of modernization that disrupt this balance.

Ultimately, the novel underscores the interdependence between humans and nature while illuminating the delicate balance that exists. It serves as a poignant commentary on the

consequences of human actions on the environment, urging reflection on the need for a sustainable coexistence with nature to preserve the intricate web of life. The novel intricately weaves the theme of man and nature, offering a compelling portrayal of the intricate relationship, conflicts, and consequences that emerge from this dynamic interplay.

### 11.6 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. Which of the following themes is prominently explored in S. Hareesh's novel *Moustache*?  
\_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Urbanization
  - B) Caste-based Discrimination
  - C) Technological Advancement
  - D) Globalization
2. How does S. Hareesh utilize language and storytelling techniques in *Moustache*?  
\_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Through linear and straightforward narration
  - B) By avoiding cultural references and folklore
  - C) Employing a blend of folklore, vivid imagery, and colloquial dialect
  - D) Utilizing complex jargon and inaccessible language
3. What role does Kuttanad, the setting of the novel, play in the novel? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) It serves as an imaginary land detached from reality.
  - B) It represents an urban, cosmopolitan setting.
  - C) It symbolizes the resilience and struggles of the marginalized.
  - D) It lacks relevance in the narrative.
4. What societal issue does the novel primarily address? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Technological dependency
  - B) Environmental conservation
  - C) Caste-based discrimination and societal norms
  - D) Gender inequality
5. How does Hareesh's use of folklore contribute to the narrative? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) It complicates the plot unnecessarily.
  - B) It hampers the reader's understanding of the story.
  - C) It enriches the cultural backdrop and contextualizes societal struggles.
  - D) It disregards cultural heritage.
6. What significance does the landscape of Kuttanad hold in the novel? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) It serves as a generic backdrop without symbolic meaning.
  - B) It represents a bustling metropolis.
  - C) It embodies the harsh realities, natural beauty, and challenges of rural life.
  - D) It lacks relevance in shaping the characters' experiences.

7. How does Hareesh depict the struggle against societal norms in the novel? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) By glorifying conformity and submission
  - B) By disregarding the impact of societal pressures
  - C) Through the protagonist's rebellion and quest for identity
  - D) By avoiding any portrayal of societal conflicts
8. What literary devices does Hareesh use to depict the characters' experiences in Kuttanad? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Solely relying on straightforward descriptions
  - B) Utilizing metaphors, vivid descriptions, and regional dialect
  - C) Avoiding any description of the setting
  - D) Utilizing only abstract concepts without tangible depictions
9. How does Kuttanad's environment impact the characters in the narrative? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) It has no influence on their lives.
  - B) It serves as a means of escapism.
  - C) It shapes their struggles and influences their identity.
  - D) It represents an idyllic setting untouched by societal issues.
10. What message does Hareesh convey about societal hierarchies and identity in the novel? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Society's hierarchies are inevitable and unchangeable.
  - B) Identity is fixed and unaffected by societal norms.
  - C) Individuals can challenge societal norms to assert their identity.
  - D) Societal norms have no impact on individual identity.

## 11.7 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

**Question 1:** Discuss the instances of magic realism in *Moustache* and their significance in the narrative.

**Answer:** The novel incorporates elements of magic realism through phenomena like the "Khabar Lahari" or News Waves, which transmit information inexplicably across distances. The mystical creature, "Aripram," and the peculiar growth of Vavachan's moustache with seemingly magical attributes also contribute to the magical elements in the story, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, adding depth to the narrative, and infusing a sense of wonder.

**Question 2:** How does the setting of Kuttanad contribute to the atmosphere and themes in the novel?

**Answer:** Kuttanad's lush and unique landscape serves as more than a backdrop; it becomes a character in itself. The novel vividly portrays the interconnectedness between the characters' lives and the environment, emphasizing the struggles and

livelihoods tied to the region's geographical and cultural specifics. The setting accentuates themes of dependency on nature, the impact of modernization on traditional ways of life, and the delicate balance between man and nature.

**Question 3:** How do elements of magic realism in the novel contribute to the exploration of the novel's themes?

**Answer:** The instances of magic realism, such as the mystical "Khabar Lahari" waves and the supernatural aspects surrounding Vavachan's moustache, serve as symbolic representations that deepen the exploration of themes. They symbolize the mystique and complexity of life, subtly reflecting the characters' struggles, desires, and the blurred lines between reality and the inexplicable.

**Question 4:** How does the setting of Kuttanad influence Vavachan's character development and his interactions within the narrative?

**Answer:** Kuttanad's environment shapes Vavachan's identity and decisions. His interactions with the unique surroundings, including the backwaters and the changing landscape, reflect his inner conflicts and aspirations. The setting influences his choices, highlighting his struggle to navigate the changing socio-cultural milieu while being rooted in his traditional background.

## 11.8 LET US SUM UP

*Moustache* by S. Hareesh intricately weaves together a tapestry of themes that resonate deeply throughout the narrative. Set against the backdrop of Kerala's lush landscape, the novel navigates the complexities of tradition versus modernity, portraying the conflicts arising from societal change and the struggle to preserve cultural heritage. It explores the multifaceted nature of hunger, not only in the literal sense of food scarcity but also as a metaphor for the characters' yearning for identity, freedom, and dignity. The intricate relationship between man and nature is a central theme, showcasing the symbiotic yet conflicted bond between humans and the environment, emphasizing the consequences of exploitation and the need for sustainable coexistence. Additionally, the novel delves into the intricacies of familial ties, societal expectations, and the resilience of individuals amidst adversities, painting a vivid portrait of the human condition within a richly textured socio-cultural milieu.

## 11.9 ANSWER KEY CYP

1. Kuttanad
2. Vavachan
3. Kuttanad
4. Pulayan
5. magic and realism

6. magic realism

7. True

8. True

#### MCQs

1B

2C

3C

4C

5C

6C

7C

8B

9C

10C

#### 11.10 SUGGESTED READING

*Moustache* by S. Hareesh, Trans. by Jayasree Kalathil, 2020.



## CASTE POLITICS AND RESISTANCE IN *THE MOUSTACHE*

### STRUCTURE

- 12.0 Introduction
- 12.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 12.2 Caste Politics and Subaltern Resistance in the novel
- 12.3 Ecological Concerns in the novel
- 12.4 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 12.5 Examination Oriented Questions
- 12.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 12.7 Answer Key (MCQs)
- 12.8 Glossary
- 12.9 Suggested Reading

### 12.0 INTRODUCTION

Dear learner, by now you are familiar with S. Hareesh's novel *Moustache*. Now this lesson will help you to further explore the novel by focusing on two fundamental concerns, that is, ecological concerns and caste politics, which have wider social implications.

### 12.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint the learner with the experience of being a lower caste or a disempowered person in the novel.

After going through this lesson, you will

- have an awareness regarding how caste shapes the lived experiences of a person.
- analyse the experience of being a lower caste or a disempowered person in the society.
- classify the various ways the subalterns devise to resist the hegemony of the powerful social class.

### 12.2 CASTE POLITICS AND SUBALTERN RESISTANCE IN THE NOVEL

The history of the subaltern has been persistently subject to falsification by the dominant communities who hold absolute control over documented history. Thus, the narratives of history become a device that reinforces and strengthens hegemonic control. As bell hooks asserts, the margins can become sites of resistance and production of counterculture. S. Hareesh's novel

testifies to this argument by documenting the subaltern counternarratives that manifest resilience against hegemony. Such narratives are attached to Moustache as he metamorphoses into a symbol of subaltern resilience and is likened to other beacons of Dalit power such as Ravanan. These orally transmitted narratives defy the absolute authority presumed by the formally recorded history of the dominant classes.

The novel, in itself, becomes a documentation of the subaltern's counternarratives which is never documented. This is expounded in the following lines, which reflect upon the lives of agricultural workers in Kuttanad "a history that no one remembers, a place that was built for hard labour, and had to be vacated once the labour was done" (Hareesh 87).

Hareesh's narrative technique upholds the conventions of oral storytelling indigenous to Kuttanad rather than following the traditions of the novel as propagated by the European colonial forces. Further, the narrative endorses and empathises with the perspective of the subaltern rather than sympathising with them from a distant and unconnected position. Therefore, this section attempts to portray how the subaltern's resilience against colonialism, feudalism, and casteism manifests in multiple dimensions of the novel such as form, theme, style, space etc. The novel truthfully documents the narratives of the subaltern which comply with the oppressive hegemony as well.

The novel illustrates the politics behind the origin of narratives such as Moustache transforming into a symbol of hope and meaning in an otherwise meaningless world by assuming the role of Matapathi (183) at Chemmayikkari and Chekuthanparambu. Thereby the novel is presented as a political space that houses, on the one hand, notions of patriarchy, feudalism, caste politics and, on the other, the resistance against all of these.

S. Hareesh weaves the seemingly disconnected events narrated in the novel around a well-made frame. The fragmentary narration follows Vavachan being engulfed by the constructed entity of the Moustache and chronicles his quest to find Seetha and escape to Malaya. Thus, the novel vacillates back and forth from the twenty-first century where the speaker narrates the legends associated with the Moustache and the twentieth century when Moustache held sway across Kuttanad.

The novel is as much the lore of Moustache as it is the lore of the numerous other characters such as Ouseph, Seetha, Chella, Paviyan, Avarachan, the last crocodile, Kuttathi, and most importantly Kuttanad itself. S. Hareesh's poetic prose paints a vivid picture of Kuttanad and is inseparable from the locale as even his comparisons link the characters and spirits to the terrain's flora and fauna. Like a storyteller, completely immersed in the locale's specificities, Hareesh narrates stories to a listener who is assumed to be well-versed with the specificities of Kuttanad and its culture. The postmodern self-reflexive and self-conscious narrative traces the numerous conceptions attached to Moustache as he is continuously created and recreated.

Moustache was born during a stage performance directed by Ezhuthachan in Neendoor,



Upper Kuttanad, during the early twentieth century. Vavachan is a man belonging to the Pulaya community, which is a Dalit community. The Dalit communities of his time were barred from growing moustaches. Vavachan was made to grow a moustache for Ezhuthachan's musical drama. He was present on stage only for two scenes and had no real dialogues apart from a few grunts and roars. But the brief appearance of the Moustache-garbed Rakshasa-like figure rekindles a mysterious fear that was deeply ingrained in the audience. This becomes evident as people, who had come from faraway places to watch the moustached "Pulayan police" (Hareesh 37), flee the scene on hearing him roar. Notably, the majority of the audience who were appalled at the display of Dalit vitality and virility were from the "upper" caste. Thus, Moustache was born out of the fears and desires of the people of Kuttanad: the paranoia about the other by the upper caste and the desire for agency and retaliation by the lower caste. In fact, Vavachan's moustache becomes a metaphor for the structures of feelings that governed the people of Kuttanad in that era. Vavachan refuses to shave his moustache after the performance and thus, the aura of power and darkness persists and pervades the persona of Vavachan as he transforms into a beacon of Dalit resilience. Moustache is fed by the beliefs that abound in the space of Kuttanad and he soon asserts independence from the biological self of Vavachan and reigns across the endless fields and water bodies of Kuttanad. This is stated indirectly when he says there shall be 'No more performances' (43), which reveals that Vavachan has metamorphosed into the Moustache and it is not an interim transformation anymore. Moustache ultimately dies as he becomes insignificant with the advent of modernisation which altered popular beliefs.

Moustache seeks to embark on Malaya after he is introduced to this alternate space where "there'll be no more troubles" (12). Moustache's other major pursuit is of Seetha. The novel blends Ramayana into the narrative and we see Moustache, who is likened to "Ravana, the ten-headed king of Lanka" (37), is irrevocably in love with Seetha, a woman of obscure origin who was brought to the Lanka-like Kuttanad by Kathu. We find parallels to Seetha from Ramayana who dared to defy Ravana with the Seetha in this novel as "unlike anyone else before, Seetha ignored the moustache and looked Moustache straight in the eye" (317).

Foucault suggests that power is not centralised into entities such as feudal or governmental institutions. On the contrary, Foucault posits that power is an ever-shifting force and can alternate between the bourgeoisie such as the land-owning class such as the Brahmins, Nairs and Syrian Christians of Kuttanad, and the proletariat such as the landless Pulayas who worked in the fields and lived on the fringes.

By applying Foucault's concept of how power operates as a flux or field of influence, we can analyse how the paddy field which is a site of oppression of the Pulayas and other "lower" castes, becomes a site for the production of the counterculture by the Pulaya community, against the culture of servitude propagated by the "upper-caste," by seizing control over the knowledge production and discursive formation.

This analysis also looks at Kuttanad as the Third space as posited by Soja. "Third space



is a purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings” (2). The concept of Third space is Soja’s attempt to compensate for the insufficiency of the dualistic perception of space - First space and Second space. According to Soja, First space is the perception of space as the objective physical setting and Second space refers to the abstract and representational aspect of space. Third space is moulded from the engagements between First space and Second space.

This analysis also applies David Harvey’s theory of ‘Uneven Development’ (137) whereby spatial inequalities emerge due to the disproportionate distribution of capital. Thus, we can trace the evolution of Kuttanad from being an agrarian economy, where the British colonial administration favoured the landlords over the labourers, to becoming a neo-capitalist economy where agriculture in itself was largely neglected. Through the diachronic approach, we can analyse the novel using David Harvey’s theory of ‘Accumulation by Dispossession’ (137) which posits that the people who control the resources will always appropriate resources away from the marginalised. Thus, the overgrown bunds, stagnant fields, hyacinth-infested lakes of Kuttanad as portrayed in the concluding chapter point to how the space associated with the agrarian way of life has been “dispossessed” as the neo-capitalist economy takes over advanced communication forms, brings this long tradition of storytelling and the resultant collective cultural memory to an abrupt end.

This analysis also employs M. N. Sreenivas’s doctrines on caste. Sreenivas proposes that the dominant caste controls the resources within the space through the oppression of other castes. Such a space will inescapably be stratified on the basis of caste with caste pervading all the facets of the individual such as labour, social interactions, social status, marriage, social etiquette, codes of conduct etc. Further, community governance will be influenced by the power dynamics of caste. The novel shows the effect of modernisation in the space of Kuttanad using Sreenivas’s theories such as Westernisation through the cultural borrowing of Western ideologies and values and blending them with the native culture. Sreenivas delineates the evolution of hybrid identity through colonisation and later globalisation.

Sreenivas posits that since Westernisation permeates into the different facets of life, it comes in conflict with caste and challenges the basis of caste with the notions of rationality and equality. This process of change has been rapidly accelerated through what Thrift and May calls Time-Space compression (1-46). Here the economic and social transformations are sped up by the technological advancements linked with modernisation.

The novel’s concluding chapter presents Kuttanad’s First Space after the economic liberalisation of 1991 which contrasts with the Kuttanad of the early twentieth century. The culture of commodification, as put forward by Debord, leads to the accumulation of capital in spaces such as the tourism sector, which belongs to the tertiary economic sector, and the decline in farming, a primary economic sector, which had once been characteristic of Kuttanad. The

contrast highlights how economic and social disparities are generated due to an unequal channelling of resources. The dispossession of resources from the traditional farming practices indirectly led to the dispossession of resources from the marginalised agrarian communities such as the Pulayas.

Characters such as Thanulinga Nadar, Khan Saheb, and Kariyil Saheb perceived Kuttanad as the Second space much in line with the voyeuristic understanding of the city planner in Michel de Certeau's 'Walking in the City.' The walkers, as proposed by Certeau, like Paviyan and Vavachan, easily manoeuvre and even find solace in the seemingly jumbled and complex fields and water bodies while the policemen, like Thanulinga Nadar and Khan Saheb, fail to fish Moustache out of what Hareesh calls the shapeshifting waters as they perceived the intricate waterbodies and fields of Kuttanad as the Second space.

The inadequacy of maps or perceiving a space as the second space as put forward by Certeau is explicated through the novel. This is because the members of the oppressed communities like Vavachan and Paviyan are actively constructing the space in an act of resistance against the hegemonic practices of the authorities.

The examination of Kuttanad as the Third Space starts with the history of Kuttanad. There lies an inadequacy in the formally recorded history of Kuttanad and that of the oppressed communities such as the Pulayas. Thus, the pre-colonial history of Kuttanad is through orally transmitted legends which often contradict one another. These oral narratives are vulnerable to manipulation and it is argued that the notion of impurity which is attached to the Pulayas, is a result of one such manipulation. According to this argument, the arrival of the upper-caste feudal elite, in the form of Namboodiris, led to the systematic oppression of the lower castes, such as the Pulayas, in a bid to establish a hegemony with the Namboothiris occupying the apex strata.

The most significant contributor to Third Space is caste. The caste system manifests itself through the divisions, discriminations, and violence in the various aspects of life. This ranges from occupation, religion, housing etc. to the most basic aspects of human life such as food, clothing, occupation, marriage, language and even touch. Caste is intrinsically woven with the notions of purity and impurity. The institutionalised murder of the members of the Pulaya and Paraya community following the violence on Karkitakam irupathettu (Twenty-eighth of Karkitakam) and the heinous murder of Kotha, the Paraya agricultural worker accused of stealing grain depict the barbaric ends that the "upper" caste goes to for enforcing the caste hegemony.

The Kerala Brahmins or the Namboothiris along with the Tamil Brahmins - Pattan, Pattar, Aiyers form the uppermost strata of the caste system. Nairs are the second most prominent "upper" caste with sub castes such as Pillah, Menon, and Kuruppu, among others and these sub castes are engaged in a wide range of occupations such as warfare, farming, and even service to the Brahmins. It should be noted that these "upper" castes only formed a minority of the population and the majority was made up of people belonging to the "lower"

castes - Chovans, and Pulayas, among others. The novel lists other castes such as Marar, Asari, Kollan, and Ulladan among others and this seemingly endless list serves the purpose of depicting how the Kuttanad of that time was compartmentalised into the narrow confines of caste. Thus, Kuttanad becomes a disciplinary space with the feudal patriarchy integrating with the caste system.

The novel also follows the persistence of the caste hierarchy that existed among the Hindus who had converted to Christianity. People belonging to ostracised castes, which had been exploited by the caste system, were widely converted by the Christian missionaries in Kerala. However, the conversions led to the formation of a new caste system within the Christian community of Kerala. The Syrian Christians or the Nasrani Christians, who claim to have been converted by St. Thomas the Apostle exercised significant control over agriculture and trade. In contrast, the “lower” caste Christians, most of whom were converted recently by missionaries, were still denoted by the caste they belonged to before conversion. This is why Vavachan is called a Pulayan Christian and is “othered” by the Syrian Christians who take pride in having been converted from families that belonged to the Hindu upper caste. Thus, the hybrid and all-pervasive nature of caste that existed in Kuttanad is depicted. Kuttan, Vavachan’s son converting back to Hinduism is indirectly due to the minimal relief from caste oppression that Pulayans get through conversion.

The Pulaya community has been treated as untouchables based on the five- tier caste hierarchy that was practised in Kerala. This “Untouchability” manifested itself in many facets of life. The Pulaya community and the linked communities were barred from entering temples, and public institutions, and sometimes even public roads were closed for them, as it was feared that the presence of a person belonging to the Pulaya community would pollute others. This oppression leads the “lower” caste in search of alternate spaces and beliefs as seen in Vavachan seeking to escape to the heterotopia of Malaya which he might’ve believed to be an alternate space where hunger and discrimination cease to exist.

Moustache becomes a work of historiographic fiction as the fictional narrative analyses the nature of the recorded history of Kuttanad and much of Kerala with special emphasis on the first half of the twentieth century and follows the narrative up to the modern day.

Hareesh alludes to social reformers such as Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali. Through these references, the novel portrays the changing socio-cultural scenario of Kerala. Sree Narayana Guru was a social reformer, born into the Ezhava caste, who toiled towards eradicating caste hegemony. His advocacy for the rights of the oppressed classes such as Pulayas is epitomised in the dictum ‘One Caste, One Religion, One God for mankind’ (Joseph 321). Hareesh refers to how noble figures such as the Guru and N.N. Pillah were mistreated by the people for their honest ways. Thus, the author hints at society’s temperament towards people who refuse to conform to its hypocrisy.

Further, the novel traces how Ayyankali, the social reformer who became the sole Pulaya member of the Praja Sabha, was invited to Pallithanam by Luca Mathai. The grand welcome he

was given shows the gradual reforms happening in the space of caste politics.

Analysing the novel through the lens of Marxist Historical Materialism, we see multiple cases of class conflict in the Kuttanad of the twentieth century. The oppressor-oppressed dynamics are manifested within various economic systems such as caste-based feudalism, colonialism among others. The oppression meted out on the Pulayas and other members of the “lower” castes is in line with the colonial oppression that was exerted across the country. Kuttanad is spread across the erstwhile princely states of Travancore and Kochi and had the British colonial powers acting upon them indirectly. As presented in the lines, “The arrival of the white man had changed many of the thousands-of-years-old traditions of the land” (Hareesh 269), the novel depicts the hybrid culture that was induced by colonialism. This is manifested in the desperate yet vain attempts of Little Saheb to deny the inherent British influence within him. The advent of British colonisation pervaded into the morality of the people as the Victorian morality combined with the traditional, patriarchal, casteist morality to form a new hybrid morality.

Brendon and Kariyil Saheb represent the exploitative colonisers. The former’s monopoly over his technological inventions in irrigation is a reflection of the wider exploitative economic practices of the British in their colonies which are often under the guise of the goodwill of advancement. This aspect of colonial oppression finds echoes in the origin of the word “Brendon” which refers to someone who takes advantage of the context

Kariyil Saheb promoting the rhetoric of hatred amongst the humans and crocodiles who had existed in harmony for centuries represents the colonial manipulation of the native fabric of Kuttanad by promoting communal conflicts on linguistic, caste-based, and religious lines among others. Baker had initiated the killing of the crocodiles due to his personal liking for crocodile meat but he justified it citing the number of ducks and cattle lost to the crocodiles. This has parallels to how colonial exploitation had been under the guise of the white man’s burden. The conduct of the natives who took away the land and ultimately life itself from the crocodiles becomes another case of class conflict.

Colonialism pervaded all spatial spheres of Kuttanad through English education and religious conversions brought out by the Christian missionaries. This becomes another class conflict, one between the colonial ideology as propagated by the missionaries in line with Macaulay’s Minutes on Indian Education and the native ideology. Thus, converts from the Pulaya community like Paviyan face double oppression, first for belonging to a marginalised caste and second for being at the receiving end of colonial oppression.

The novel intricately weaves the narratives of Ramayana into the text. However, Hareesh endorses the deities whom the high-caste feudal lords often refuse to acknowledge. While the temples of “elite” Gods barred Pulayas from entering, the deities of the oppressed such as Muthan, Ittichan, and Perumadan gave them refuge. The Pulaya community engages in the worship of their ancestors and evil spirits, the most prominent being Chathans. The multiplicity of beliefs that the members of the Pulaya community hold are expounded in the verse that the Vellon says during the Pulaya Wedding rites -

“May God and all the ancestors as well as the other minor Gods of this country manage this country without any discord” (Thaliath 1041).

The tyranny of caste made the conditions for education more conducive for the upper-caste members and gradually the “upper” caste members started occupying major governmental positions. Thus the government employees endorsed the caste system and manipulated the laws in accordance with it, leading to a casteist and patriarchal government.

The law that barred non-Brahmin women from covering their breasts, forms of institutionalised misogyny such as Thalikettu Kalyanam, Sambandham etc. and the sexual abuse of the so-called untouchables point to the rot within the system.

The contrast between the food that is offered to Moustache at Pallithanam house and the food Paviyan and much of the Pulaya community were accustomed to reveals the uneven distribution of wealth owing to the economic hegemony enforced by the feudal patriarchy. Moustache is served with “good-quality Koora rice, buffalo milk curd, pearlspot fish curry made with deseeded, ground chillies” (Hareesh 213) among many other things which is in sharp contrast to the kanji and sometimes mere kanji water alone which the Pulaya folk like Paviyan used to have. Pulayas bound in serfdom were compensated with a pittance of unhusked rice and vegetables after the day’s labour. On days when there was no work in the fields, the workers starved. The communities engaged in agricultural labour were perpetually entrapped within a vicious cycle of exploitation as they were provided with a bare minimum for sustenance, which ensured that they never escaped the cycle.

The Pulayas dwelled on the margins of the fields in one-roomed huts made out of bamboo, straws and palm leaves called ‘Maddam’ (Thaliyath 1031). Maddams were built by the Pulayas themselves and they dismantled and rebuilt the huts according to the crop cycles and changes in the seasons.

Thus, the novel portrays subtle acts of defiance, wherein individuals navigate their identities and aspirations amidst the oppressive caste system, embodying a quiet yet resolute resistance against entrenched caste-based discrimination.

### **12.3 ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS IN THE NOVEL**

In S. Hareesh’s novel *Moustache*, ecological concerns are intricately woven into the fabric of the narrative, depicting the symbiotic relationship between nature and the lives of the characters in a remote village in Kerala, India. The novel vividly portrays the significance of the natural world and the impact of human actions on the environment.

One of the central ecological themes in the novel is the relationship between the villagers and the surrounding ecosystem, particularly the fragile balance between humans and the biodiversity of the region. The story highlights the villagers’ dependence on the natural resources provided by the environment for their livelihoods, especially the livelihood of the fishermen whose lives are deeply intertwined with the nearby rivers and marine life. Through evocative descriptions, Hareesh emphasizes the beauty of the landscape while subtly pointing out the threats it faces due to human activities and modernization.

Additionally, the novel underscores the consequences of overexploitation and degradation of natural resources. The exploitation of the river for sand mining and the subsequent environmental degradation are portrayed as a conflict between economic interests and ecological preservation. Hareesh uses this conflict to shed light on the detrimental effects of human actions on the delicate ecological balance, ultimately affecting the villagers' way of life and the biodiversity of the region.

Moreover, the novel explores the broader theme of humanity's disconnection from nature and the repercussions of this detachment. As the characters navigate their lives, the narrative underscores the need for a harmonious relationship between humans and the environment. It subtly urges readers to reflect on the importance of preserving and respecting nature for the well-being of both present and future generations.

Hareesh's novel skillfully integrates ecological concerns into its narrative, painting a vivid picture of the intricate relationship between humans and the environment. It serves as a poignant reminder of the consequences of human actions on the natural world and advocates for a more sustainable and harmonious coexistence with nature.

#### 12.4 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

Dear learner, now that you have read this lesson in detail, you can try to answer a few multiple choice questions. Don't forget to check the answers to assess your progress.

Question 1: What societal challenges does Vavachan face due to his lower- caste background in *Moustache*? \_\_\_\_\_.

- A) Economic exploitation
- B) Social discrimination
- C) Limited access to resources
- D) All of the above

Question 2: How are gender roles depicted in the novel? \_\_\_\_\_.

- A) Women have equal societal status as men
- B) Women's roles are confined within traditional expectations
- C) Women hold positions of authority in the community
- D) Gender roles are not addressed in the narrative

Question 3: Which character in the novel faces challenges due to both caste and gender biases? \_\_\_\_\_.

- A) Vavachan
- B) Janu
- C) Yashodhamma
- D) Ravi



Question 4: How does caste discrimination manifest in the novel's societal framework?

\_\_\_\_\_.

- A) Through restricted access to education for lower-caste individuals
- B) Limited job opportunities based on caste
- C) Social ostracization of lower-caste communities
- D) All of the above

Question 5: Which character challenges traditional gender roles by asserting her agency and desires? \_\_\_\_\_.

- A) Janu
- B) Yashodhamma
- C) Naseema
- D) Chedathy

Question 6: What challenges do characters face when attempting to break free from the constraints of the caste system? \_\_\_\_\_.

- A) Social stigma
- B) Economic hurdles
- C) Resistance from the upper-caste hegemony
- D) All of the above

Question 7: In the novel, how is the exploitation of lower-caste individuals depicted?

\_\_\_\_\_.

- A) Unfair wages for labor
- B) Denial of basic rights
- C) Discrimination in societal institutions
- D) All of the above

Question 8: How does the novel highlight the unequal treatment of women in decision-making processes? \_\_\_\_\_.

- A) Women hold prominent positions in the community
- B) Women's opinions are disregarded in important matters
- C) Women have equal authority as men
- D) Gender equality is not addressed in the novel

Question 9: How does the novel explore the intersectionality of caste and gender issues? \_\_\_\_\_.

- A) By portraying women from upper-caste backgrounds facing discrimination
- B) By showcasing the struggles of men from lower castes in patriarchal settings
- C) By ignoring the intersectionality of caste and gender
- D) None of the above

Question 10: What narrative elements in the novel depict attempts at challenging traditional caste and gender norms? \_\_\_\_\_

- A) Characters breaking free from societal expectations
- B) Instances of defiance against discrimination
- C) Characters asserting their agency
- D) All of the above

## 12.5 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

Question 1: How does the author employ ecological motifs or settings within *Moustache* to reflect larger societal themes or human behaviour?

Question 2: How does the caste system in “*Moustache*” influence the characters’ aspirations, relationships, and societal positions throughout the narrative?

## 12.6 LET US SUM UP

In S. Hareesh’s novel *Moustache*, caste politics intertwines deeply with ecological concerns, portraying the complex relationship between society’s hierarchical structures and the environment. The narrative delves into how caste dynamics dictate access to and control over natural resources, reflecting power imbalances that exploit both land and marginalized communities. Through vivid storytelling, the novel highlights how caste-based discrimination leads to the exploitation and degradation of the environment, ultimately illuminating the interconnectedness between social injustices and ecological issues. Hareesh’s exploration of caste politics and ecological concerns within the novel offers a profound commentary on the intersectionality of societal power struggles and environmental degradation.

## 12.7 ANSWER KEY (MCQs)

- |      |    |    |
|------|----|----|
| 1D   | 2B | 3B |
| 4D   | 5A | 6D |
| 7D   | 8B | 9B |
| 10D. |    |    |

## 12.8 GLOSSARY

subaltern: of lower status

hegemony: the position of being the strongest and most powerful and therefore able to control others.

counterculture: a way of life and set of attitudes opposed to or at variance with the prevailing social norm

indigenous: Native to a particular region or environment

feudalism : the social system which existed in the Middle Ages in Europe, in which people worked and fought for a person who owned land and received land and protection from him in return

bourgeoisie: (in Marxist contexts) the capitalist class who own most of society's wealth and means of production

proletariat: (often used with reference to Marxism) working class people especially those who do not



own any property

marginalised: placed in a position of little or no importance, influence, or power

## **12.9 SUGGESTED READING**

*Moustache* by S. Hareesh, Trans. by Jayasree Kalathil.

“Shock and Awe” by Deepa Bhashti, *Himal Southasian Review*, 2021



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## LIFE AND WORKS OF MARGARET ATWOOD

### STRUCTURE

- 13.0 Introduction
- 13.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 13.2 Margaret Atwood: Life and Works
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### 13.0 INTRODUCTION

Dear learner, in the previous unit you read about S. Hareesh's novel *Moustache*. This unit IV deals with a Canadian novel *Surfacing* written by Margaret Atwood, a famous Canadian woman writer. In this lesson, you will read about the biographical aspect of Margaret Atwood and an account of her major works is also provided.

### 13.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint the learner with the life and the works of Margaret Atwood.

A serious reading of this lesson will

- familiarise you with Margaret Atwood and the nature of her writing
- acquaint you with the major thematic concerns delineated in her works.

### 13.2 MARGARET ATWOOD: LIFE AND WORKS

Margaret Atwood, full name Margaret Eleanor Atwood (born November 18, 1939,

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada) is a celebrated Canadian writer well-known for her prose fiction and for her feminist perspective.

Since 1961, she has published eighteen books of poetry, eighteen novels, eleven books of non-fiction, nine collections of short fiction, eight children's books, two graphic novels, and a number of small press editions of both poetry and fiction. Atwood has won numerous awards and honours for her writing, including two Booker Prizes, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the Governor General's Award, the Franz Kafka Prize, Princess of Asturias Awards, and the National Book Critics and PEN Centre USA Lifetime Achievement Awards. A number of her works have been adapted for film and television.

Atwood is the founder of the Griffin Poetry Prize and the Writers' Trust of Canada. She is also a Senior Fellow of Massey College, Toronto. She is the inventor of the LongPen device and associated technologies that facilitate remote robotic writing of documents.

### **13.2.1 EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION**

Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, in 1939. She moved with her family to Sault St. Marie, Canada, in 1945 and to Toronto, Canada, in 1946. Until she was eleven years, she spent half of each year in a sparsely settled "bush" country in northern Canada in wilderness, where her father worked as an entomologist. Her writing was one of the many things she enjoyed in her "bush" time, away from school. Atwood's fascination with the Canadian wilderness, which is present in much of her writing, dates from this period. At the age of six she was writing morality plays, poems, comic books, and had started a novel. School and preadolescence brought her a taste for home economics.

Atwood was sixteen years old when she made commitment to pursue writing as a lifetime career. She studied at Victoria College, University of Toronto, where she received her undergraduate degree in 1961. Upon the recommendation of her mentor, Northrop Frye, who joined Harvard University while Atwood was studying there, she decided to pursue a graduate degree at Radcliffe College. At that time, Harvard was starchy and ultraconservative, and Atwood's experiences as a graduate student helped shape her feminist views and opposition to the Americanization of Canadian culture. In 1962, she earned her master's degree, and although she stayed at Harvard intermittently over the next several years, she left the program before completing her Ph.D. By 1967, she was a recognised writer.

She first came to public attention as a poet in the 1960s with her collections, *Double Persephone* (1961), winner of the E.J. Pratt Medal, and *The Circle Game* (1964), winner of a Governor General's award. She published her first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), an edgy satire about a young woman working at a marketing firm. Over the next few years, she continued to alternate between poetry and prose, often publishing one work in each genre in the same year. In 1972, she published a critical work called *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, which influenced the ways Canadians understand their literary traditions.

Still taught in many Canadian schools, *Survival* advanced an environmental interpretation of Canadian literature and portrayed Canadian writers as victims still imprisoned by a colonial dependency—caught between America to the south and the vast wildernesses to the north. That same year, Atwood published her second novel, *Surfacing* (1972), in which the protagonist escapes to the northern wilderness before rejoining society.

After two broken-off engagements and a five-year marriage to an American, Jim Polk, Atwood settled down with the Canadian writer, Graeme Gibson, in 1973. After several years of being professionally involved with the Toronto-based publishing house, House of Anansi Press, as well as intermittent teaching engagements, she and Gibson bought a farmhouse outside Alliston, Ontario, where they lived for many years. In 1976, the year she published her third novel, *Lady Oracle*, Atwood gave birth to a daughter, Jess Atwood Gibson. Over the next few years, she dabbled in television screenwriting; produced a history book, *Days of the Rebels: 1815–1840* (1977); and published a collection of short stories, *Dancing Girls* (1977).

Following more or less temporary residencies in Vancouver, Edmonton, Montreal, Berlin, Edinburgh, London, and the south of France, Atwood and her family settled in Toronto on a permanent basis in 1981. The previous year, Atwood had become vice-chairperson of the Writers' Union of Canada, a position perfectly suited to her interest in Canadian nationalism, which her years in the United States, as well as her commitment to publish Canadian writers through Anansi, had strengthened. Atwood explored the theme of Canadian identity, with varying levels of explicitness, in many of her works. Committed to forging a "Canadian literature," Atwood has cited fellow Canadian poets of her generation, including Michael Ondaatje and Al Purdy, as the strongest influences on her poetry. More than twenty years after publishing *Survival*, Atwood expanded on this subject in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995).

Internationally, Atwood is celebrated for the blunt feminism of her books. From her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, to her dystopian masterpiece, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), the book that gave her international fame, Atwood has shown a tremendous interest in the restraints society puts on women—and the facades women adopt in response. *The Handmaid's Tale*, which Atwood refuses to label as "science fiction," depicts a society in which women are shorn of all rights except the rights to marry, keep house, and reproduce. After *The Handmaid's Tale* made Atwood a major international celebrity, she wrote a series of novels dealing with women's relationships with one another, including *Cat's Eye* (1988) and *The Robber Bride* (1993). In 1992, she published *Good Bones*, short, witty pieces about female body parts and the constraints that have been placed on them throughout history. Atwood explores women's historical roles in her other works, including her renowned poetry collection, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) and her novel *Alias Grace* (1996). Both re-imagine the lives of famous pioneer women in Canadian history.

Today, Atwood is one of the best-known living writers in the world. Atwood's work has

been published in more than twenty-five countries, and she has received a number of prestigious awards for her writing, including the Booker Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Molson Award, and a Canada Short Fiction Award.

### 13.2.2 THEMATIC CONCERNS OVERVIEW

Sherrill Grace, writing in *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood*, identified the central tension in all of Atwood's work as "the pull towards art on one hand and towards life on the other." Atwood "is constantly aware of opposites—self other, subject/object, male/female, nature/man—and of the need to accept and work within them," said Grace. Linda W. Wagner, writing in *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism*, also saw the dualistic nature of Atwood's poetry, asserting that "duality [is] presented as separation" in her work. This separation leads her characters to be isolated from one another and from the natural world, resulting in their inability to communicate, to break free of exploitative social relationships, or to understand their place in the natural order. "In her early poetry," Gloria Onley wrote in the *West Coast Review*, Atwood "is acutely aware of the problem of alienation, the need for real human communication and the establishment of genuine human community— real as opposed to mechanical or manipulative; genuine as opposed to the counterfeit community of the body politic."

Suffering is common for the female characters in Atwood's poems, although they are never *passive victims*. Atwood explained to Judy Klemesrud in the *New York Times* that her *suffering* characters come from real life: "My women suffer because most of the women I talk to seem to have suffered." Although she became a favourite of feminists, Atwood's popularity in the feminist community was unsought. "I began as a profoundly apolitical writer," she told Lindsay Van Gelder of *Ms.*, "but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me."

### 13.2.3 INTRODUCTION TO HER IMPORTANT WORKS

***Alias Grace:*** *Alias Grace* is a historical fiction novel first published in 1996 by McClelland & Stewart. It won the Canadian Giller Prize and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The story fictionalizes the notorious 1843 murders of Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery in Canada West. Two servants of the Kinnear household, Grace Marks and James McDermott, were convicted of the crime. McDermott was hanged and Marks was sentenced to life imprisonment.

***The Blind Assassin:*** *The Blind Assassin* is a novel first published by McClelland and Stewart in 2000. The novel is set in the fictional Ontario town of Port Ticonderoga and in Toronto. It is narrated from the present day, referring to previous events that span the twentieth century but mostly the 1930s and 1940s. It is a work of historical fiction with the major events of Canadian history forming an important backdrop, for example, the On-to-Ottawa Trek and a 1934 Communist rally at Maple Leaf Gardens. Greater verisimilitude is given by a series of

newspaper articles commenting on events and on the novel's characters from a distance.

The text was awarded the Booker Prize in 2000 and the Hammett Prize in 2001 besides a number of other nominations.

***Cat's Eye:*** *Cat's Eye* is a 1988 novel about fictional painter Elaine Risley, who vividly reflects on her childhood and teenage years. Her strongest memories are of Cordelia, who was the leader of a trio of girls who were both very cruel and very kind to her in ways that tint Elaine's perceptions of relationships and her world and her art moving into her middle years. The novel unfolds in mid-20th century Canada, from World War II to the late 1980s, and includes a look at many of the cultural elements of that time period, including feminism and various modern art movements. The book was a finalist for the 1988 Governor General's Award and for the 1989 Booker Prize.

***The Handmaid's Tale:*** *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), a futuristic dystopian novel, was published in 1985. It is set in a near-future New England in a patriarchal, white supremacist, totalitarian theonomic state known as the Republic of Gilead, which has overthrown the United States government. Offred is the central character and narrator and one of the "handmaids," women who are forcibly assigned to produce children for the "commanders," who are the ruling class in Gilead.

***Oryx and Crake:*** Atwood has described *Oryx and Crake*, published in 2003, as speculative fiction and adventure romance, rather than pure science fiction, because it does not deal with things "we can't yet do or begin to do," yet goes beyond the amount of realism she associates with the novel form. It focuses on a lone character called Snowman, who finds himself in a bleak situation with only creatures called Crakers to keep him company. The reader learns of his past, as a boy called Jimmy, and of genetic experimentation and pharmaceutical engineering that occurred under the purview of Jimmy's peer, Glenn 'Crake.'

***Surfacing:*** *Surfacing*, published by McClelland and Stewart in 1972, is Atwood's second novel. *Surfacing* has been described by commentators as a companion novel to Atwood's collection of poems, *Power Politics*, which was written the previous year and deals with complementary issues. The novel, grappling with notions of national and gendered identity, anticipated rising concerns about conservation and preservation and the emergence of Canadian nationalism. It was adapted into a movie in 1981.

The novel narrates the story of a woman who returns to her hometown in Canada to find her missing father. Accompanied by her lover, Joe, and a married couple, Anna and David, the unnamed protagonist meets her past in her childhood house, recalling events and feelings, while trying to find clues to her father's mysterious disappearance. Little by little, the past overtakes her and drives her into the realm of wildness and madness.

**The Testaments:** *The Testaments* is a 2019 novel and is the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). The novel is set 15 years after the events of *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is narrated by

Aunt Lydia, a character from the previous novel; Agnes, a young woman living in Gilead; and Daisy, a young woman living in Canada. *The Testaments* was a joint winner of the 2019 Booker Prize, alongside Bernardine Evaristo's novel *Girl, Woman, Other*. It was also chosen as 'Best Fiction' novel in the Goodreads Choice Awards 2019, winning by over 50,000 votes.

### 13.3 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

Dear learner, before moving on to the next section, take a break and try to answer these questions so that you get a better idea of the sections that you have read till now. In case of any difficulty, do not get dejected! Re-read the previous sections and again attempt MCQs.

- Q1. When and where was Atwood born? \_\_\_\_\_
- 1939, Toronto
  - 1939, Ontario
  - 1850, Vancouver
  - 1850, Quebec City
- Q2. What was her father's occupation? \_\_\_\_\_
- Anthropologist
  - Microbiologist
  - Entomologist
  - Oncologist
- Q3. At what age Atwood made her commitment to pursue writing as a profession? \_
- 18 years
  - 15 years
  - 17 years
  - 16 years
- Q4. From which college did Atwood receive her bachelor's degree? \_\_\_\_\_.
- Victoria College
  - George Brown College
  - Humber College
  - Centennial College
- Q5. Atwood first came to public attention as a \_\_\_\_\_ in the 1960s \_\_\_\_\_.
- Novelist
  - Poet
  - Playwright
  - Essayist
- Q6. What is the title of Atwood's first novel? \_\_\_\_\_
- Lady Oracle
  - The Robber Bride

- c. The Edible Woman
  - d. Surfacing
- Q7. What is the title of her second novel? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Surfacing
  - b. Cat's Eye
  - c. The Robber Bride
  - d. The Handmaid's Tale
- Q8. Which works of Atwood won the Booker Prize? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. *Cat's Eye, Lady Oracle*
  - b. *The Handmaid's Tale, The Robber Bride*
  - c. *Surfacing, Double Persephone*
  - d. *The Blind Assassin, The Testaments*
- Q9. Which of Atwood's works won the Canadian Giller Prize and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. *The Testaments*
  - b. *Alias Grace*
  - c. *The Handmaid's Tale*
  - d. *Cat's Eye*
- Q10. Who identified the central tension in all of Atwood's work as "the pull towards art on one hand and towards life on the other"? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Sherrill Grace
  - b. Linda W. Wagner
  - c. Gloria Onley
  - d. Lindsay Van Gelder

#### 13.4 ANSWER KEY (MCQs)

- |        |       |       |
|--------|-------|-------|
| 1. b,  | 2. c, | 3. d, |
| 4. a,  | 5. b, | 6. c, |
| 7. a,  | 8. d, | 9. b, |
| 10. a. |       |       |

#### 13.5 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS (SAQs)

1. Atwood first came to public attention as a \_\_\_\_\_ in the 1960s.
2. *Alias Grace* is a \_\_\_\_\_ novel.
3. Still taught in many Canadian schools, \_\_\_\_\_ advanced an environmental interpretation of Canadian literature.



4. \_\_\_\_\_ is common for the female characters in Atwood's poems.
5. *The Blind Assassin* was first published in \_\_\_\_\_.

### 13.6 ANSWER KEY (SAQs)

- 1.) Poet 2.) Historical fiction 3.) Surfacing 4.) Suffering 5.) 2000

### 13.7 LET US SUM UP

Margaret Eleanor Atwood one of Canada's famous writers is also an environmental activist, and creator. Atwood's works encompass a variety of themes including gender and identity, religion and myth, the power of language, climate change, and "power politics". Many of her poems are inspired by myths and fairy tales which interested her from a very early age.

The lesson acquaints you with the life of Margaret Atwood, her education, and important works. Dear learner after reading this lesson you become familiar with Margaret Atwood as a novelist, poet, critic, essayist, and short-story writer. she has also contributed to children's fiction, Canadian history, and the editing of volumes ranging from prestigious anthologies to a literary cookbook. Margaret Atwood is recognized as an outstanding feminist because of her writings.

### 13.8 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

1. What is your assessment about Margaret Atwood as a writer? Explain
2. Name the important works of Margaret Atwood.
3. Write briefly about the early life of Margaret Atwood.
4. Write briefly about the education of Margaret Atwood.

### 13.9 SUGGESTED READING

Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*. ECW Press, 1998. Print. Marion

Wynne-Davies, *Margaret Atwood*. Oxford University Press, 2010. Print

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret\\_Atwood](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Atwood)

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Margaret-Atwood>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/margaret-atwood>

<https://www.sparknotes.com/author/margaret-atwood/>



***SURFACING* BY MARGARET ATWOOD****STRUCTURE**

- 14.0 Introduction
- 14.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 14.2 *Surfacing*: An Introduction
- 14.3 Check Your Progress (CYP)
- 14.4 Title of the Novel *Surfacing*
- 14.5 Characters in the Novel *Surfacing*
- 14.6 Literary Devices
- 14.7 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 14.8 Examination Oriented Questions
- 14.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 14.10 Answer Key (MCQs)
- 14.11 Suggested Reading

**14.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear learner, while the previous lesson introduced you to the writer Margaret Atwood, this lesson will now introduce you to her novel *Surfacing*. In this lesson you will read about the title, characters, and various literary devices used by the writer in the novel.

**14.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME**

The Objective of this lesson is to introduce the learner to an outline of the story of *Surfacing*.

After going through this lesson, you will

- be acquainted with the novel *Surfacing*
- be able to summarize the novel and analyse its various important aspects such as characters, title, and literary devices
- interpret the novel from a feminised approach to the genre of nature writing

**14.2 *SURFACING*: AN INTRODUCTION**

*Surfacing* (1972), Margaret Atwood's second novel, was the first to bring her

widespread, international acclaim. The novel is about an unnamed female narrator, whose search for her missing father leads her to make several important, but blistering discoveries about herself. The novel is set in Canada, in a town bordering Quebec. The tension between Canadians and Americans is one of the important part in this novel. After receiving news of her father's mysterious disappearance, the narrator travels with her boyfriend, Joe, and her friends Anna and David, who are married. Her friends, working on a movie called Random Samples, plan to use the trip to acquire footage. Once back in her hometown, the narrator searches out an old friend of her father, named Paul, in hope of finding answers. Paul is unable to give her any useful information about her father's disappearance. The narrator and her friends then hire a man from town to take them to her father's cabin, which is on an island in the middle of a large nearby lake.

When they arrive at the island, they unpack their things and set up camp in the abandoned cabin. After some initial searching of the surrounding area, it becomes clear that their searching will lead them nowhere. The narrator finds a stack of papers among her father's things, with strange, apparently random words scrawled on them. The narrator is in grim about her father's mental state.

The narrator's time on the island is interrupted by several vivid flashbacks, through which her past is exposed. The scenes involve her family, previous marriage, and child. She worries about her relationship with Joe, not sure she actually loves him. She worries, in fact, over her increasing emotional numbness to life generally, when Evans, the man from town who ferried the narrator and her party to island, come back to take them away. However, David decides to stay longer. The narrator is uncomfortable with this, because she fears her father, now insane is somewhere nearby.

Flashbacks to her wedding and the birth of her child upset the narrator; something is "off" about them. The narrator also notices how David and Anna's marriage, on close inspection, is actually very poor. David cheats Anna and emotionally abuses her. Amid the growing tensions, when one day Joe unexpectedly proposes to the narrator, she turns him down. Eventually, the narrator notices her father's strange drawings that refer to ancient rock paintings he had been researching. She resolves to seek out the paintings in question, hoping she will find some useful information. The paintings are not easy to find, but finally, the narrator thinks she has figured out where she might locate one. Because of changes in the water table since it was painted, this one, she guesses, will be located underwater.

After searching out the location of the painting, the narrator dives down to find it. Instead of the painting, she discovers what she believes to be a dead child. This affects her memories, which makes her understand her past with her ex-husband and child in a completely, new way. Traumatized by the memory, the narrator begins to lose her grip on sanity. David attempts to seduce the narrator, out of revenge for Anna cheating on him with Joe, but she rebuffs him.

Soon, the police come to the island with the news. The narrator's father has been found by some local fishermen– he is dead. The narrator is totally shattered. Her condition becomes psychotic. She destroys David's film and hides from her friends, who are forced to leave the island without her. After their departure, she goes to the cabin, destroying most of its contents. From that day, she lives the life of a wild beast : eating wild plants, sleeping outside. She begins to believe she will be able to summon her parents from the dead; but only when she follows very specific rules. She also becomes convinced she is pregnant with a divine child. Eventually, she emerges from this psychotic state, and healed of her pain. She looks in the mirror and sees she is just herself, a natural woman. When Joe comes back to the island to look for her, she watches him from the woods. She realizes she trusts him, and she might even come to love him.

### 14.3 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (CYP)

Dear learner, stop here! Make an assessment of what you have read through the CYP exercise given below:

1. The narrator in *Surfacing* is \_\_\_\_\_. (named/unnamed)
2. The narrator of the novel *Surfacing* is a female \_\_\_\_\_. (True/False)
3. *Surfacing* was Margaret Atwood's first novel \_\_\_\_\_. (True/False)
4. *Surfacing* was published in the year 1972 \_\_\_\_\_. (True/False)
5. *Surfacing* is about the narrator's search for her missing \_\_\_\_\_. (father/mother)
6. Narrator's father is found to be dead \_\_\_\_\_. (True/False)
7. The narrator's father is found by the policemen \_\_\_\_\_. (True/False)

### 14.4 TITLE OF THE NOVEL *SURFACING*

In the novel *Surfacing*, the narrator's painful repressed memories are brought into her conscious mind, as if emerging from a deep lake toward the surface. The title *Surfacing* refers to the narrator's symbolic surfacing out of the lie-based reality she has been taught by the patriarchy and into a reality she can define for herself. The meaning of the title needs to be understood within the context of the psychological realisation of the narrator of her own identity. The narrator comes to learn in-depth about her own condition but also the conditions of the past and the conditions of women in general. In addition, she considers the condition of nature and the way that all of these things have suffered as a result of men. Her resolution, coming at the climax of the novel, relates to the title of the novel because the narrator feels she is able to "surface" in order to see everything the way it is.

The narrator rejects the role of victim and seeks to move ahead, articulating a third kind of identity that is not constrained by the victor-victim dichotomy that has damaged not only herself, but also other women and nature too. *Surfacing* therefore refers to the realisation of the narrator concerning her own state and her relationship not only with men but also with nature itself. The narrator resurfacing from the water symbolises a metaphorical baptism and rebirth.

## 14.5 CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL *SURFACING*

- Female narrator-Her name is actually never revealed
- Anna -friend of narrator
- David-husband of Anna
- Joe-narrator's boyfriend.
- Paul-friend of the narrator's father.
- Madame-Paul's wife.
- Claude-son of the owner of the village motel and bar.
- Malmstrom-works for the Detroit branch of the Wildlife Protection Association of America .
- Evans -an American who works as a guide.
- Narrator's father
- Narrator's mother
- Narrator's brother
- Madame-the shopkeeper
- Mustached woman - works at the store.
- Men in Elvis Presley -sit at the counter of the store. Haircuts
- Mr. Percival - narrator's boss.

## 14.6 LITERARY DEVICES

Narrator and Point of View:There is an unnamed female narrator and the story and characters are told from her point of view.

Tone: deadpan, impassive, paranoid, suspicious, thoughtful Mood:

gloomy, anxious, wild, tense

Protagonist and Antagonist- The narrator: protagonist. Americans: antagonists.

Major Conflict: revolves around two questions-will the narrator be able to face her past—her abortion, her parents, and their deaths? And once she has descended into primal madness, will she be able to return to the normal world?

Climax: The narrator gets a vision of her aborted child while diving, and it gives way to repressed memories of her past.

Allusions: There are numerous allusions to WWII, such as Hitler and the Holocaust. The Vietnam War is occurring at the time of the novel, and Joe served in the Canadian forces. As a child, the narrator read Racine and Baudelaire: the former is Jean Racine, a 17th-century French dramatist, and the latter is a 19th-century French poet. The narrator also read Robert Burns, a Scottish poet, and Thompson's "Seasons," a reference to the Scottish James

Thomson's (spelled either way) series of poems..When the narrator says Canadians used to think Americans were lovable, she uses the example of Dwight Eisenhower, the American president from 1952- 1960. David sings a snippet from "The Maple Leaf Forever," once a national anthem of Canada. There are allusions to Christianity/Catholicism: God, the Devil, Christ.

Imagery: Imagery is a core component of this novel: there are images of death and decay; of water as death and rebirth; of animals, both sacrificed and free; of conception and abortion; of rot and disease; of borders and boundaries and enclosures; of creeping civilization amid the wilderness.

Paradox: The narrator says of her father, "The fact that he had not yet appeared only increased the likelihood that he would" (83). The narrator looks through scrapbooks she made "for something I could recognize as myself" (91).

Metonymy and Synecdoche: "What I married was a pair of boobs" (139)— David talking about Anna

Personification: "Joe swiveled the camera and trained it on them... sinister whirr" (137). "her voice occupied the room, territorial" (156). "The wind moves, rustling of tree lungs" (167). "A light wind, the small waves talking against the shore, multilingual water" (184)

#### 14.7 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. When was *Surfacing* first published? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. 1939
  - b. 1945
  - c. 1962
  - d. 1972
2. Who first published *Surfacing*? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Andre Deutsch
  - b. McClelland and Stewart
  - c. Simon and Schuster
  - d. Atlantic Little-Brown
3. *Surfacing* is Atwood's \_\_\_\_ novel? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. First
  - b. Second
  - c. Third
  - d. Fourth
4. When was it adopted into a movie? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. 1975
  - b. 1999
  - c. 1981

- d. 2010
5. The narrator of the book thinks that the older generation is \_\_ by its rigid sense of morality. \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Bolstered
  - b. Crippled
  - c. Insulated
  - d. Redeemed
6. Who is the narrator searching for? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Her mother
  - b. Her father
  - c. Her sister
  - d. Her son
7. What is the narrator illustrating for her freelance job? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. A book of fairy tales
  - b. A magazine article
  - c. Encyclopaedia entries
  - d. A series of trading cards
8. What is the narrator looking for on her camping trip? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Native burial grounds
  - b. A research outpost
  - c. Wall paintings
  - d. Skeletal remains
9. What does the narrator find while she is diving in the lake? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. An old car
  - b. A waterlogged backpack
  - c. A ruined journal
  - d. A dead child
10. Who tries to rape the narrator? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Claude
  - b. Paul
  - c. David
  - d. Joe
11. The narrator's father saw Paul as a model of \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. The straight and narrow
  - b. A refined scholar
  - c. The simple life

- d. A wild man
12. How did the narrator's mother die? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Suicide
  - b. A heart attack
  - c. A car accident
  - d. A brain tumour
13. Who kept a laboratory where he ran experiments on animals in jars? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Evans
  - b. The narrator's brother
  - c. Paul
  - d. The narrator's father
14. What does Bill Malmstrom claim that works for? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. A wildlife preservation agency
  - b. An unnamed government department
  - c. A real estate firm
  - d. A resort developer
15. What was distinctive about the old shopkeeper that the narrator called Madame? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. She had one eye
  - b. She had one leg
  - c. She had one ear
  - d. She had one arm
16. What is the narrator's response to the anger she feels at all the standard roles that are forced on women? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. To become an animal
  - b. To become a ghost
  - c. To become a robot
  - d. To become a man
17. The narrator ultimately realizes that complete withdrawal from society will result in \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Freedom
  - b. Death
  - c. Peace
  - d. Disappointment
18. The narrator claims that she only enjoys Joe for his \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Physical qualities
  - b. Conversation



- c. Social connections
  - d. Income
19. What does the narrator call the flirty banter that Anna and David have with each other?  
\_\_\_\_\_.
- a. A mating dance
  - b. An imitation
  - c. A war
  - d. A skit
20. What does Anna compare marriage to? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Wrestling a bear
  - b. Dancing in a minefield
  - c. Skiing blindly downhill
  - d. Raising a child
21. When the narrator goes mad, what does she vow that she will not teach her child? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Time
  - b. Addition
  - c. Gender
  - d. Language
22. Throughout the novel, the narrator experiences a near constant sense of \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Anticipation
  - b. Gratitude
  - c. Alienation
  - d. Confusion
23. What does the narrator refer to as a brain disease? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Young lovers
  - b. Americans
  - c. Optimists
  - d. Men
24. The \_\_\_\_\_ that has been shot and hanged becomes a representation of American destruction of nature.
- a. Beaver
  - b. Heron
  - c. Fox
  - d. Owl
25. What does David demand that Anna wear at all times? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Makeup
  - b. A dress

- c. Sunglasses
  - d. High heels
26. The events of the novel take place in \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Britain
  - b. France
  - c. The US
  - d. Canada
27. We do not know the narrator's \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Name
  - b. Age
  - c. Appearance
  - d. All of these
28. Who served in the Vietnam War? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. David
  - b. Joe
  - c. Paul
  - d. The Narrator's Father
29. Who is still alive in the narrator's family? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Her Father
  - b. No One
  - c. Her Mother
  - d. Her Brother
30. What was going on during the narrator's childhood?\_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Iraq War
  - b. WWI
  - c. Vietnam War
  - d. WWII

#### **14.8 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. What is the nature of David and Anna's relationship?
2. Why does the narrator find herself "complicit" in what she deems "Americanism?"
3. Is the novel anti-abortion?
4. What does the narrator discover about her father?

## 14.9 LET US SUM UP

We need to remember:

- The narrator returns to her island childhood home.
- She searches for clues to her father's disappearance.
- She finds mysterious, nonsensical drawings her father made.
- She is plagued by painful but disjointed memories.
- Her boyfriend Joe, proposes marriage, but she refuses.
- She searches unsuccessfully for a rock painting.
- She goes diving to find an underwater rock painting.
- She sinks into delusion. Her father's body is found.
- She stays on island, living as an animal.
- She returns to sanity, ready to move on from her grief.

## 14.10 ANSWER KEY

### CYP

1. unnamed
2. True
3. False
4. True
5. father
6. True
7. False

### MCQs

1. d.) 1972, 2.b.) McClelland and Stewart, 3. b.) Second, 4. c.) 1981, 5. b.) Crippled, 6. b.) Her father, 7. a.) A book of fairy tales, 8. c.) Wall paintings, 9. d.) A dead child, 10. d.) Joe, 11. c.) The simple life, 12. d.) A brain tumour, 13. b.) The narrator's brother, 14. a.) A wildlife preservation agency, 15. d.) She had one arm, 16. a.) To become an animal, 17. b.) Death, 18. a.) Physical qualities, 19. d.) A skit, 20. c.) Skiing blindly downhill, 21. d.) Language, 22. c.) Alienation, 23. b.) Americans, 24. b.) Heron, 245 a.) Makeup, 26. d.) Canada, 27. d.) All of

these, 28. b.) Joe, 29. d.) Her Brother, 30. d.) WWII

#### 14.11 SUGGESTED READING

Atwood, Margaret. *Surfacing*. London. Little Brown Group. Ebook. 2012.

Nathalie Cooke, *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*. ECW Press, 1998. Print.

Marion Wynne-Davies, *Margaret Atwood*. Oxford University Press, 2010.  
Print [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret\\_Atwood](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Atwood)

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Margaret-Atwood>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/margaret-atwood>

<https://www.sparknotes.com/author/margaret-atwood/>



## ***SURFACING* BY MARGARET ATWOOD**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 15.0 Introduction
- 15.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 15.2 Introduction to *Surfacing*
- 15.3 Summary (Chapter 1-27)
- 15.4 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 15.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 15.6 Answer Key (MCQs)
- 15.7 Glossary
- 15.8 Suggested Reading

### **15.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear Learner, in the previous lesson you were introduced to the novel *Surfacing* and its characters. Now this lesson will offer you a detailed chapter-wise summary of *Surfacing*.

### **15.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME**

The objective of this lesson is to introduce the learner to the detailed summary of *Surfacing* to appreciate the novel and also to prepare for semester end exam.

After going through the lesson you will

- be able to explain the plot as well as the major events happening in the novel
- appreciate Margaret Atwood's craftsmanship by analysing how skilfully she has weaved the various elements of the story in the plotline.

### **15.2 INTRODUCTION TO *SURFACING***

*Surfacing* (1972), Margaret Atwood's second novel, was the first to bring her widespread, international acclaim. The novel is about an unnamed narrator (female), whose search for her missing father leads her to make several important, but disturbing discoveries about herself. The novel is set in Canada, in a town bordering Quebec. The tension between Canadians and Americans are one of the important part in this novel. After receiving word of her father's mysterious disappearance, the narrator travels with her boyfriend, Joe, and her

friends Anna and David, who are married. Her friends, working on a movie called Random Samples, plan to use the trip to acquire footage. Once back in her hometown, the narrator searches out an old friend of her father, named Paul; in hope of finding answers. Paul is unable to give her any useful information about her father's disappearance. The narrator and her friends then hire a man from town to take them to her father's cabin, which sits on an island in the middle of a large nearby lake.

When they arrive at the island, they unpack their things and set up camp in the abandoned cabin. After some initial searching of the surrounding area, it becomes clear that their searching will lead them nowhere. The narrator finds a stack of papers among her father's things, with strange, apparently random words scrawled on them. The narrator was worried about her father's mental state.

The narrator's time on the island is interrupted by several vivid flashbacks, through which we get to know her past. The scenes involve her family, previous marriage, and child. She worries about her relationship with Joe, not sure she actually loves him. She worries, in fact, over her increasing emotional numbness to life generally, when Evans, the man from town who boated the narrator and her party to island, come back to take them away David decide to stay longer. The narrator is uncomfortable with this, because she fears her father, now insane is somewhere nearby.

Flashbacks to her wedding and the birth of her child upset the narrator; something is "off" about them. The narrator also notices how David and Anna's marriage, on close inspection, is actually very poor. David cheats Anna and emotionally abuses her. Amid the growing tensions, when one day Joe unexpectedly proposes to the narrator, she turns him down. Eventually, the narrator notices her father's strange drawings that refer to ancient rock paintings he had been researching. She resolves to seek out the paintings in question, hoping she will find some useful information. The paintings are not easy to find, but finally, the narrator thinks she has figured out where she might locate one. Because of changes in the water table since it was painted, this one, she guesses, will be located underwater.

After searching out the location of the painting, the narrator dives down to find it. Instead of the painting, she discovers what she believes to be a dead child. This effects her memories, which causes her to understand her past with her ex-husband and child in a completely, new way. Traumatized by the memory, the narrator begins to lose her grip on sanity. David attempts to seduce the narrator, out of revenge for Anna cheating on him with Joe, but she refuses him.

Soon, the police come to the island with the news. The narrator's father has been found by some local fishermen— he is dead. The narrator is totally shattered. Her condition becomes psychotic. She destroys David's film and hides from her friends, who are forced to leave the island without her. After their departure, she went to the cabin, destroying most of its contents. From that days, she lives the life of a wild beast : eating wild plants, sleeping outside. She

begins to believe she will be able to summon her parents from the dead; but only when she follows very specific rules. She also becomes convinced she is pregnant with a divine child. Eventually, she emerges from this psychotic state, and healed her pain. She looks in the mirror and sees she is just herself, a natural woman. When Joe comes back to the island to look for her, she watches him from the woods. She realizes she trust him, and she might even come to love him.

### **15.3 SUMMARY (CHAPTER 1-27)**

#### **Chapter – 1**

As the novel opens, readers are introduced to the narrator, a young woman who remains unnamed for the duration of the story. She is travelling to her childhood home in Quebec, Canada with the help of friends who own a car, and she is accompanied by her lover, Joe. The narrator and Joe ride in the back of the car, and their friends, David and Anna, are up front. They pass through a small city. As the car travels north, the narrator notices how things have changed since she was last in the area. She remembers childhood scenes with her brother, and she considers the profile of her boyfriend, who becomes uncomfortable as she watches him. She thinks about her father, who may be alive or dead - she's not sure.

They pass an area where the American military has built a bunker and come to a house entirely made of glass bottles. David and Joe are making a movie called Random samples, so that they get out to shoot some footage. Then they drive on, passing children playing, a gas station with large stuffed moose dressed as humans, and a roadside crucifix. They approach a village and can see a blue, cool lake ahead. In the village, the narrator felt like how fast it was; in the past it felt like suffering to get here, with vomit from driving on rocky roads.

#### **Chapter – 2**

They stop at the motel with a bar and the narrator says she is going out on her own. The others are a little relieved, and stay to drink beer. The narrator is glad that they have a car so she could get here, and she likes and trusts them, but she knows they do not understand why she is here. They disowned their parents a long time ago, and they do not get why she is looking for her father. She walks through the village and down a dirt road to a house belonging to a man named Paul, a family friend. She asks Paul if her father has come back yet. He says not yet, "but maybe soon." Madame, Paul's wife, makes them tea, and the narrator recalls being there with her mother when her father was visiting Paul. Madame says something to Paul in French, and he translates : "Your mother, she was a good woman, Madame says it is very sad; so young too." The narrator recalls being with her mother in the hospital when she was dying. She had told her mother she would not go to her funeral. Her mother had argued that funerals are not enjoyable.

The narrator asks Paul what happened to her father, and he says he "is just gone." Paul explains that he and the police have looked all over but have seen nothing. Paul asks about her

husband, and she lies and says he's with her. She says (and this is a lie) she is divorced, and has left her child with her ex-husband. She does not have time for this and blocks it. Paul's letter comes to her mind. She says she will go down to the lake and Paul says they already looked three times. She thinks it will be different if she looks herself. Maybe, she gets back her father at the cabin, waiting for her.

### **Chapter – 3**

The narrator walks back toward the motel, stopping briefly at a store and gets food for the group. A woman with a light mustache is behind the counter, and two men in Elvis Presley haircuts are at the counter in the back. She thinks about how there used to be just one store in the town, run by a woman who only had one hand, and she always wondered what happened but never asked. She arrives back at the bar. Joe asks her if she learned anything and she says no. She remembers their first meeting and considers maybe he likes her because she shows no emotion. She says she would like to go down to the lake for a couple days to look around, and her friends agree. David says he wants to catch a fish. She recalls her father being upset when she left her husband and child; he considers leaving your own child an "unpardonable sin."

The four friends hire a man named Evans to take them by boat to the island where the narrator's father's house is. They pull up to the dock. Anna remarks that it is good to get away from the city for a bit. It starts to drizzle and she thinks of how the lake is tricky, for the weather shifts quickly and people drown every year. The narrator thinks of her brother falling off the dock when they were kids and nearly drowning. He got out of the enclosure where he played and her mother was alone in the house and checked on him and he was not there, so she went down to the water and saw her brother. This was before the narrator was born but she can remember it clearly as if she saw it.

### **Chapter – 4**

The four unload their baggage from Evan's boat, pay him and watch him motor away. They take their bags along the dock and walked toward the cabin. The narrator thinks about her child and about her sense the child never belonged to her : it was her husband's. She unlocks the door and everyone goes inside, poking around and finally settling down for a beer. She sees no evidence of what happened to her father. She lights a fire and grabs a knife to go to the garden. The garden has been rearranged since she was last there. Anna asks if the narrator is okay and she says sure, surprised by the question. They eat dinner, wash up and go down to the dock to smoke pot. The narrator is glad the others are with her because if she were alone the loneliness would overtake her. David starts to talk about the dead animals this country was built on. Anna chastises him for lecturing and tells him they're not his students. She strokes his face lovingly and the narrator wonders what their secret is. They have been married nine years and the narrator remembers how when she got married her husband changed and started expecting things from her. She holds Joe's hand and listens to the call of a loon echoing over the lake.



## **Chapter – 5**

The next morning, before dawn, the narrator wake up to the sound of birds. She looks at Joe, still sleeping, and tries to decide whether she loves him or not. She thinks she would “rather have him around than not; though it would be nice if he meant something more” to her. She looks at the pictures on the walls

- her own childhood drawings - and a jacket that had belonged to her mother, now hanging at the foot of the bed. The narrator gets out of bed and gets dressed. Anna is putting on makeup and the narrator tells her she does not have to do that since there is no one here to look at her. Anna replies that David does not like to see her without it, but then contradicts herself and says he does not know she wears it.

After her breakfast, the narrator makes plan to go to search for her father. The four go out into the forest, and as they walk along the trail she recalls being with her husband, years ago, when he seemed perfect. She also recalls a conversation with Anna while they were cleaning up breakfast. She’d asked Anna how she and David manage to stay together. She told Anna her own marriage fell apart because she was too young. Then she thinks about reading survival manuals, rather than romance magazines, as a teen.

They find no sign of the narrator’s father, and she realizes the futility of trying to find him in the dense woods. They turn around and go back to the cabin.

## **Chapter – 6**

The narrator feels there is nothing to do but wait. She wants “to go back to where there is electricity and distraction.” Joe and David are canoeing and Anna is reading a book. She observes how like her own younger self Anna looks, and how like her brother and father Joe and David look. She thinks this leaves her playing the role of her mother. But she’s not her mother, who she remembers going on long walks in the woods and feeding the birds in the afternoons. The narrator is a commercial artist and currently illustrating a book of children’s folk tales. She begins an illustration of a Phoenix and a princess, briefly recalling making childhood drawings at this same table. After a few unsuccessful attempts at the illustrations, she gives up.

Anna comes inside and asks her, abruptly, what her father had been doing up here. She answers, “He was living.” He’d enjoyed isolation, she thinks, and he was a pacifist. So he withdrew from human society to an island in “the most remote take he could find.” The narrator looks through a stack of papers left by her father and finds them to be unintelligible drawings with nonsense words on them. She realizes he might have gone insane. She puts the papers away as Joe and David return to the cabin.

## **Chapter – 7**

After supper, David decides he wants to go fishing so the narrator digs for worms near the compost heap. Anna wants to stay behind and the narrator is nervous about this, wondering

if her father will be attracted by the light and come back. She lies and says she needs Anna in the canoe for extra weight. They push off and the shore recedes, though they follow its line. David is not catching anything so the narrator takes out a frog that she uses for such an occasion. Anna calls her cold-blooded but it works, and David catches a fish and the narrator brains it. They are joyful and the narrator takes the fish and feels a little sick since she has killed something but she decides that is irrational, since it is okay to kill some things like food and enemies and mosquitos.

David wants to keep fishing but is having no luck. They hear a big powerboat and see it round a corner, roaring with a big American flag in the front and back. There are two "irritated - looking businessmen with pug-dogs faces and nifty outfits" with Claude from the village. One American yells out to see if they caught anything and she says no. They grumble. The narrator says it is time to leave because if the Americans catch one they will be here all night and if they don't, they'll roar away and their boat will make too much noise. The narrator is relaxed since she is leaving tomorrow. Her father can have the island to himself for his private madness. She respects that, and she will burn his drawings before they go because they are "evidence of the wrong sort."

## **Chapter – 8**

The next morning as the narrator prepares the fish, David and Joe film its innards for Random Samples. After breakfast she begins to pack up, but David says he wants to stay another week, and Joe agrees. Anna is not thrilled with the idea, and neither is the narrator. When Evans arrives David arranges for him to come back in a week while the narrator retreats to the outhouse. She recalls hiding from people during birthday parties and other social occasions, as well as being the victims in other children's games. These memories of childhood cause her to question the nature of memory and to review her life's narrative to make sure it still "fits". She senses her memory is intact until one point, the time she "left," when it becomes disjointed. She has a moment of panic, but when David knocks on the outhouse door she comes back to herself.

Later she goes for a swim and remembers jumping off the dock. One time her brother had nearly drowned here, but their mother saved him. As a child she had worried about where her brother would have gone if he'd died. She also remembers diving when she was young and staring upward at the sky through the water. But now she doubts, if she could do that.

## **Chapter – 9**

The narrator has a growing sense of uneasiness about her own past and about staying on the island. She feels her father's presence and fears he may be in danger, and she thinks her friends should not go off alone. She takes crumbs out to feed the birds. Joe follows ; he looks like he wants to talk. But they are interrupted by David, who wants to chop wood. David and Joe go off with an axe and a hatchet to look for firewood. The narrator decides this is safe

since they have weapons. She and Anna go to the garden and pulls weeds. She remembers her parents digging the garden and her mother scaring off a bear that had raided their food. Anna asks her that afternoon if she is on the pill and she says no; both women had issues with it. The narrator thinks of how it was almost possible to have love without fear and sex without risk but not anymore. She shudders at memories of giving birth and how chemical and foreign it was. She cannot remember why her husband was not with her at the time.

When Joe and David return with a log, they want to capture some shots of it for Random samples. Later, after everyone is in bed, the narrator hears Anna and David having sex.

## **Chapter – 10**

Time seems to move slowly as the narrator increasingly dreads what might happen if they encounter her father. She wants to “get them off the island, to ... save all of them from knowledge. David fishes, Anna reads, the narrator works on her illustrations, and Joe watches her. Her sketch of a giant ends up looking like a football player. Joe seems bored and unhappy. She realizes it is unfair for her to stay with him because she gives him “unlimited supplies of nothing.”

The narrator proposes going to pick blue berries. The four pack a lunch, get in the canoes, and paddle to another island, which is covered with blueberry bushes. As they pick, Joe says they should get married. She says no : they already live together so it wouldn't make any difference. He says he thinks she doesn't care about him. She insists she does care, while thinking about leaving him. She tells him she was married before and had a child, and she doesn't want to go through it again. She recalls, with distaste, the day of her wedding.

Later they all eat blueberry pie and talk politics. David, Joe and Anna read books and old issues of National Geographic while the narrator looks through old scrapbooks. Afterward, she hides the scrapbooks under her mattress.

## **Chapter – 11**

Joe is still upset with the narrator and ignores her. David makes dumb jokes about his behavior. David and Anna wonder what's wrong. As the narrator feeds the birds. They will not fly down to eat from her hand, and she remembers her mother said people frightened them. Meanwhile, Paul arrives at the dock in his boat accompanied by another man- Bill Malmstrom, a member of the Wildlife Protection Association of America. Malmstrom wants to buy the home and land as a retreat for members. The narrator says it isn't for sale at the moment. Malmstrom gives her a card and thanks her. After the two men leave, David says that the Americans want this land because it will be strategically important during the imminent war. David asks what she said and she said she refused, and he calls her a good girl and says her heart, and the rest of her, is in the right place.

Later, Anna tells the narrator David has had several affairs. He is honest about them,

and when she becomes jealous, he says that jealousy is “bourgeois.” “Really,” she says, “it’s just to show me he can do it and get away with it.” Anna warns the narrator David might hit on her to make Anna jealous. The narrator is disappointed Anna and David’s marriage isn’t as good as she thought.

## **Chapter – 12**

The narrator goes to the lake to rinse out a dirty pail. Joe is lying on the dock. Back in the cabin alone, the narrator again looks through her father’s mad drawings, hoping to find a will or other document. But then she finds a letter from a researcher at a university thanking her father for the tracings of the rock paintings of the area. A few pages of a book on the topic are included. The narrator realizes the deranged drawings are not her father’s at all, but tracings of ancient art. Her earlier hypothesis disproven, she concludes he is sane and therefore must just be dead. Notes made on the drawings seem to be locations where he’d found the rock paintings. She decides to visit the places, starting with White Birch lake, which is “connected” to the main lake by a portage,” or a place to carry canoes over land.

Anna comes inside from sunbathing and asks what is wrong with Joe. The narrator replies he wants them to get married and she does not want to. Anna suggests she go down and talk to Joe. The narrator goes down to the dock and asks what is wrong. He replies that she knows. He asks her if she loves him because that is the only thing that matters. She admits she wants to, and does in a way. Back in the cabin, the narrator looks through an old photo album, trying to “tell when the change occurred” – when she stopped feeling emotions. She sees photos of her mother and of herself as a child at different ages : “not me but the missing part of me.” But the photos don’t answer her question.

## **Chapter – 13**

The next morning Joe and narrator decide she will move out when they get back to the city. She knows he does not love her; it is an idea of himself he loved and he wanted someone - anyone to join him. The four set off in canoes to find the rock painting location she’d identified from her father’s papers. When they stop for lunch, they eat and discuss a variety of topics, and David makes some rude comments in typical fashion. David tells a story and when Anna mentions something about women, he tells her to leave out the women’s liberation stuff. The narrator says she thinks men should be superior and Anna says disgustedly that she is brain-washed.

Around four o’ clock they pass two Americans on an official-looking surveying trip, chain sawing trees. David expresses his dislike for Americans. He starts yelling ‘Pigs!’ at them but they only smile and wave, thinking he is greeting them. They gather all the things to begin the portage process. The others have not done it and it is laborious. Suddenly the narrator smells something, and then turns to see a dead blue heron hanging upside down by a rope, its wings fallen open and its eye looking at the narrator.

## **Chapter – 14**

David and Joe take some shots of the dead heron for Random samples. The narrator assumes the bird was killed by the Americans they had passed earlier. Since herons aren't good for food, there is no reason to kill one. While fishing, the narrator recalls a childhood memory of going inside an abandoned tugboat and seeing drawings of vaginas on the walls. She had been shocked they were "cut off like that from the bodies that ought to have gone with them."

Later the narrator talks to Anna about David. Anna worries David will be angry because she forget her makeup. The narrator assures Anna he won't notice but Anna replies that of course he will. She says he has all these rules for her and that if she breaks one then she gets punished, but he keeps changing them so she doesn't even know what they are. He likes to make her cry; she says, and that if anyone mentioned this to him he had just laugh. The narrator suggests she get divorced and Anna says sometimes she thinks David wants her to do that. They walk to the fire and Anna pretends everything is normal. That night in their tent, Joe tells narrator she won and they can go back to normal, but she says no. He tenses in anger and she thinks he might hit her; but he turns away. She listens to the noises outside, but none are dangerous.

## **Chapter – 15**

In the morning, the narrator steps outside the tent and dips her face into the water of the lake. She cleans the fish and they eat it for breakfast. They decided to try and find the rock paintings, which would be in a bay near the American's camp. The narrator looks at the shore and the map, knowing her father had been here. But after looking in what seems to be the right place, there is still nothing. Her friends are disappointed. They head back past the American's camp, but when they start talking to them; the men says they are actually Canadian. The narrator is furious. David wants to stay and talk baseball with them, but the narrator hurries them away from her "own anger as well as from the friendly mental killers." They pass the heron again, which smells even worse and is covered in flies.

She remembers how her brother would capture little creatures and keep them in his "laboratory." When she set them free, he was enraged, and her brother would just keep the creatures somewhere else. She felt helpless. When they pass the surveyors, she thinks of how everything is ruined, everything is bought and sold.

## **Chapter – 16**

Evans is coming tomorrow to take them back, and the narrator is trying desperately to find something to vindicate her father. She obsessively checks the map and decides to go out again. She looks for her father's camera but cannot find it. However, the location is underwater, so she'll have to dive to find it. She puts on a sweatshirt over her bathing suit and goes down to the lake, where unseen, she watches as David tries get Anna to pose naked for

Random samples. Anna accuses David of trying to humiliate her. Anna is getting mad and Joe tells David to stop, but David tells Joe to shut up. At last, Anna furiously agree. The narrator sees Anna emerge crying hard, her “pink face was dissolving.”

After Anna and Joe leave, the narrator approaches David, still on the dock. The narrator thinks how the two of them are like each other since they donot know how to love and there is something missing in them. She had not meant to say anything but she asks why he did that. She is not defending Anna; She only wants to understand. He says, “she asks for it.” She makes him do these things by going off with other men. The narrator takes a canoe and paddles away.

## **Chapter – 17**

The narrator paddles toward a cliff marking the location of the submerged painted rock she seeks. She thinks about the heron, suffering and dying, and likens it to Christ - something that has died instead of us. When she reaches the cliff, she stands up in the canoe and looks down at the water, where she sees her own image. She repeatedly dives down and surfaces, searching for the painted rock. After several attempts, exhausted, she finally sees something. But it isn't a painting on a rock. It is “a dark oval trailing limbs... something I knew about, a dead thing.” She is terrified. When she emerges she sees Joe in another canoe, coming out to make sure she was okay. She lays at the bottom of the canoe with her eyes closed. She knows what it was. She couldn't accept the ruin and so she concocted a story for herself about the ring on her finger. The man was not her husband and did not even come with her to the abortion. The man assured her the abortion was normal and easy and the fetus was not a person but only an animal. Before leaving that place, she leaves her sweatshirt as an offering to the gods that were there and who had given this place their power. Joe follows, wanting to know what's wrong with her. He wants to love her but she does not want him in her because he is “one of the killers.” She tells him no and he becomes angry. He stops and gets in his canoe and paddles furiously away.

## **Chapter – 18**

When the narrator returns to the cabin, it is empty and feels unfamiliar. She sits on a swing outside and thinks about the affair that led to her pregnancy she is grateful to her father left her the puzzle of his drawings and map marking to solve, for it was a gift that led her to the sacred place. But now she feels she will not be complete until she has found a gift from her mother. She walks along a trail, thinking about this, when David approaches her. He tries to seduce her and when she resists, tell her Anna and Joe are off right now having sex. She tells him he does not turn her on and he curses at her. She feels a sense of power fill her. She can see he is an impostor and a pastiche, covered with patches of America. She is also certain she has to find what her mother left her, the thing she hid. What her father left her is not enough to protect her, it is the knowledge but there are other gods, gods not just of the head.



David worriedly says he is sorry and not to tell Anna. At dinner, there is an icy awkwardness. The narrator can see how sad David and Anna are and how Anna is also desperate, her only weapon her body. The narrator says to Anna and Joe that David approached her for sex and she refused him. David accuses her of hating men, but she thinks; she really hates Americans.

## **Chapter – 19**

After dinner, Anna volunteers to wash dishes, as if in an apology for taking David's side. She sings to avoid talking. The narrator is wondering about her mother's gift to her, and decides that she would have hidden it somewhere that would have been likely for her to find. She looks all over the cabin and finds nothing until she steps into her room, upon which she immediately feels the power. It has to be the scrapbooks. Her search is interrupted by the arrival of four men : Claude, Paul and two game wardens. They have come to report some Americans found her father's body while fishing. David relays the news. She believes David and Anna are making it up to hurt her.

The narrator goes back inside her room to look at the scrapbook. She fixates on an image she made of a woman with a round stomach, a baby sitting inside her looking out, and a man with horns on his head and a barbed tail. She decides the baby is herself and the man is God; who also has attributes of the devil. She feels like the others outside her room are already turning metal, "skins galvanizing." She looks at her palm, which Anna once read, noticing the beak in the lines. Their voice murmur. She realizes they are avoiding her and thinks she should be filled with moving. Yet no one has died and everything is alive and waiting to become alive.

## **Chapter – 20**

Joe returns to the narrator in bed. He thinks she is in pain and bends his body away from her but she touches him and he puts his arms around her. She knows he thinks he has won. He is full of smiles and wants her to stay with him. The narrator's sense of herself as an animal; and of humans as animals who have abandoned their natural state. She leads him outside into the woods but keeps him close as there is something she has protection against but he does not. She rejects the "chemically treated hides" (clothing and bedding) and behaves like an animal. He tells her he loves her and she guides him into her. It is the right time, and she can feel her lost child surfacing from the lake; forgiving her. The time she will do it alone, perhaps on a champ of dry leaves. She wants to get pregnant, have the baby without medical intervention like an animal, and raise it without language.

## **Chapter – 21**

The next morning, Joe wants to make love again, but the narrator is not interested. After breakfast, as they pack up to leave, they talk about Random samples. Anna points out they didn't take any footage of the narrator, and David it would be good to have her with

someone like himself on camera. David and Joe leave for a moment and the narrator picks up the film. She starts unwinding it. Anna tells her she better not do that but does not interfere. The film uncoils into the water.

Anna regards her and says they will get her. David comes back and she jumps into a canoe. Anna tells them what she did, and she starts paddling away. When she looks behind her, she sees David trying to salvage the film. She paddles into the bay, then floats for a bit. She lies down. The sun is hot and the energy of decay turns to growth. She feels her body change. She hears the motor of Evan's boat in the distance. She leaves the canoe and hides herself. She can glimpse them looking, then conceding defeat. They are all Americans to her now. After they leave, there is silence. She is by herself. This is what she wanted.

## **Chapter – 22**

The others locked the doors as they left : the narrator breaks a window to get in. Inside she cleans up the glass and then takes a nap. When she wakes, she is hungry, so she goes down to the garden. This is when she cries for the first time, accusing her parents for dying and not considering how she would feel. Later she cooks and eats, then goes to the outside. The thought of the closed door scares her. The house is still safe, which is important since she does not have her power anymore. She stuffed up the windows and then goes to bed since there is nothing else to do. It starts raining and she imagines the lake rising. She wakes in the middle of the night to silence and becomes afraid; it is like her hands will not move. Her parents want in but she cannot help them.

## **Chapter – 23**

In the morning, she knows that some things are different now. She reverses the mirror so she cannot see it, stops brushing her hair, burns all of her illustrations, take off her ring, rips up the scrapbooks, destroy the albums and the map, smashes all the glass, and clears a space. She keeps one blanket for the time until her fur grows. She wets herself in the lake, takes off her clothes, and rests on the sand. The earth golds her body down as it rotates. She leaves her false body in the lake. She is hungry but can no longer go back in the cabin, so she finds whatever she can in the garden. She makes a burrow near the woodpiles and sleep like a cat.

## **Chapter – 24**

In the morning, the narrator wakes up, her body aches and she is hungry, but she can no longer go any closer to the cabin. She rests, watching the plants grow. She finds she is now forbidden to go through the gate into the garden. She envisions the baby growing inside her like the drawing she made of herself as a body. She feels other changes happen; her vision is different; and she is transparent. She has become one with the animals and trees.

As she returns to the cabin, she has a vision of her mother standing in front of it and feeding the birds. But as she approaches, full of fear, her mother disappears. The narrator thinks



her mother has become one of the blue joys she was feeding.

### **Chapter – 25**

The narrator wakes up the next morning to the sound of a powerboat. There are five men in it. Two climb the hill to the cabin and go inside. She is not sure who they are. She runs and hides, and they eventually leave. When she returns, she is bleeding and limping; but she feels the paths are forbidden to her, so she walks beside the path. As she approaches the garden, she sees what she thinks is her father. But when he turns toward her, she thinks is her father. But when she turns toward her, she has other thoughts. She has a vision of a fish jumping from the water, transforming into a painted fish, then back into a real fish. She thinks they are made by whatever was standing there. Then she realizes they are her own footprints.

### **Chapter – 26**

The next morning, she realizes her parent have departed and she is the only alive on the island. “The rules are over” and she can go anywhere. She feels certain her parents had been there and they spoke to her “in the other language.”

It is clear now that she cannot stay here forever since there is not enough food. She knows she is strong enough to make it back to the village. There are no gods to help her now, as they have receded and gone back to the past. She will have to live in the normal way now. Her father and mother dwindle and become human. She knows what people would think if they found her - that she was crazy, not just “a natural woman, state of nature.” She just laughs.

### **Chapter – 27**

Finally, in the last chapter, the narrator has accepted as normal and even good, something she once found frightening - change. She now realizes, she does have power. She is not a victim, and in fact she had allowed herself to believe she was powerless partly to avoid taking responsibility for the use of power.

She is outside when the boat comes. It is Paul and Joe is with him. Joe gets out and starts calling her name. It is important that he is here, that he is offering her maybe “captivity in any of its forms, a new freedom?’ She knows that if she goes with him they will have to talk, and the words will eventually fail, but she sees now he is not an American, he is only half - formed and that is why she can trust him. Her body tenses forward, but her feet don’t move yet. He calls again, he will not wait forever. Everything is quiet.

### **15.4 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)**

Dear learner, now that you have read the detailed summary of *Surfacing*, try to answer these questions. If you encounter any difficulty you can check out the answer key.

1. When was the novel published? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) 1972
  - b) 1995
  - c) 1980
  - d) 1969
2. The novel takes place in \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) Canada
  - b) Britain
  - c) France
  - d) The US
3. We do not know the narrator's \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) name
  - b) age
  - c) appearance
  - d) all of these
4. The narrator is a/an \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) poet
  - b) author
  - c) fine artist
  - d) illustrator
5. Who served in the Vietnam War? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) The narrator's father
  - b) Joe
  - c) Paul
  - d) David
6. Who is still alive in the narrator's family? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) Her father
  - b) Her brother
  - c) Her mother
  - d) No one
7. How long has the narrator known Anna? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) Two years
  - b) Five months
  - c) Nine months
  - d) Two months
8. What is "Random Samples?" \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) Anna's paperback
  - b) A poem David wrote
  - c) David and Joe's film
  - d) The book the narrator is illustrating
9. What was going on during the narrator's childhood? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a) Iraq War

- b) WWI
  - c) Vietnam War
  - d) WWII
10. What do Paul and the narrator exchange? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) Bread
  - b) Gossip
  - c) Newspapers
  - d) Vegetables
11. Her mother's diary was filled with \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) factual information
  - b) drawings
  - c) philosophical musings
  - d) emotional interludes
12. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator seems to have \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) a husband from whom she is separated
  - b) a husband and child
  - c) a husband with whom she is together
  - d) a child only
13. When she returns to the village, she thinks \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) it seems hostile
  - b) she never wants to leave again
  - c) it has not changed at all
  - d) it seems like it has changed
14. What does David want to do on this trip? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) Fish
  - b) Rock climb
  - c) Birdwatch
  - d) Hike
15. What of her mother's is still in the house? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) A notebook
  - b) A leather jacket
  - c) A necklace
  - d) A shawl
16. What kind of book is NOT in the cabin? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) Old paperbacks
  - b) Classics
  - c) Bibles
  - d) Scottish poetry
17. How long have David and Anna been married? \_\_\_\_\_.
- a) 10 years
  - b) 5 years
  - c) 9 years

d) 1 year

18. How does the narrator feel about Joe? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) She is afraid of him.  
b) She detests him.  
c) She likes him enough.  
d) She loves him.
19. What were the pictures she'd drawn in her room of? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) Animals  
b) Explosions  
c) Trees  
d) Glamorous women
20. Her father can best be described as \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) creative  
b) witty  
c) spiritual  
d) logical
21. Her father hated \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) women  
b) Christianity  
c) nature  
d) art
22. Her mother loved what creature? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) The crows  
b) The jays  
c) The herons  
d) The loons
23. What does Anna say she has to do for David? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) Be sexual  
b) Wear makeup  
c) Dress nicely  
d) Be thin
24. What is the narrator illustrating? \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) Grimms Fairy Tales  
b) Quebec Folk Tales  
c) Greek myths  
d) Hans Christian Anderson fairy tales
25. As a child, she wanted to go to \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) the United States  
b) Sunday School  
c) a museum  
d) the city

## 15.5 LET US SUM UP

Margaret Atwood's second novel, *Surfacing*, earned critical and popular acclaim in Canada and the United States after its publication in 1972. *Surfacing* is structured around the point of view of a young woman who travels with her boyfriend and two married friends to a remote island on a lake in Northern Quebec, where she spent much of her childhood, to search for her missing father. Accompanied by her lover and another young couple, she becomes caught up in her past and in questioning her future. This psychological mystery tale presents a compelling study of a woman who is also searching for herself. Readers praise the novel's style, characterizations, and themes. Critic Patricia F. Goldblatt comments in her essay on Atwood's protagonists that in her construction of the main character in *Surfacing*, Atwood proves "to her and to us that we all possess the talent and the strength to revitalize our lives and reject society's well-trodden paths that suppress the human spirit. She has shown us that we can be vicariously empowered by our surrogate, who not only now smiles but winks back at us, daring us to reclaim our own female identities."

Margaret Atwood in her novel, *Surfacing*, presents an account of trauma voiced by an unnamed female protagonist. Along with her boyfriend, Joe, and a married couple, David and Anna, she sets out to her village in North Quebec in search of her missing father. Although, David and Joe go to the trip with their agenda of shooting a film, "Random Samples," as they remain oblivious to the feelings of the women in the novel. In 'Surfacing' the narrative function of the author is to provide a testimony of traumatic emotions of the central female character by making her the narrator who falls prey to her past. Atwood adopts a first person narrative strategy to illustrate the direct representation of overpowering emotions in the protagonist, related to guilt and pain as a confession to the readers.

## 15.6 ANSWER KEY (MCQs)

- |       |       |       |       |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. a  | 2. a  | 3. d  | 4. d  |
| 5. b  | 6. b  | 7. d  | 8. c  |
| 9. d  | 10. d | 11. a | 12. a |
| 13. d | 14. a | 15. b | 16. c |
| 17. c | 18. c | 19. d | 20. d |
| 21. b | 22. b | 23. b | 24. b |
| 25. b |       |       |       |

## 15.7 GLOSSARY

scrawled: write (something) in a hurried, careless way.

psychotic: relating to or affected with a psychosis, that is, a severe mental condition in which thought and emotions are so affected that contact is lost with external reality.

motel: a roadside hotel designed primarily for motorists

unpardonable: a fault or offence too severe to be pardoned; unforgivable

dock: an enclosed area of water in a port for the loading, unloading, and repair of ships

chastise: rebuke or reprimand severely

futility: pointlessness or uselessness.

grumble: complain about something in a bad-tempered way.

hatchet: a small axe with a short handle for use in one hand.

deranged: mad, insane

concocted: create or devise a story or plan.

salvage: rescue a wrecked or disabled ship or its cargo from loss at sea

## **15.8 SUGGESTED READING**

Atwood, Margaret. *Surfacing*. Virago Press, 2009.

Barthes, Roland. "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative". *New Literary History*, translated by Lionel Duisit, vol.6, No.2, Winter, 1975, pp.237-272.



## ***SURFACING* BY MARGARET ATWOOD**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 16.0 Introduction
- 16.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 16.2 Characters
- 16.3 Quest for Identity
- 16.4 Ending of *Surfacing*
- 16.5 Check Your Progress I (CYP I)
- 16.6 Symbolic Significance of the Narrator's diving into the water in *Surfacing*
- 16.7 Wilderness in *Surfacing*
- 16.8 Themes in *Surfacing*
- 16.9 Check Your Progress II (CYP II)
- 16.10 Glossary
- 16.11 Examination Oriented Questions
- 16.12 Let Us Sum Up
- 16.13 Answer Key (CYP I, CYP II)
- 16.14 Suggested Reading

### **16.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear learner, after reading the chapter-wise summary in the previous lesson you are familiar with the novel *Surfacing*. Now this lesson will provide you more clarity by offering insights into the characters, themes, and other important elements characterising the novel.

### **16.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME**

The objective of this lesson is to give a detailed description of the characters and the major thematic concerns in the novel *Surfacing*. This will help the learner to appreciate the novel from different perspectives and also prepare for the semester end exam.

After reading this novel, you will

- be able to analyse the characters and their motivations in the novel that drive the plot, as well as the thematic concerns in the novel
- critique the ecofeminist vision of Margaret Atwood as delineated in this novel and analyse literature and environment from a female point of view

## **16.2 CHARACTERS**

### **Narrator**

The novel's protagonist, an unnamed female narrator, is summoned to her childhood home—a small town on the Quebec border—because her father has gone missing. As she travels to the town and the isolated island where her father's cabin is located, she also embarks on a journey into her own past. While trying to solve the mystery of her father's disappearance, she delves into other mysteries, including the cause of her disconnected memories and lack of emotional connection to her lover, Joe. Over the course of a few weeks, the narrator puts the pieces of herself together. This process means confronting painful suppressed memories, grieving the deaths of her parents, and taking responsibility for her own choices. The journey moves from sanity into delusion and back again. In the end she finds a kind of wholeness and the courage to survive.

### **Anna**

Anna goes with the narrator to find her missing father, but she's never at home in the wilderness as the narrator is. She is uncomfortable being apart from city life and its easy access to luxuries not found on the island. Although at first Anna seems happily married to David, the narrator comes to realize Anna is terribly unhappy. However, it is also clear Anna desperately wants to stay in this unhappy marriage. This situation gives the narrator an opportunity to explore ideas about women and the expectations they face from men and from society. Anna is the embodiment of all the destructive forces at work on women. She is afraid to be seen without makeup. She is humiliated and objectified by her abusive husband. She does little to help herself not play the victim, instead retaliating against David by sleeping with other men. Deeply invested in creating the veneer of pretense required of women, Anna's presence allows the narrator to see clearly the harm these expectations cause. The narrator's declaration of herself as "natural" is a rejection of the kind of womanhood Anna represents.

### **David**

David, full of himself and confident in his power over others, is unlikable from the beginning. While Anna's vulnerability makes her a sympathetic character, David shows no such vulnerability. He is calculated and unfeeling, enjoying the game of emotional abuse and feeling no regret for the way he treats Anna. Even when he strays outside social boundaries—such as trying to coerce the narrator into sex—he deflects the blame onto others. He blames Anna for making him seek out other partners with her own indiscretions. He blames the narrator for her



coldness, accusing her of hating men. David's inability to love is a trait the narrator recognizes in herself as well—a point of commonality that makes her take stock of her own emotions. Unlike David, who seems uninterested in repairing this broken part of himself, the narrator urgently seeks repair. Perhaps seeing the destructiveness of David's lack of love provides incentive for the narrator to seek healing.

### **Joe**

Joe is a quiet man who seems uncomfortable with the intensity of the narrator's personality and deep psychological pain. He makes pottery that is deliberately unusable for the sake of artistic expression, which the narrator takes to be a rebuke of her own commercial art career. He withholds physical affection when the narrator refuses his marriage proposal. He wants to have the relationship on his terms; he wants her declaration of love. He passively goes along with David's schemes, even when they are abusive. He has sex with Anna when the narrator seems to distance herself from him. However, though flawed, his love for the narrator seems authentic. He comes back to the island to look for her, although the others do not. In the end the narrator thinks she can trust him because he, too, is a sufferer like her.

### **Water**

The title of the novel, *Surfacing*, stands as an overall metaphor for the emotional journey of the narrator. She dives into her subconscious, into her memories, into her grief, and into her delusions. She surfaces again having put the parts of her whole self together. The dive she takes to the bottom of the lake symbolically represents the emotional work she must do to face her feelings about her abortion and about her parents' lives and deaths. So the water, and in particular the lake, function as an important symbol of the narrator's subconscious, in which she has buried or submerged painful memories and into which she must go to find healing.

### **Dead Heron**

On the way to find one of the rock paintings, the narrator sees a dead heron hanging by its feet from a tree. She knows herons are not good for food, so there is no good reason to kill one. She assumes Americans killed it since they are known to kill without reason. However, the men who killed the heron turn out to be Canadians, which shocks the narrator. She is disturbed by her inability to tell the difference between Canadians and Americans, and she worries the American influence will end up being too strong for Canadian culture to resist. Thus the dead heron comes to symbolize both the passive victim-hood of Canadian culture and the destructive American influence.

### **Barometer Couple**

The wooden barometer couple—a quaint husband and wife—seen in Paul and Madame's home becomes a symbol of the forces that keep relationships together. At first they seem to represent Paul and Madame; the narrator remarks on how Paul and Madame are just

like carvings. As the novel progresses they come to symbolize all the reasons couples stay together. As the narrator comes to realize, there are a variety of different bonds between couples, and love is not necessarily the only one or even the strongest one. David and Anna's relationship seems based on mutual hate, or at least a mutual struggle for power. Her own parents seemed to share a bond they found in rejecting society together. Until the final moments of the story, her relationship with Joe seems stable only as long as it doesn't stray into the realm of emotion and simply remains a convenient sexual outlet for both. The barometer couple is, ultimately, any couple that is bound together for any reason.

### **Alienation of Women**

*Surfacing* sheds light on the alienation that women, and particularly the narrator experiences living in a patriarchal society. Alienation means a separation or withdrawing of a person or a person's emotions from the values or traditions of his/her society and family. It also means estrangement or separation. Moreover, alienation indicates the loss of a person's connection with his/ her society.

The narrator rebels against social restrictions. She is frustrated by the social rules of her society, and wants to renew herself through her alienation. The narrator without name signifies no real identity and she doesn't belong to the society or culture.

The narrator is upset by the social disturbances imposed upon her throughout her life. Her relationship with her ex-husband, the narrator was grim: "It was my husband's, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator." who causes her trauma when he forces her to abort her baby as he is already married, and has children. She feels guilty: "whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it." for aborting her child.

*Surfacing* deals with the journey of the narrator from the city to her childhood home in the town in the company of her boyfriend, Joe and the married couple, David and Anna. The narrator has to undertake the journey to get rid of the social and familial disturbances like marriage, oppression, abortion, divorce and missing father. She wishes to repress her hurtful experiences as she is considered dead in life. After the trauma of her abortion, her life becomes hard and complex. So, a desire of alienation captures her. On her journey to the town, she feels that she has nothing to do with human beings. By getting close to her past memories and nature, the narrator gets enough courage to renew herself.

Nature is a good source of inspiration. Moreover, the spirits of her parents enable her to recover from her inner turmoil. She becomes mature, wise, and enlightened. Alienation empowers her to face the challenges of life. However, she understands that this life is not completely good or bad, but it has the two sides of good and evil. She also realizes that it is impossible to withdraw herself from the society, so she decides to rejoin the city as a strong woman who cannot be exploited by men. Throughout her alienation, she is taught that instead

of being a victim, she becomes a victor as she emerges from the damages of society and its people. The Narrator fights against the social powers that imposed upon her. Finally, she gets confidence in herself as well as freedom.

### **16.3 QUEST FOR IDENTITY**

*Surfacing* presents the female quest for identity with reference to profession, marriage and motherhood. The novel depicts man's imposition on woman in these matters which disables her intellectually, emotionally and morally. The novel questions and challenges woman's place in traditional discourse and suggest a rejection of such discourse. After her symbolic surfacing from the patriarchy's false reality, the narrator has shaken free of the alienation forced upon her and can reclaim her own identity. She starts by distancing herself from Anna, David, and Joe, all figures who uphold the patriarchy's status quo. The narrator then tries to distance herself from society completely by giving in to her animal instincts. She sheds her complicated human identity and rebuilds one based on an intimate relationship with nature. In this natural state, which is seen by human society to be a form of madness, the narrator can see her life clearly. She recognizes herself as a normal woman, but one who has the power to shape her own life and become an active part of the world around her. After reclaiming her identity, the narrator considers joining Joe on the boat and reentering society as a changed woman.

### **16.4 ENDING OF *SURFACING***

The novel is divided into three parts, with each division focusing on a major stage of the heroic monomyth. An initial reading of *Surfacing* may give the impression that the narrative is disjointed, chaotic, as the narrator's own mind. This is due to the numerous flashbacks that suggest by their form the twists and turns of the protagonist's memories. Nevertheless, the narrator's quest for her missing father, which contains the central action of the novel, moves in straightforward fashion, leading her not only to her father, but to her mother, and finally to herself.

Part I of *Surfacing* begins with the narrator, who remains unnamed throughout the novel, "venturing forth" to seek her father, a retired botanist, who is missing, perhaps dead, on an isolated island in the Canadian wilderness. She seems an unlikely hero, or at best reluctant, almost preferring not to find him, having dissociated herself from her family because of an event in her life which she cannot share with them, indeed cannot face herself. Part I of *Surfacing* ends with the narrator pushing herself "reluctantly into the lake," an image that serves as a metaphor to reveal the protagonist's incipient descent into the self to discover within her psyche the split between the head and feeling. As she says: "I'm not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate."

Part II of the novel initiates the protagonist into the mysterious realm of the self where the possibilities of reintegration of the two halves can be seen. If she can find her father, she

believes, he may have the answer to dispel the “illusion” that body and head are separate. Her initiation into the depths of the self has allowed her to recognize the split within her, but now she must find some way to heal that wound. To see is not necessarily to act. The narrator realizes that “the power from my father’s intercession wasn’t enough to protect me, it gave only knowledge and there were more gods than his, his were the gods of the head, antlers rooted in the brain. Not only how to see but to act.” What she requires is the “thing her mother had hidden,” and she finds it in the scrapbooks her mother had saved, a pictograph the narrator herself had drawn: “On the left was a woman with a round moon stomach: the baby was sitting up inside her gazing out. Opposite her was a man with horns on his head like cow horns and a barbed tail.” This drawing is one of the most important and one of the most ambiguous images in the novel. Whatever meaning the picture had for the narrator as a child, “its first meaning lost now like the meanings of the rock paintings,” she has to read “[its] new meaning with the help of the power,” that is, the transformative power she has attained through her discovery of her dead father. The narrator never explicitly states the meaning of the pictograph, but rather enacts its meaning. The drawing suggests a way for her of closing “the break” in her psyche.

Part III of the novel focuses on the preparation of the narrator for her return to community, her “surfacing”. The impregnation of the narrator by Joe in the last part of the novel has been viewed by Rosemary Sweet apple as reinforcement of a stereotypical relationship between men and women: man is “divine and infernal;” woman is a “potentially creative victim.” Moreover, as far as Sweet apple is concerned, the meaning of the moon-mother (which the narrator acts out) and the horned man (Joe) “turn out to be no different from the original meaning of the picture she made as a child.”<sup>15</sup> But the narrator does not believe the meaning is the same.

The end of *Surfacing* appears somewhat, if not completely, positive, as the narrator re-enters her own time, affirming: “This above all, to refuse to be a victim ... withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death.” The final line of the novel, “The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing” is played off against the protagonist’s possible return to community inherent with its probability of failure. But solitude would be withdrawal, which the narrator has already rejected, as if realizing that if nature demands “nothing” of her, it also gives her “nothing.” The ambivalence expressed at the end of *Surfacing* suggests the conflict of the problematic hero of the novel after he has attained self-recognition: “The ideal thus formed irradiates the individual’s life as its imminent meaning; but the conflict between what is and what should be has not been abolished and cannot be abolished in the sphere wherein these events take place — the life sphere of the novel; only a maximum conciliation ... is attainable.”<sup>21</sup> The protagonist is only aware of her becoming, which alone allows her to choose her future.

## 16.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS I (CYP I)

Dear learner, now that you have read in detail about the characters of the novel *Surfacing* you can help yourself check your familiarisation with them by trying to answer the questions given below. Go through the section again in case of doubts and the Answer Key provided at the end of the lesson for your assistance.

1. The protagonist goes to a small town on the \_\_\_\_\_ border.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ goes with the narrator to find her missing father.
3. Ana is married to \_\_\_\_\_.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ comes back to the island to look for the narrator.
5. On the way to find one of the rock paintings, the narrator sees a dead \_\_\_\_\_.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ symbolises the forces that keep relationships together.

## 16.6 SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NARRATOR'S DIVING INTO THE WATER IN *SURFACING*

The protagonist's diving into the water has a great symbolic significance in the novel *Surfacing*. When she dives into the water, her past memories start resurfacing and bring forth a transformation in her life. It is a crucial event, for she descends into her subconscious mind, where a conflict occurs between her two 'selves,' one that exists in the visible world and her other self that is buried under the surface. Her past that is buried within, surfaces when she dives into her inner subconscious. Her direct encounter of her father's dead body leads to a surfacing from death to a 'new' life. By plunging into the waters, she identifies her 'self' and this gives her many new realizations. The father's body, the memories of her aborted fetus, her unhappy past and all her painful experiences suffocates her mind. Her disturbed mind finds a release in this psychic quest, giving her a healing of her mind. She surfaces from the dive with a new acceptance of herself and the power of nature. Her dive into the waters to explore her father's rock paintings turns out to be a dive into her subconscious mind, allowing her to emerge as a transformed being.

## 16.7 WILDERNESS IN *SURFACING*

The wilderness in *Surfacing* serves as a symbolic and transformative backdrop. It represents the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and her connection to her past. It also symbolizes the complex relationship between humans and the natural world. The wilderness plays a central role in the characters' emotional and psychological development throughout the novel. The message of *Surfacing* is one of self-discovery and re-connection. Through her interactions with the wilderness, the protagonist confronts her past, her inner turmoil, and her own sense of self. The novel suggests that embracing the complexities of one's identity and connecting with the natural world can lead to healing and renewal.

## 16.8 THEMES IN *SURFACING*

*Surfacing* explores a wide range of themes, primarily centered around identity, self-discovery, the complex relationship between humans and nature, and the impact of modernization on traditional ways of life:

**Identity and Self-Discovery:** At the heart of the novel is the protagonist's quest for self-discovery and understanding of her identity. The story revolves around an unnamed female narrator who returns to her family's remote cabin in the Canadian wilderness. Her journey of self-discovery is closely linked to her exploration of her own past, her relationships, and the reconnection with her cultural and ancestral roots.

**The Complex Relationship Between Humans and Nature:** Nature plays a significant role in the novel, representing both a powerful and transformative force. The characters' interactions with the natural world, particularly the wild and untamed Canadian wilderness, are symbolic of their internal struggles and their desire to shed societal constraints and expectations in favor of a more primal and authentic existence.

**Modernization vs. Tradition:** The tension between modernization and traditional ways of life is a central theme. The novel portrays the clash between the urban and rural, the old and new, and the loss of cultural heritage. The characters grapple with the encroachment of industrialization and consumer culture into their remote wilderness, which threatens their way of life and the natural environment.

The novel captures the protagonist's emotional and psychological evolution as she grapples with her history, her relationship with the natural world, and her own sense of self. Through her interactions with the wilderness, her companions, and the rituals that unfold, "Surfacing" delves into the depths of the human psyche and explores the complexities of identity and self-discovery within the context of a changing and often challenging world.

## 16.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS II (CYP II)

Dear learner, now it is the time to take another break. You have now developed clarity regarding the themes and symbols in *Surfacing*. You can now try to attempt the exercise given below by stating whether the statements are true or false. You can revisit these sections in case of a doubt and also consult the Answer Key after you have finished the exercise.

1. *Surfacing* represents the female quest for identity (True/False)
2. *Surfacing* deals with issues such as marriage and motherhood (True/False)
3. The narrator builds her identity based on an intimate relationship with nature (True/False)
4. The novel is divided into five parts (True/False)
5. The novel does not make use of flashbacks (True/False)
6. The narrator's diving into the water holds symbolic significance (True/False)
7. Wilderness does not play a symbolic and transformative role in the novel (True/False)



8. Modernisation versus Tradition can be categorised as a theme in *Surfacing* (True/False)

## 16.10 GLOSSARY

	Word	Meaning
1.	Hamburger	a sandwich consisting of a cooked patty of ground or chopped beef.
2.	Steak	a slice of meat or fish
3.	Pallid	faint or deficient in color
4.	Bleary	looking or feeling dull and unfocused.
5.	Lumbering	move in a slow, heavy, awkward way.
6.	Epigram	a short poem, especially a satirical one
7.	Novice	a person who is new to or inexperienced.
8.	Teepees	a type of tent in the shape of a cone
9.	Corralled	confine
10.	Nudging	persuade someone to do something.
11.	Clanking	loud, sharp sounds
12.	Petite vitesse	French word means low speed
13.	Stucco	a type of plaster used for covering walls and ceilings
14.	Bonjour monsieur	French means Good Morning Sir.
15.	Porcelain	a hard but delicate, shiny, white substance
16.	Petrified	so frightened that one is unable to move.
17.	Il fait beau	French term means it's beautiful
18.	Anachronism	a person, thing or idea that exists out of its time in history.
19.	Inquisitive	wanting to discover as much as you can about things
20.	Cleaver	a heavy knife with a large square blade.
21.	Morosely	in a very unhappy or annoyed way.
22.	Speckled	something marked with small dots or spots.
23.	Camouflage	appearance designed to hide soldiers and equipment on the ground.
24.	Jiggles	a quick light shake
25.	Blotched	a discoloration on the skin.
26.	Proliferating	to increase greatly in number.
27.	Hysterics	uncontrolled behaviour caused by extreme fear or sadness.
28.	Catastrophe	sudden disaster or misfortune
29.	Undulate	to form or move in waves : fluctuate.
30.	Ambush	a surprise attack on someone from a hidden place.

- |     |              |   |
|-----|--------------|---|
| 31. | Cantaloupe   | a cultivated variety of musk-melon.               |
| 32. | Spangle      | a small thin piece of glittering material.        |
| 33. | Subterfuge   | a trick or a dishonest way of achieving something |
| 34. | Muffled      | to wrap with something to prevent sound.          |
| 35. | Unfathomable | impossible to understand                          |
| 36. | Stumble      | to walk in an awkward way                         |
| 37. | Studded      | decorated with small raised pieces of metal       |
| 38. | Dungeons     | a room or cell for prisoners                      |
| 39. | Cluttered    | a state of being untidy                           |
| 40. | Ponderously  | of very great weight                              |

### 16.11 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the title *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood?
2. There are quite a few references to things/people being doubled or mirrored. What do these moments do for the novel as a whole? Why are they there?
3. What are the thematic concerns present in *Surfacing*?
4. Discuss the ending of *Surfacing*. What has the narrator learned, and is the ending positive, negative, or ambiguous?
5. Analyse *Surfacing* as an ecofeminist text by giving references from the text.
6. Enlist the ways in which language shapes the representation of the characters in *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood?
7. Discuss post-colonial elements in *Surfacing*.
8. Comment on the male characters in the novel.
9. Comment on the significance of the women characters in the novel.
10. Based on your reading of *Surfacing*, critically evaluate urban and rural life.
11. Comment on the significance of the title of the novel.
12. “*We still think of a powerful man as a born leader and a powerful woman as an anomaly,*” how do these words of Margaret Atwood find relevance in *Surfacing*?

### 16.12 LET US SUM UP

Margaret Atwood’s novel *Surfacing* portrays a world where society is male-defined and men use their power to keep women under their control. In order to reconnect with their



true self, women must find their voice in patriarchal world. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist is on a quest to transformation. She is a socially alienated woman who feels resentment towards the society in general. She feels no connection to other humans and is rather selfish in her actions. The reason for her resentfulness is her abortion, which caused her trauma. Her guilt and anger caused her to create a new reality for herself. She also feels as if her parents had abandoned her when they died. Throughout the novel the protagonist sees herself as a powerless victim and feels rejected.

During her transformation she slowly begins to realize that her view of life is flawed and in order to survive she must accept the past and be considerate of other humans. With the help of nature, the protagonist no longer divides the world and society into good or bad, but rather also accepts other points of view. The main outcome of her transformation is that she refuses to feel like a victim and is willing to become a part of society again.

The novel has an open ending, which leaves the protagonist's future for the reader to guess. The protagonist, who was resentful and cold towards the society and other people, transforms into an empowered woman who refuses to feel inferior. She finds her true identity and her self-worth and emerges from her quest as a victor instead of a victim.

#### **16.13 ANSWER KEY**

##### **CYP I**

1. Quebec
2. Ana
3. David
4. Joe
5. Heron
6. The Barometer couple

##### **CYP II**

1. True
2. True
3. True
4. False
5. False
6. True
7. False
8. True

#### 16.14 SUGGESTED READING

Atwood, Margaret. 1979. *Surfacing*. Little Brown Group. ebook. 2012.

“From Violent Duality to Multi-Culturalism: Margaret Atwood’s Post- Colonial Cultural and Sexual Politics”. In Jorn Carlsen (ed). *O Canada: Essays on Canadian Literature and Culture*, 97-108. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1995.



## AN INTRODUCTION TO AMITAV GHOSH AND HIS WRITINGS

### STRUCTURE

- 17.0 Introduction
- 17.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 17.2 Amitav Ghosh: His Life and Fiction
- 17.3 Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs)
- 17.4 Chronological Bio-profile
- 17.5 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 17.6 Examination Oriented Questions
- 17.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 17.8 Answer Key (SAQs, MCQs)
- 17.9 Suggested Reading

### 17.0 INTRODUCTION

Dear learner, let us now come to the next unit, that is, Unit V, which deals with Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*. In this lesson, you will be introduced to Amitav Ghosh, one of the major literary figures in contemporary Indian English Literature. This lesson will offer a detailed biography of Amitav Ghosh.

### 17.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME

The main objective of this lesson is to introduce Amitav Ghosh and his writings to the learner. The chronological bio-profile will help the learner to appreciate and also memorize the important events in the life of the author.

After going through this lesson, you will

- be familiar with Amitav Ghosh and his major works
- appreciate the literary contributions of Amitav Ghosh which establish him as a towering figure in contemporary Indian English literature.

### 17.2 AMITAV GHOSH: HIS LIFE AND FICTION

Amitav Ghosh was born on 11<sup>th</sup> July 1956 in Calcutta. He grew up in India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh and was educated at the all boys school 'The Doon School' in Dehradun. In his nascent years at school, he regularly contributed fiction and poetry to the school magazine.

After Doon, he received degrees from St. Stephen's College, Delhi University and Delhi School of Economics.

Ghosh is the author of *The Circle of Reason* (1986) (his debut novel), *The Shadow Lines* (1988) -won him the Sahitya Akademi Award since then has been part of syllabus of many universities; "throws light on the phenomenon of communal violence and the way its roots have spread deeply and widely in the collective psyche of the Indian subcontinent," after which he wrote *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and *Sea of Poppies* (2008). The *Ibis trilogy*, which was set during the 1830s, not long before the Opium War, embodies the provincial history of the East. *River of Smoke* (2011) is the second and the third is *Flood of Fire* (2015). Ghosh's most recent book, *Gun Island* (2019) deals with climate change and human migration. His notable non-fiction writings are *In an Antique Land* (1992), *Dancing in Cambodia and at Large in Burma* (1998), *Countdown* (1999), and *The Imam and the Indian* (2002). Most of his work deals with historical settings, especially in the Indian Ocean periphery.

In addition to many foreign awards, Ghosh has won several awards in his native India. In 2018, he was given the Jnanpith award, making him the first English- language Indian writer to receive the award. He was also awarded the Padma Shri by the Indian government, the nation's fourth-highest civilian honour.

Amitav Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, published in 1986 is a suspenseful drama about a young weaver, Alu, who is on the run from his Bengali village, having been falsely accused of being a terrorist. Alu flees his home, traveling through Bombay to the Persian Gulf, reaching North Africa with a policeman in hot pursuit. The novel while focusing on the diasporic routes uses the elements of fantasy and fable in its narrative technique. He also uses the technique of picaresque and social realism in dealing with the representation of a fictional Middle Eastern state. The novel also takes part into larger concerns of hold and exchange of capitalist commodities such as sugar, spice, and oil, and their roles in both erstwhile colonial and in contemporary economies. This engaging book has been translated into several languages and in 1990 won Ghosh the prestigious Prix Medici étranger Award for the French edition.

*The Shadow Lines*, published in 1988, is set in 1960s Calcutta and explores the consequences that occur in the lives of ordinary people when acts of mindless violence are unleashed. The plot traces the hard times in the life of Bengali family in the aftermath of the Partition of India in 1947 and during the 1971 establishment of Bangladesh. The narrative, linking the global and the local, moves from Calcutta to Dhaka and London, demonstrate the inefficacy of cartographic demarcations that remain mere "shadow lines" in the light of more immediate and vividly felt human realities. *The Shadow Lines* won Ghosh both the Ananda Puraskar Award and also the Sahitya Academy Award, two prestigious literary awards in India.

*In an Antique Land*, which came out in 1992, described as "creative non- fiction," reflects Ghosh's anthropological interests in which he procured his doctoral degree from Oxford

University. The work covers an extensive span and has two separate narrations—one constructed as a travel tale, which seems to be distinctively autobiographical in nature, delineating the experiences of a Ghosh persona engaged in anthropological fieldwork in a Fellaheen village, and the other a kind of investigative anthropological pursuit of a fugitive slave, Bomma, of the twelfth century, that traces him through Egypt, India, Britain, and finally the United States.

In a science fiction novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, published in 1996, Ghosh uses magic realistic devices to depict Murugan's journey from New York to Calcutta, in search of the elusive Calcutta Chromosome. It is loosely based on the journals of Ronald Ross, the acclaimed British scientist whose work in discovering the link between the malaria parasite and the Anopheles mosquito earned him the Nobel Prize for medicine in 1902. This work of his won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for the year's best science fiction in 1997 because of its amalgamation of science and mysticism. The entire subplot is an intertwining of faith and science, describing the villagers' strange worship of Mangala Bibi—a sort of high priestess of an antisience secret cult, who is worshipped as a folk goddess in Calcutta. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is to be filmed by Gabriele Salvatores, the Oscar Award-winning director of *Mediterraneo*.

In 2000, Ghosh published his next novel, *The Glass Palace*, set in Burma, India, Malaysia, and Singapore. This book has become a focus of scholarly interest for reasons other than its literary content. *The Glass Palace* was the Eurasian regional winner in the best book category of the 2001 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. This made it eligible to enter the final round for the prize itself. Not aware that his publisher had submitted his book, Ghosh withdrew it upon being informed that *The Glass Palace* was a finalist entry, sparking off an international controversy and provoking yet another debate among postcolonial scholars on the role of the commonwealth in contemporary society. Aside from the controversy it has generated, *The Glass Palace* itself is a poignant evocation of the moral conundrums and dilemmas that the colonial powers imposed upon the colonized in the guise of undertaking "a civilizing mission." It explores the existential and moral dilemmas that middle-class Asians—soldiers under the raj fighting for the empire; Asians who were ideologically torn between two sides of a question, such as members of the INA<sup>10</sup>—were forced to grapple with on a daily basis in their lives. Though the narrative of *The Glass Palace* seems epic in scope, opening with the 1885 British invasion of Burma and the deposition of the Burmese monarchy, it also etches the rise and fall of the fortunes of Indian entrepreneur Raj Kumar and ways in which subsequent generations of Indians are affected by the World Wars. The slow wasting away of the Burmese monarch, his daughters' marriages, the lives of Dolly and her sons, all form distinct narratives in this book about life, love, and war. The novel won Ghosh the Grand Prize for Fiction at the International Frankfurt eBook awards.

*The Hungry Tide*, published in 2005, is set in the Sundarban Islands in the Bay of Bengal, its focus is on the plight of displaced people, refugees from neighboring Bangladesh, a

forgotten people fighting against odds to survive in a small secluded island. Two characters enter this obscure island, Piya Roy, a marine biologist of Bengali descent, who arrives from the United States to study Irrawaddy dolphins, and Kanai Dutt, a professional translator, beckoned from the metropolis by his aunt to study the journal entries of his deceased uncle, who has lived and worked among the refugees. Piya's and Kanai's exchanges with Fokir, an illiterate fisherman and a "pure soul," their encounter with local events and their struggle to survive in difficult surroundings form the pivotal point of the plot. This work of his focuses itself on the compelling questions relating to the preservation of a delicate ecosystem that we share with land and sea animals, of the hazards posed by an unpredictable and changing environment on humans and animals, and the responsibilities these generate. *The Hungry Tide* won Ghosh the Hutch Crossword Book Award.

In 2008, Amitav Ghosh published *Sea of Poppies*, an epic saga, the first in a projected trilogy. Set in north India and the Bay of Bengal in 1838 on the eve of the First Opium War, the novel consists of assortment of characters from Deeti, the upper-caste wife of an opium addict, to Kalua, the low caste ox-cart driver with an impressive physique, from Neel Rattan, a Bengali aristocrat, to Ah Fatt, a half-Parsi, half-Chinese opium addict, all of whose destinies get mingled on board the *Ibis* as they begin their journey as "*jahaj-bhais*" or ship brothers as it sails over the dreaded "black waters" from Calcutta to Mauritius.

In *River of Smoke* (2011) by Amitav Ghosh is the second book in the Ibis Trilogy, set against the backdrop of the opium trade between India and China in the 19th century. The novel continues the saga of various characters introduced in the first book, "Sea of Poppies." It primarily follows the story of Bahram Modi, an Indian merchant caught in the turmoil of the opium trade. The narrative portrays the events leading up to the First Opium War, detailing the political, economic, and personal struggles faced by individuals embroiled in the opium trade. As tensions rise between China and British traders due to the illicit opium trade, Bahram Modi finds himself entangled in a web of conflicting interests and personal dilemmas. The novel intricately weaves together multiple storylines, including Bahram's efforts to secure a livelihood, the complexities of trade relations between countries, and the personal lives of various characters. Against the backdrop of historical events and cultural clashes, "River of Smoke" vividly depicts the human cost and moral quandaries arising from the opium trade while exploring themes of power, greed, and the consequences of colonial exploitation.

*Flood of Fire* (2015) by Amitav Ghosh, the concluding book in the Ibis Trilogy, delves deeper into the repercussions of the Opium Wars between China and Britain. The narrative follows the fates of several characters from diverse backgrounds— Indian, British, and Chinese—whose lives intertwine amidst the political tensions and personal struggles arising from the opium trade. Against the backdrop of the First Opium War, the novel navigates the complexities of power dynamics, cultural clashes, and individual quests for survival. It encapsulates the human cost of imperialism, the clash of civilizations, and the impact of historical events on the lives of individuals, offering a compelling conclusion to the epic saga begun in the

previous books of the trilogy.

*Gun Island* (2019) by Amitav Ghosh follows the journey of Deen Datta, a rare books dealer, as he navigates through a complex web of myths, history, and environmental concerns. Deen's life takes an unexpected turn when he encounters an ancient legend about a gun merchant and a sacred goddess. His quest to uncover the truth behind this myth leads him on a fascinating and adventurous exploration from Kolkata to Los Angeles and then to the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans. Along the way, Deen grapples with the impacts of climate change, the loss of cultural heritage, and the interconnectedness of human lives across time and geography.

Ghosh intricately weaves together themes of migration, displacement, cultural identity, and the environmental crisis. Through the lens of Deen's experiences, the novel delves into the human connection to the environment, the significance of storytelling, and the ways in which ancient myths and contemporary realities intersect. "Gun Island" is a thought-provoking narrative that reflects on the interplay between humanity, history, and the natural world, inviting readers to ponder the intricate relationships that shape our lives and the world around us.

Amitav Ghosh's writing deals in the epic themes of travel and diaspora, history and memory, political struggle and communal violence, love and loss, while all the time crossing the generic boundaries between anthropology and art work.

### **17.3 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS (SAQs)**

1. Amitav Ghosh's works belong to which genre?
2. Most of Amitav Ghosh's work deals with historical settings, especially in the Indian ....?
3. Which work won The Sahitya Akademi Award for Amitav Ghosh?
4. This book is loosely based on the life and times of Sir Ronald Ross, the Nobel Prize-winning scientist who achieved a breakthrough in malaria research in 1898, name it.
5. Ghosh was first English-language Indian writer to receive which award?

### **17.4 CHRONOLOGICAL BIO-PROFILE**

1956: Born in Calcutta on 11 July; father: Shailendra Chandra Ghosh, with the Indian army, diplomat; mother: Anjali Ghosh. Accompanies parents to East Pakistan, Iran, and Srilanka in his childhood.

1969–1973: Completes his Senior Cambridge at Doon School, Dehra Dun, India.

1974–1976: Studies for a bachelor's degree in history and graduates from St. Stephen's College, Delhi University.

1978: Obtains a master's in sociology from Delhi University.

1979: Attends St. Edmund Hall, Oxford to pursue postgraduate work, and in 1979



obtains a diploma in social anthropology.

1982: Awarded Doctorate of Philosophy for his thesis on “Kinship in Relation to the Economic and Social Organization of an Egyptian Village Community.” During this period, he acquires a diploma in Arabic at Institut Bourguiba des Langues Vivantes Tunis in Tunisia. He later travels to Egypt to conduct fieldwork. This period is sketched later in his creative nonfiction, *In an Antique Land*.

1982–1983: Appointed Visiting Fellow, Centre for Developmental Studies, Trivandrum, Kerala (India).

1983–1987: Appointed Research Associate, Department of Sociology, Delhi University.

1986: *The Circle of Reason* is published. Also, the essay “The Imam and the Indian,” *Granta* 20 (Cambridge).

1987: Appointed Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Delhi University. Awarded the *New York Times* Notable Book for *The Circle of Reason*.

1988: Appointed Visiting Professor, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, departments of Literature and Anthropology; *The Shadow Lines* published; revisits Egypt.

1989: Appointed Visiting Professor, South Asia Centre, Columbia University, spring semester and Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, fall semester.

1990: Awarded Prix Medicis étrangère in Paris for *The Circle of Reason*; awarded the Ananda Puraskar, Calcutta, for *The Shadow Lines*. Awarded the annual prize of the Sahitya Akademi (Indian Academy of Literature) for *The Shadow Lines*.

1991: Invited guest of the Minister of Culture, International Book Festival, Fureur de Lire, Paris, France, September; “The Cairo Geniza and the Indian Ocean in the Middle Ages,” Stanford University, May, invited speaker; readings from the manuscript of *In an Antique Land*, University of California, Santa Cruz, May.

1992: Published *In an Antique Land*, which was the subject of forty-minute TV documentary by BBC III that year.

1993: *In an Antique Land* wins *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year.

1994: Appointed Visiting Professor, Department of Anthropology, Columbia University, New York, for three years.

1995: His essay “The Ghost of Mrs. Gandhi” awarded the Best American Essay. Begins reporting for *The New Yorker*; invited guest, Sydney Writers’ Festival and Carnival, Sydney, Australia, January; invited inaugural speaker, Gandhi exhibition, Bose-Pacia Gallery, New York; invited guest speaker, South Asian Journalists Association, New York, October; invited speaker: “‘The Angel of Chartres is a Cambodian’: Rodin, Revolution and Cambodian Dance,” Department of Art History, Lectures in the History of Art and Visual



Culture series, Columbia University, November.

1996: *The Calcutta Chromosome* is published. It is awarded the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction of the year.

1997: Essay "India's Untold War of Independence," published in *The New Yorker*, June 17; translation in Bengali: *Ananda Bazaar Patrika*, 5 installments, August–September; translation in German: *Lettre* 38, no. 3. 1998: Published *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*; published "Calcutta's Global Ambassador," *New York Times* (Op-Ed), March 14; published "The March of the Novel through History: The Testimony of My Grandfather's Bookcase," *Kunapipi: A Journal of Post-Colonial Writing*.

1999: "The March of the Novel" wins the Pushcart Prize; appointed Distinguished Professor for four years, Department of Comparative Literature, Queen's College, City University of New York; *Countdown* is published; it is in the final shortlist for the American Society of Magazine Editors Award for Reporting.

2000: *The Glass Palace* is published. Ghosh declines the Commonwealth Writers' Prize.

2001: *The Glass Palace* wins the Grand Prize for Fiction at the Frankfurt eBook Awards; *New York Times* Notable Book of 2001; *Los Angeles Times* Notable Book of 2001; *Chicago Tribune* Favorite Book of 2001; *The Glass Palace* featured on German TV, BBC East Asia, KVON Radio (L.A.), CNN International, WNYC (Leonard Lopate).

2002: The volume of essays *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces* is published; *The Glass Palace*, paperback release, readings: Milwaukee, Madison, Seattle, San Francisco, New York, February to March.

2003: Published essays "The Anglophone Empire" and "The Man behind the Mosque."

2004: *The Hungry Tide* is published; appointed Visiting Professor, Department of English, Harvard University.

2005: *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* is published in the United States.

2006: *The Hungry Tide* wins the Hutch Crossword Book Prize.

2007: Awarded Padmashree by the government of India in recognition of his distinguished contributions in the field of literature; also awarded the Grinzane Cavour Prize in Turin, Italy, for literary contributions that have an international perspective.

2008: *Sea of Poppies* is published, the first in the forthcoming *Ibis* trilogy; shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

2009: *Sea of Poppies* is winner of the Vodafone Crossword Book Award.

2010: Ghosh declared co-winner along with Margaret Atwood of the Dan David Prize for his literary achievements.

2011: *River of Smoke* is published. 2015: *Flood of Fire* is published.

2016: *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* is published.

2021: *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* is published. 2022: *Uncanny and Improbable Events* is published.

2022: *The Living Mountain* is published.

2022: *Smoke and Ashes: A Writer's Journey Through Opium's Hidden Histories* is published.

## 17.5 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. In which novel does Amitav Ghosh explore the story of an American marine biologist studying dolphins in the Sundarbans? \_\_\_\_\_
  - A) *The Hungry Tide*
  - B) *Sea of Poppies*
  - C) *The Glass Palace*
  - D) *Gun Island*
2. Which trilogy by Amitav Ghosh is set against the backdrop of the Opium Wars and the 19th-century colonial trade in Asia? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) *The Circle of Reason*
  - B) *The Ibis Trilogy*
  - C) *The Calcutta Chromosome*
  - D) *The Shadow Lines*
3. In which novel does Ghosh explore the story of a rare manuscript that links the past and the present through its mysterious origins? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) *The Hungry Tide*
  - B) *The Glass Palace*
  - C) *The Calcutta Chromosome*
  - D) *Gun Island*
4. Which novel by Amitav Ghosh portrays the lives of people connected by the timber trade in Burma, India, and Malaya during the British colonial era? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) *River of Smoke*
  - B) *The Glass Palace*
  - C) *Sea of Poppies*
  - D) *The Shadow Lines*

5. Which novel by Amitav Ghosh focuses on the story of a diverse group of individuals aboard a ship, the Ibis, in the 19th century?\_\_\_\_\_.
- A) *The Glass Palace*
  - B) *Flood of Fire*
  - C) *River of Smoke*
  - D) *Sea of Poppies*
6. Which book by Amitav Ghosh explores the impact of climate change and human intervention on the environment, involving a quest to decipher ancient texts? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) *The Hungry Tide*
  - B) *The Shadow Lines*
  - C) *Gun Island*
  - D) *River of Smoke*
7. In which novel by Amitav Ghosh does the story revolve around the consequences of the Partition of India and its impact on multiple generations? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) *The Glass Palace*
  - B) *The Circle of Reason*
  - C) *The Shadow Lines*
  - D) *Flood of Fire*
8. Which novel by Ghosh explores the story of a rare, precious gemstone that passes through generations and connects lives in Burma and India?\_\_\_\_\_.
- A) *River of Smoke*
  - B) *The Glass Palace*
  - C) *The Hungry Tide*
  - D) *Sea of Poppies*
9. Which book by Amitav Ghosh is known for its portrayal of the 18th- century opium trade and its consequences in Canton and beyond? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) *Flood of Fire*
  - B) *The Hungry Tide*
  - C) *River of Smoke*
  - D) *Sea of Poppies*
10. Which novel by Amitav Ghosh concludes the “Ibis Trilogy,” depicting the events surrounding the First Opium War? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) *Flood of Fire*
  - B) *River of Smoke*
  - C) *Sea of Poppies*

## 17.6 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

- Q.1 Write a brief note on the life of the Amitav Ghosh.
- Q.2 Who is the first English writer who won Janpat award and for which work?
- Q.3 What are the major concerns in the works of Amitav Ghosh?

## 17.7 LET US SUM UP

Amitav Ghosh, a distinguished figure in contemporary literature, embodies a unique literary voice that intertwines historical narratives, cultural complexities, and socio-environmental themes. Born in Calcutta, India, in 1956, Ghosh spent his formative years immersed in diverse cultures and languages, shaping his multidimensional perspective reflected in his literary works. His upbringing and education, which spanned India, Bangladesh, and England, greatly influenced the thematic diversity and depth found in his writing.

Ghosh's literary repertoire is marked by a profound exploration of historical events, intercultural interactions, and pressing global issues, positioning him as an influential voice in contemporary literature. Works such as *The Ibis Trilogy* comprising *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*, masterfully blend historical accuracy with compelling storytelling, offering a panoramic view of historical events such as the Opium Wars, while delving into themes of colonialism, migration, and cultural assimilation.

His relevance to contemporary literature stems from his adeptness in addressing pressing concerns of our times, particularly environmental degradation and the human impact on the natural world. Ghosh's engagement with ecological issues, notably showcased in *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, underscores the urgency of environmental consciousness in the face of climate change and challenges the conventional boundaries of literature by integrating environmental concerns into compelling narratives. Ghosh's oeuvre serves as a testament to his ability to craft intricate tales that transcend geographical borders and historical epochs, inviting readers to ponder over complex social, environmental, and cultural dynamics while solidifying his place as a significant contemporary literary figure. His works continue to captivate audiences globally, offering profound insights into the multifaceted complexities of our world, making him an essential voice in shaping discussions on history, culture, and the environment in contemporary literature.

## 17.8 ANSWER KEY (SAQs, MCQs)

### SAQs

1. Historical Fiction
2. Ocean Periphery

3. *The Shadow Lines*
4. *The Calcutta Chromosome*
5. Jhanpith award

#### **MCQs**

1. A) *The Hungry Tide*
2. B) *The Ibis Trilogy*
3. C) *The Calcutta Chromosome*
4. B) *The Glass Palace*
5. D) *Sea of Poppies*
6. C) *Gun Island*
7. C) *The Shadow Lines*
8. B) *The Glass Palace*
9. C) *River of Smoke*
10. A) *Flood of Fire*

#### **17.9 SUGGESTED READING**

<https://amitavghosh.com/>

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Amitav-Ghosh>

Sankaran, Chitra. ed. *History, Narrative, and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction*, Suny Press, 2012.



**AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*****STRUCTURE**

18.0 Introduction

18.1 Objectives and Outcome

18.2 *The Hungry Tide* Plotline

18.3 Check Your Progress (CYP)

18.4 Themes

18.4.1 Language

18.4.2 Man vs Nature

18.4.3 The Human Cost of Environmental Conservation

18.4.4 Idealism and Theory vs Practicality and Action

18.5 Symbols

18.5.1 Cyclone Shelter

18.5.2 Tigers

18.5.3 Gamchas

18.5.4 The hospital

18.6 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)

18.7 Examination Oriented Questions

18.8 Let Us Sum Up

18.9 Answer Key (CYP, MCQs)

18.10 Suggested Reading

**18.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear Learner, the previous lesson gave you insights into the life and works of Amitav Ghosh. The present lesson focuses on his novel *The Hungry Tide*. In this lesson, you will read a detailed summary of the novel as well as the various themes underlying the work. You will also read about the various symbols enriching this work.

## 18.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME

The objective of this lesson is to introduce the learner the detailed plotline of the novel *The Hungry Tide*.

After going through this lesson, you will

- be able to summarize the novel
- recognize the various environmental concerns as delineated in this work, making the work a fine example of a text charged with ecological awareness
- recognise how Amitav Ghosh has made a skilful use of various symbols in the novel which are in harmony with the thematic concerns of the novel as well as the ecological vision of the writer.

## 18.2 THE HUNGRY TIDE PLOTLINE

*The Hungry Tide* is the sixth novel written by an Indian born author, Amitav Ghosh. The book won the 2004 Hutch crossword Book Award for fiction. The novel is divided into two sections – “The Ebb: Bhata” and “The Flood: Jowar”– and is set in the Sunderbans. Measuring over ten thousand square kilometers, this delta is the world’s largest mangrove ecosystem. The name “Sunderbans” means “beautiful forest,” and is located in the northern part of the Bay of Bengal. It stretches across coastal India and Bangladesh, from the Hoogly in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh. It is the home of the Bengal tiger, and since the tiger is an endangered species, Government of India has taken steps to protect it by preserving its natural environments. This, however, has resulted in confrontations with the local populace, and that conflict is part of the history behind this novel.

For the settlers in the immense labyrinth of tiny islands known as the Sundarbans, life is extremely precarious. Attacks by tigers are common. Unrest and eviction are constant threats. At any time, tidal floods may rise and surge over the land, leaving destruction and devastation. The settlers of these Sundarbans believe that anyone without a pure heart who ventures into the watery labyrinth will never return. The waves here are treacherous. The tides reach several miles inland and everyday thousands of mangroves disappear to reemerge hours later. And no one dares to make home there but the truly dispossessed and displaced who are unwanted and who have nowhere else to go. Yet, they have settled there to eke out a living from the barren, unyielding salty tracts of land. The people are mostly fishermen who depend on the river and the sand for fish and crabs for sustenance. Each day of their life is unpredictable, and survival is precarious on those islands, also referred to as the “tide country.”

In the novel we are moved by the plight and suffering of the refugees from East Bengal who fled their place of birth after partition and also during the 1971 crackdown by West Pakistan. The great divide of 1947 wreaked havoc with the Hindus and Sikhs of West Punjab, Sind, Baluchistan etc., and also with Hindus of East Bengal. It was, however, the crackdown in 1971 on the people of East Bengal by the Punjabi dominated, Urdu speaking Muslims of West Pakistan that sounded a death knell for Hindus of East Bengal. They were the special targets of

the army and thousands of them were literally butchered in cold blood. Many of them fled to neighbouring India, and were treated as refugees. Even after the formation of Bangladesh, many were reluctant to go back and wanted to live in India. These people made the Sundarbans their home and settled there. Life for these settlers is an incessant battle for survival against the unpredictable storms and tides, both natural and manmade. Despite its threatening environment charged with fears of the all devouring tides and man-eating tigers and crocodiles, it is the deep sense of human bonding among the islanders which transcends differences of class, caste, creed, and nationality that helps the inhabitants defeat the forces bent on annihilating them.

The two prime locales of the actions in the Sundarbans—Lusibari and Garjontola— are fictitious places. However, Ghosh remarks that the secondary locations such as Canning, Gosaba, Satjelia, Morichjhapi, and Emilybari are real places inhabited by refugees from East Bengal and other dispossessed factions of society. Ghosh travelled to this area along with Annu Jalais, an authority on its history and culture. Besides, he had linkages with the tide country, for, as a young boy, he had stayed there with his uncle, Sri Chandra Ghosh, who had been for more than a decade the headmaster of the Rural Construction Institute, a school set up by Sir Daniel Hamilton, an Englishman, who dreamed of making it a land without the barriers of caste, class, race, and religion that divide and segregate human beings.

In this place of vengeful beauty, the lives of three people from different worlds collide. Piyali Roy is a young marine biologist, of Indian parentage but stubbornly American, comes in search of a rare, endangered river dolphin, *Orcaella Brevirostris* and Kanai Dutt, a sophisticated translator from New Delhi meets her there. Kanai has returned to the island on request from his aunt for the first time after the death of his uncle, a political radical who died mysteriously in the aftermath of a local uprising. Piya's journey, on the other hand, begins with a disaster, when she is thrown from a boat into crocodile-infested waters. Rescue comes in the form of a young, illiterate but proud local fisherman, Fokirchand Mandol or Fokir and she hires him as her guide and Kanai becomes their translator. Although Piya and Fokir have no language between them, they are powerfully drawn to each other, sharing an uncanny instinct for the ways of the sea. As the three of them launch into the elaborate backwaters, they are drawn unawares into the hidden undercurrents of this isolated world, where political turmoil exacts a personal toll that is every bit as powerful as the ravaging tide. And it is from this moment that the tide begins to turn.

As the plot progresses, it becomes clear that Fokir is the son of Kusum, a childhood friend of Kanai Dutt. Kusum's story, which forms the subtext of the novel and which is recounted in Nirmal's journal, is instrumental in retrieving the history of Morichjhapi, which stands till today as one of the darkest spots in the history of mankind. The events of 1979, "widely discussed in the Calcutta press, English as well as Bengali" (402) were deliberately erased from the public memory, and also from history.

In 1950, eleven years after Hamilton's death, Nirmal and Nilima Bose arrived at Lusibari. They had been married for less than a year, and the reasons for their decision to move to this



remote and tenuous locale were complicated. The year before, Nirmal had attended the conference of the Socialist International in Calcutta; he had been teaching at Ashutosh College at that time. Nilima was one of his students, her grandfather was a founding member of the Congress party, and her father was an eminent barrister at the Calcutta High Court. Although her family did not approve of their marriage, they nonetheless helped arrange the move so that the two could take the management of Hamilton's estate. When the couple arrived, though, they saw utter destitution; much had fallen into decrepitude in the past eleven years. The Hamilton Estate was also crippled by law suits. Not an individual to accept defeat easily, Nilima established the Women's Union and sought support from outside. By the 1980s this had developed into the Badabon Trust. It had become, in short, her life's work though, not perhaps, her husband's.

The Badabon Trust that Nilima Bose runs and the high school that her husband Nirmal had run until his death are built over the site of a commune established by a British idealist named Sir Daniel Hamilton. This is called "Lusibari," a pidgin version of "Lucy's House," and was so named for Hamilton's wife, who had sadly died on her way from England to join him. Hamilton was a utopian visionary, and he had bought ten thousand acres of the Sunderbans and invited impoverished people to come and populate the place, free to them on one condition – there should be no caste system, and no tribal nationalism. Many arrived brushing aside all dangers– dangers from crocodiles, tigers, snakes, etc. They were also ready to convert to fishermen from farmers, which had been their profession so far. This migration to the commune occurred in three waves – in 1920s, in 1947 after partition of India, and in 1971 after the Bangladesh war – and they helped Hamilton establish a semicomunist region where the inhabitants shared possessions.

The novel is told from three perspectives: that of Piyali Roy or Piya, an Indian born American scientist researching river dolphins, and Kanai Dutt, a New Delhi translator on a trip to see his aunt and find about his uncle's mysterious death. Kanai and Piya initially meet on a train and Nirmal, Kanai's deceased uncle's letter that recounts his experience and life after he started helping out in the Marichjhapi. The letter shows the true face of the Sunderbans and the people's struggle there. The letter is Nirmal's way of helping the people of Marichjhapi and doing them justice.

Kanai notices Piya in the station because "he was intrigued by the way she held herself, by the unaccustomed delineation of her stance" but he does not talk to her directly. Piya on the other hand had noticed Kanai "while waiting on the platform and she had been struck by the self-satisfied tilt of his head and the unabashed way in which he stared at everyone around him, taking them in, sizing them up, sorting them all into their place." She thought of him as an entitled upper class person when he persuades an elderly person reading the newspaper by the window seat to trade places with him.

It is when Piya spills her coffee on Kanai's paper, they strike up a conversation and learns that, both are travelling to similar locations: Kanai is going to Lusibari, one of the Sundarban

islands, to see his aunt and take a look at the journal his recently deceased uncle, Nirmal, left him and Piya is traveling to obtain a research permit and conduct research on river dolphins. By the time they get off, Piya makes quite an impression on Kanai which encourages him to extend an invitation to Piya to visit him and his aunt in Lusibari, in hopes that it'll lead to something else. Kanai meets with his aunt Nilima, who runs the local trust hospital in Lusibari, waiting for him at the station. The journey to Lusibari is filled with nostalgia and missing his uncle.

Meanwhile, Piya, having obtained the research permit through her family connections and bribery, has set off in search of the dolphins, with the escort of a guard, "a small ferret faced man, dressed in a starched khaki uniform." Although the guard gave her no reasons to be wary of him at first, his demeanor began to change slowly the further they went into the market. In a "short while she found herself in the company of a vaguely thuggish man, Mej-da" and was told that he owned a launch that was available for hire. She distrusts these men, and her distrust extends to horror and disgust when they come upon a fisherman around her age and his son who was fishing in a restricted area and attempt to steal their money, as a bribe. Piya tries to stop them, but due to some mishaps, ends up falling overboard and is caught in the river's undertow.

The fisherman, named Fokir, rescues her while the guard and his pilot watch and ogles at her telling her that it's almost sundown. It's then she decides to quit being helpless and do something about it. She asks Fokir 'Lusibari' and 'Mashima' and when he nodded as to say yes, she sends the guard and pilot away but not before demanding money and showing her crude gestures. She gets acquainted with Fokir and learns that his son's name is Tutul. Although she tries to pay them for their services, he tries to deny it. The party spends days and nights in the vast river, bonding and finally Piya gets to see her dolphins and she watches them to study their patterns of behaviour.

While at Lusibari, Kanai goes into his uncle Nirmal's study and finds the package that was addressed to him. In it "he saw, lying inside, like an egg in a nest, a small cardboard covered notebook, a khata." He opened the notebook to find that these pages had been addressed directly to him, in the form of some kind of extended letter although it didn't have any customary salutations of a letter. His uncle wrote to him about the events on an island called Marichjhapi (The Marichjhapi massacre of 1978-79, when the government of West Bengal forcibly evicted thousands of Bengali refugees who had settled on the island, forms a background for some parts of the novel). There he reads about Kusum, who he had met when he came to the island before and her son Fokir. Further along the letter, he gets to know that the government soldiers killed Kusum, when Fokir was just a child. Kanai meets Fokir's wife, Moyna, an ambitious and bright young woman, when she comes to his aunt's place. She has risen up from a barefoot nurse to nurse trainee through her hard work. Moyna is fed up with her childish husband and his inability to do anything but fish. She is a trainee nurse and wants a better life for their son than crab catching.

Piya, on the other hand, develops a strong bond with Fokir as they travel the rivers and

inlets. He helps her find the dolphins. Piya realizes that previous knowledge of the dolphins were so little and incomplete and that there is so much more to discover. She believes that she can get a grant to do so and is happy that she has found her life's purpose. After a few run-ins with tigers and crocodiles, they decide that this much adventure is enough for the day and decide to travel back to Lusibari, to reconnect with Kanai and is warmly welcomed by Mashima and Kanai. She retells her story and explains how Fokir helped her. Having found Kanai and well rested, Piya is eager to take a sturdier boat out to see the dolphins and explore. For this she wanted Fokir. She goes to his house along with Kanai who is acting as her translator, to enlist his help but to her dismay was greeted by a broken man who was undermined in every way by his wife. Though Piya's bitter towards Moyra for her treatment towards Fokir, she keeps the conversation cordial and explains her situation to them. Fokir agrees to tag along by renting a *bhotbhoti* or diesel boat of a local man named Horen who is Fokir's mentor as well as Kanai's uncle's companion.

As the party gets ready to leave, Kanai is visited by Moyra. She tells him to talk with Piya to keep a distance from Fokir, as she is afraid that another journey might cause something between them. While they travel, Kanai notes the intense relationship between Piya and Fokir and is jealous of their relationship. He tells her that she'll never truly understand Fokir and that there's nothing in common between them. He tries to assert himself and woo Piya but his actions are futile because of her bond with Fokir.

Piya is hurt and confused after watching Fokir help local villagers brutally kill a tiger by setting it on fire. She expected Fokir to stand up against it with her to stop the angry mob from killing it. But Fokir, to her dismay, was at the front sharpening the bamboo. Piya and Kanai discuss the brutality and how they should've stopped it. Though Kanai tries to justify the villagers action but at the end stops by consoling a tormented Piya. Kanai suggests that they should return to Lusibari because the guards are on the lookout for her because of her actions in front of the villagers.

After a frightful and dangerous run-in with a tiger, Kanai tells Piya that he no longer wants to stay there and wants to go back to New Delhi. He tells her that he's returning tomorrow. Kanai and Horen set out telling her that Horen will return the next day to help them and to stay with Fokir in his boat for the time being. However, halfway back, Kanai and Horen notices every boat in the vicinity turning back and asks around about it. They learn that a catastrophic storm or a *jhor* is approaching. As the storm hits hard, Fokir and Piya take refuge on a tiny island and uses an old saree and his crab trap to tie themselves to an unusually big and thick Mangrove tree's highest branch to ride out the storm

Meanwhile at Lusibari, Kanai meets with Moyra and his aunt, and explains the situation to them. He reassures Moyra that he'll go back to look for them and agrees with Moyra along. Fokir and Piya check around to see another tree to move to as the waves and storm slows down, but when the wind changes, Fokir shields her so that the impact of everything hitting him, every blow is on him. "She tries to break free from his grasp and shield him. But his body was

unyielding especially with the wind behind it. She could feel the bones of his cheek as if they had been superimposed on her own.” Kanai and Moyra reach them only to find Piya. She tells them that he couldn’t make it and that dies protecting her. She shows them to the tree where she tied the body to keep it protected.

Through that night and the following days, Piya stayed by Moyra’s side, in her room. Mats had been set out for mourners and Piya seated herself on one, Tutul appeared beside her. He placed bananas on her lap and sat with her, holding her hand, patient and unmoving. She held him close, so close that she could feel his heart beating against her. She remembered the impact of the stump that had crashed onto Fokir’s unprotected back; she remembered the weight of his chin as it pressed onto her shoulders; she remembered how close his lips were to her ears, so close that it was from their movement rather than the sound, that she understood he was saying the names of his wife and son.

Piya recalled the promises she made to him in silence, and how in those last moments, she had been unable to do anything for him other than to hold a bottle of water to his lips. She remembered how she tried to find the words to remind him of how loved he was and once again, he had seemed to understand her, even without words. Traumatized and heartbroken by the death of Fokir, Piya leaves the Sundarbans, but returns some time later with a carefully laid out plan, and setting up her research camp on Lusibari, employing Fokir’s widow as her assistant. Kanai is also set to return to focus on recreating his uncle’s journal. In the end, we see that Piya and Kanai come back to the tide country, as if they cannot escape the pull of the East. Throughout the book, Ghosh explores topics like humanism and environmentalism, especially when they come into a conflict of interest with each other.

### 18.3 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (CYP I)

Dear learner, it is time to move to the next section. But wait a moment! Before moving on to the next section here is a simple exercise which you can try to solve.

1. *The Hungry Tide* is the \_\_\_\_\_ novel written by Amitav Ghosh.
2. The novel is divided into \_\_\_\_\_ sections.
3. The novel is set in \_\_\_\_\_.
4. The novel centres on the conflict between the local population and Indian Government \_\_\_\_\_. (True/False)
5. The novel rests on a deep sense of human bonding among the islanders \_\_\_\_\_. (True/False)
6. The two prime locations of the action: Lusibari and Garjontola are real places \_\_\_\_\_. (True/False)
7. Piyali Roy meets \_\_\_\_\_ as she comes in search of dolphins in the Sundarbans.

8. Kanai Dutt is a \_\_\_\_\_.
9. Fokir chand Mandol is the young illiterate local fisherman hired as a guide by Piyali Roy \_\_\_\_\_. (True/False)
10. Nilima Bose runs a trust called \_\_\_\_\_.

## 18.4 THEMES

### 18.4.1 Language

*The Hungry Tide* follows Piya, an American-Indian cytologist (a scientist who studies marine mammals) and Kanai, a Delhi-based translator, as they visit the Sundarbans, an archipelago of islands in the Bay of Bengal. Piya is there to study the endangered Orcaella river dolphin; Kanai is visiting his aunt, Nilima, for the first time in forty years after the unexpected discovery of a packet of what are thought to be writings left to him by his late uncle Nirmal. As Piya and Kanai immerse themselves in their respective pursuits and form relationships with the Sundarbans locals, they both grapple with issues of language and how to form understandings with people who speak an entirely different language (even if in Kanai's case, he also speaks Bengali). Through Piya and Kanai's experiences, the novel ultimately suggests that spoken and written language are insufficient means of communication, especially when compared to a shared visual or emotional language—in this case, the language of fear.

Piya—who speaks no Hindi or Bengali, but works in a remote part of India where few people speak English—must embrace the idea that she doesn't necessarily need a common spoken or written language in order to complete her work. She finds that visual cues are a far more effective means for communicating with others. Though Piya initially begins her work on a Forest Service boat, she abandons the Forest Service as soon as possible—even though she's able to communicate with the forest guard and the boat pilot reasonably well through gestures and mime, they show little interest in listening to her. This is an early example of how sharing a language of some sort doesn't mean that two people can actually communicate effectively. Rather, understanding other people requires respect and a genuine desire to connect—two things that the Forest Service officials clearly don't care about. When Fokir, a local fisherman who doesn't speak English, rescues Piya from the Forest Service, it soon becomes clear to her that she and Fokir don't need to share a language to communicate. She's able to communicate with Fokir using gestures, drawings, and her laminated flashcards with pictures of the dolphins she's looking for, and he's more than willing to help her achieve her research goals despite the language barrier. The flashcards in particular introduce the idea that sight is a communication method that's far more effective than written or spoken language, as it allows individuals to interpret a common sight in their own language.

Kanai undergoes the most notable transformation as he discovers the limits of spoken and written language. He finds that being able to speak six languages doesn't teach him what

the locals insist is the real language of the Sundarbans: the emotional language of fear. Several locals, including Fokir, Nilima, and Horen, another fisherman, explain that, according to local wisdom, to even say the word tiger is to call the beast itself—essentially, they suggest that words have the power to create the same kind of visual reality that Piya begins to get at with her flashcards of the dolphins. However, when Kanai does come face to face with a tiger, he confronts a reality that's far more real and terrifying than anything words could ever conjure. He finds that language fails him—both spoken and in his head—and instead, the tiger (which he cannot name at all, even with a euphemism) becomes “an artifact of pure intuition, so real that the thing itself could not have dreamed of existing so intensely.” With this experience, Kanai discovers that fear, much like language, is something that one learns, internalizes, and then uses to make sense of one's world.

The novel acknowledges that spoken and written language, while limited, certainly hold an important place in the world—after all, this is how the story is relayed to the reader, how Piya is able to achieve funding to continue her research project after the cyclone, and how Kanai is forced to understand Nirmal's final months of life through reading his notebook. However, the novel also suggests that visual language and emotional language (in this case, the language of fear) are more universal languages, as neither requires the spoken or written word to translate.

#### **18.4.2 Man vs Nature**

*The Hungry Tide* takes place in the Sundarbans, the archipelago of islands that forms the Ganges Delta. The islands of the Sundarbans vary in size from tiny spits of land to landmasses of considerable size, though they're constantly made and remade by the ever-changing tides and regularly occurring cyclones. The islands and rivers are covered in mangrove forests that shelter man-eating crocodiles, snakes, and Bengal tigers, all of which constantly threaten the lives of the Sundarbans' residents. The novel suggests that while outside or human conflicts certainly affect life in the Sundarbans, the struggle to survive in a natural world that seems entirely inhospitable to humans is a far more pressing concern.

For the people who call the Sundarbans their home, the natural world is an essential, respected, and revered part of life. Kusum, a young woman who left the Sundarbans as a teen and returns to the island of Morichjhāpi with Fokir, her son, travels with Bangladeshi refugees who talk about the Sundarbans. Many of these refugees were originally from the Sundarbans and were forcibly removed after the partition of India in 1947, but they affirm that the mud of the Sundarbans still flows through their veins—a sentiment she shares. This shows that for Kusum, Fokir, and Horen, the specific environment of the Sundarbans is as much a part of them as their language, religious beliefs, or indeed, their human biology. This offers some reasoning for shocked outsiders like Piya and Nirmal as to why people want to live there in the first place—the locals see themselves as intrinsically part of nature.

Despite the locals' deep connections to the land and the environment, it's also



important to recognize that the residents of the Sundarbans still live in fear of their environment. Upon her arrival on Lusibari in 1950, Nilima is shocked when she learns that wives dress as widows when their husbands go out fishing or to gather honey—at least one woman is guaranteed to be widowed after every outing, given the aggressive and dangerous crocodiles and tigers that attack and kill humans with tragic regularity. To address this, locals rely heavily on the story of the goddess Bon Bibi, whom they believe watches over the islands. According to legend, she long ago drew a line through the islands to separate her “good” realm from the “evil” realm of a tiger demon, Dokkhin Rai, who had an insatiable desire for human flesh. When a greedy captain made a deal with Dokkhin-Rai that promised the demon a boy, Dukhey, in exchange for an island’s natural resources, Dukhey called on Bon Bibi to save him from the tiger’s jaws—and she did. Because of this, shrines to Bon Bibi pepper the Sundarbans, and locals regularly pray and leave offerings at the shrines. They believe that people who are good at heart can’t be harmed (at least by tigers) in places where Bon Bibi is present. Indeed, during the novel’s two sightings on an island where a shrine is present, nothing happens. This is especially telling given the local wisdom that if a person sees a tiger, they’re already as good as dead and certainly won’t live to tell the tale.

Although the prevalence and the apparent power of the Bon Bibi legend certainly offers the illusion that humans are able to gain the upper hand in the fight against nature, the local characters repeatedly affirm (and even demonstrate with their lives) that they live at the mercy of the natural world, which seems overwhelmingly indifferent to human life. Despite several efforts to curb tiger attacks, local women in the present (the early 2000s) still expect to be widowed in their twenties. Likewise, when cyclones roll through, they destroy boats, kill livestock and people, and submerge entire islands. The novel even offers the historical anecdote of Henry Piddington, the Englishman who coined the term “cyclone,” as a cautionary tale to not underestimate the power of the storms—he correctly predicted that a cyclone would lay the carefully planned port city of Canning flat within fifteen years of its construction. In illustrating both the beauty of the Sundarbans and the region’s danger, violence, and indifference to human life, *The Hungry Tide* suggests that all humans can do is to hope, pray, and live with respect and reverence for a place that can kill them as easily as it can provide the resources for human life to thrive.

#### **18.4.3 The Human Cost of Environmental Conservation**

While *The Hungry Tide* grapples primarily with the conflict between man and nature (in which man is relatively helpless in the face of dangerous natural forces), it also explores the conflicts that arise when people with power take it upon themselves to preserve and protect the natural world from overfishing, poaching, and the general spread of civilization on previously wild land. Though Piya, as a cetologist (a scientist who studies marine mammals), begins the novel believing fully that the welfare of the natural world should take precedence over anything else, her time in the Sundarbans begins to show her that conservation efforts aren’t necessarily a clear force for good in the world. Although the novel acknowledges that wildlife conservation is an admirable goal, the novel is ultimately wary of how those conservation efforts play out. In

exploring how governments can use the name of ecological preservation to justify violence against vulnerable people, the novel asserts that the human toll of wildlife conservation efforts must be taken into consideration first. In other words, conservation efforts must help both the natural environment and the people who make that environment their home.

Kanai explains to Piya how some government and environmental groups try to protect the environment at the expense of the people who live there. Such groups fail to take into account—or care—about the potential human cost of ecological preservation efforts. When Piya and Kanai discuss their experience of encountering a village mob torturing and burning a captured tiger that killed two people, Kanai encourages Piya to consider both the reasons why the villagers would want to do so, as well as the ways in which even Seattle-based Piya is complicit in creating the environment where torturing a tiger can even happen. Kanai points out that in the Sundarbans as a whole, tigers kill multiple people every week—so many, he suggests, that if people were to be killed in such numbers elsewhere, it would be deemed genocide. However, because the residents of the Sundarbans are “the poorest of the poor,” the killings aren’t reported. He suggests that the government and environmental groups alike care more for the tigers than they do for the tigers’ human victims, if only because the victims are so poor—while there’s money and political favor to be had in promoting conservation efforts.

The Morichjhāpi conflict of 1978-79 also illustrates how environmental preservation can be a convenient and impactful justification for violence against the people who live in a certain environment. Though the settlement at Morichjhāpi was seen as a threat to the government for a host of other reasons, some of the conflict had to do with the fact that the refugees chose to settle on an island that the government had previously set aside as a wildlife refuge. The reader learns about this conflict through an argument between Nirmal and Nilima. When Nirmal begs Nilima to route some of the Trust’s resources to the people on Morichjhāpi, Nilima insists that the people there are just squatters (illegal occupants). She also says that if people are regularly allowed to take land like they’ve done, the environment will suffer. Nirmal, on the other hand, believes that the people on Morichjhāpi are people in need of medical attention, just like people everywhere, and that the environmental argument is merely a convenient way to justify the group’s eviction. Later, Nirmal is struck when Kusum, who lives on Morichjhāpi, recounts when, in the middle of the first siege, she listened to the police announce that the island is a nature reserve funded by people all over the world. She wonders to Nirmal who these people are who “love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?” Kusum comes to believe that her true crime in the government’s eyes is being human and poor in a world that privileges people who no longer have to make a living by fishing, farming, and clearing land, as most poor people in the area have to do.

Though the novel ends before any true, large-scale resolution can be reached in regard to the balance between valuing human life and protecting the environment, Piya’s proposed ongoing project to study the Orcaella dolphins suggests that she has internalized what she learned from being forced to humanize the locals. She tells Nilima that she’d like to work with local



fisherman, rather than attempt to stop their work, and believes that some of the research money she'd receive to study the dolphins could be shared with the Babadon Trust, which provides locals with healthcare and other services. Nilima's apparent endorsement of Piya's plan suggests that environmental conservation can only be truly positive and useful when it seeks to conserve not just the natural world and the animals that live there, but also protect that people who share the environment—no matter how poor they may be.

#### **18.4.4 Idealism and Theory vs Practicality and Action**

Upon returning to Lusibari for the first time since he was a child, Kanai receives a packet left to him by his late uncle Nirmal, a dreamy, idealistic Communist who became involved in the 1979 Morichjhāpi conflict, much to his wife Nilima's chagrin. Unlike her husband, Nilima took it upon herself to work with the government to form the Babadon Trust, which sought to provide much-needed services to locals in a way her husband found wholly distasteful. By considering the ways in which idealism bogs Nirmal down and paralyzes him from taking meaningful action, and comparing that paralysis to Nilima's life of action, *The Hungry Tide* makes the case that theory, idealism, and good intentions are relatively meaningless if they're never put into practice.

Upon their arrival in the Sundarbans, Nirmal is simultaneously entranced and repulsed by the history of Sir Daniel Hamilton, a wealthy Scotsman who developed the Hamilton Estate on Gosaba. There, he implemented a cooperative system and did his best to distance Gosaba from India's rigid caste system in the name of creating an ideal society in which everyone could profit. Though Hamilton is frequently described as having been a wealthy capitalist, his estate seems Communist in nature, which is what intrigues Nirmal. For the time that Hamilton was alive, the experiment worked relatively well, which provides Nirmal with proof that his beloved class and political theories can indeed work in the real world.

When faced with the corruption of the landowners and the poverty of the locals upon his and Nilima's arrival in Lusibari, ten years after Hamilton's death, Nirmal is overwhelmed and entirely unable to function. The narrator notes that he turned to his copy of Lenin's pamphlet, which he rereads over and over again in search of answers as to how to help the impoverished locals. Nilima, on the other hand, begins talking to the local women and listening to their stories, and then forms a union to help them and bring services to the island. Though Nirmal is dismissive of Nilima's methods (she works with the government to secure funding and assistance, which he finds unacceptable given his political leanings), Nirmal is forced to recognize that his wife was actually able to orchestrate a great deal of positive change on Lusibari. Through her work, Nilima is able to break up the landholdings, eject the corrupt land managers, and build a hospital capable of serving an extraordinary number of people. Through Nirmal's notebook, it's clear that he believes Nilima is just as dismissive of his politics as he is of hers. However, Nilima tells Kanai on several occasions—and Kanai infers himself—that what actually drove Nilima and Nirmal apart was Nirmal's complete inability to act, write, or work within a system he found distasteful to create any change. For him, his theory was too important to compromise on, even if it meant that nothing got done because of that.

These conflicts between action and inaction finally came to a head when Nirmal became involved with the Morichjhāpi conflict. His writing in his journal shows clearly that he was entranced by the idea of the perfect, Hamilton-esque society that the refugees on Morichjhāpi sought to create. Further, while he desperately wanted to be of help and felt he could help (given his background as a schoolteacher and a once-prominent member of the Marxist academic circles in Calcutta), he again was bogged down in thinking about what should be done. Nirmal died not long after the police invade Morichjhāpi and massacre the refugees in 1979, leaving only his account of the events in one small notebook to Kanai upon his death. In the notebook, Nirmal speaks again and again about how he recognizes that inaction throughout his life has been his undoing, and yet he still finds himself unable to do anything but record his experiences of the conflict through the lens of idealized theory. Essentially, the novel suggests that the notebook, as Nirmal's final contribution, really only serves the purpose of unraveling personal mysteries for his family members and proving that Nirmal was entirely capable of meaningful action. It's telling, then, that Nirmal's notebook doesn't even survive to the end of the novel—it gets swept away in the cyclone's floodwaters. His one lasting contribution, on the other hand, is the cyclone shelter he insisted Nilima include in the hospital—something he pushed for because of his interest in storms and meteorological theory. The cyclone shelter stands as proof that Nirmal's idealism and good intentions were impotent until and unless they were joined with action, practicality, and funding.

## **18.5 SYMBOLS**

### **18.5.1 Cyclone Shelter**

The cyclone shelter symbolizes what Nirmal may have been able to accomplish had he been more willing to compromise on his belief in the importance of pure, unadulterated communist theory. Nilima explains that the Babadon Trust never would've built the cyclone shelter in the hospital had Nirmal not insisted they do so. Notably, Nirmal only insisted because he was so interested in the science and the theory behind cyclones and other storms. Thus, the cyclone shelter becomes both the most lasting thing that Nirmal leaves behind and a reminder of all that he was unable to leave behind.

### **18.5.2 Tigers**

In the Sundarbans, tigers symbolize the extraordinary power of the natural world. Locals know that the tigers are always there and can appear and kill with no notice, and they overwhelmingly believe that to even say the word "tiger" is to call the beast itself. Though tigers certainly aren't the only animal or natural force capable of killing people, the special reverence afforded to tigers makes them the representative of the deadliness of the Sundarbans as a whole. Like the tigers, the landscape itself must be treated with respect, reverence, and fear.

### **18.5.3 Gamchas**

Gamch has, which are small pieces of cloth used in India as towels, symbolize one's

connection to people, places, and cultures. Piya's father, despite expressing no interest in remaining connected to his Indian roots after moving to Seattle, refuses to throw his away, even though it looks moldy and disgusting after years of use. Thus, holding onto his gamchhas keeps him connected to his home in one small way. As Piya relearns the word itself and uses gamchhas provided to her by Fokir, she becomes more connected to her own Indian roots and to Fokir. Later, gamchhas become very literal means of staying connected to life itself, as Kusum's father uses a gamchha to help tie himself and his uncle to a tree during a cyclone.

#### 18.5.4 The hospital

The hospital that Nilima founds symbolizes the importance of translating one's ideals into practice and the impact that doing so can have. By creating the hospital, Nilima has been able to improve life on the Sundarbans for its residents, although she has also had to make compromises in her ideals by working with the government, which her husband Nirmal fiercely opposes. Notably, unlike Nirmal's notebook, the hospital survives the cyclone undamaged, emphasizing its permanence.

#### 18.6 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. What is the primary setting of *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Sundarbans
  - B) Himalayas
  - C) Western Ghats
  - D) Ganges Delta
2. Who is the American marine biologist studying dolphins in the Sundarbans? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Kanai Dutt
  - B) Moyna
  - C) Piya Roy
  - D) Fokir
3. What is the name of the rare river dolphin that Piya seeks to study in the Sundarbans? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Ganges River Dolphin
  - B) Irrawaddy Dolphin
  - C) Pink Dolphin
  - D) Orca
4. Who is the translator accompanying Piya on her expedition to the Sundarbans? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Kanai Dutt
  - B) Nirmal

- C) Fokir  
D) Nilima
5. Which character is a guide and a boatman from the local village of Lusibari in the Sundarbans? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) Moyna  
B) Fokir  
C) Nirmal  
D) Kusum
6. What significant event brings Piya and Kanai together during their expedition in the Sundarbans? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) Encounter with a Bengal tiger  
B) A cyclone  
C) Discovery of an ancient manuscript  
D) Meeting with local fishermen
7. What species does Kanai Dutt aim to protect through the establishment of a wildlife sanctuary in the Sundarbans? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) Tigers  
B) Crocodiles  
C) Dolphins  
D) Sea Turtles
8. Which of the following is not a central theme explored in *The Hungry Tide*? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) Environmental conservation  
B) Socio-political conflicts  
C) Cultural identity  
D) Space exploration
9. What event serves as a turning point in the relationship between Piya and Fokir in the Sundarbans? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) A violent storm  
B) The sighting of an endangered bird  
C) A boat accident  
D) A traditional festival
10. What traditional form of storytelling does Fokir often use to share myths and tales of the Sundarbans? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) Kathakali  
B) Kathak  
C) Jatra  
D) Bharatanatyam

## 18.7 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

**Question 1.** Is Kanai's confidence, or perhaps arrogance, more of an advantage or disadvantage in the novel? Why?

**Answer:** Kanai's confidence, or at times perceived arrogance, plays a multifaceted role in the novel. It both serves as an advantage and a disadvantage throughout the novel.

Advantage:

Kanai's confidence allows him to navigate challenging situations with a sense of self-assurance. His belief in his intellectual abilities and his assertiveness enable him to engage in discussions, express his opinions, and pursue his goals. This confidence initially aids him in facing unfamiliar terrains and situations in the Sundarbans, offering a sense of control and assurance in an environment he's unfamiliar with.

Disadvantage:

However, Kanai's overconfidence at times blinds him to the perspectives and experiences of others, particularly those like Fokir and Piya, whose lives and knowledge are deeply connected to the natural world of the Sundarbans. His arrogance occasionally causes him to dismiss their insights and underestimate their understanding of the environment. This leads to a lack of empathy and an inability to fully comprehend the complexities of the region and the lives of its inhabitants.

In summary, while Kanai's confidence initially aids him in navigating unfamiliar territories, his arrogance becomes a hindrance as it obstructs his ability to empathize and understand the nuanced dynamics of the Sundarbans. His overconfidence acts as both an advantage and a disadvantage, depending on the context and the individuals involved in his interactions.

**Question 2.** Comment on the marginalized, excluded, and silenced social groups described within the novel?

**Answer:** In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, the novel vividly portrays the marginalized, excluded, and silenced social groups, primarily the indigenous communities living in the Sundarbans, revealing their struggles, resilience, and the complexities of their existence.

**Munda and other Indigenous Communities:** The Munda tribe and other indigenous groups in the Sundarbans are depicted as marginalized communities whose lives and livelihoods are deeply intertwined with the natural environment. They face numerous challenges, including socio-economic marginalization, lack of access to basic amenities, limited educational opportunities, and exploitation by more dominant groups. Their voices and perspectives are often silenced or ignored by the outside world, contributing to their invisibility and social exclusion.

**Fisherfolk and Their Struggles:** The fisherfolk, like Fokir and his family, represent another marginalized group within the Sundarbans. They live on the fringes, facing hardships due

to ecological changes, unpredictable tides, and the constant threat of natural disasters. Their reliance on the environment for survival exposes them to vulnerability, poverty, and exploitation by outside forces, leading to their voices being overlooked and disregarded.

**Women's Position and Challenges:** Women within these marginalized groups face additional layers of marginalization due to gender inequalities. Their voices are often further silenced within patriarchal structures prevalent in these communities. For instance, Piya's interactions with Moyna highlight the constraints and restrictions faced by women like her, constrained by societal norms and expectations.

The novel brings attention to these marginalized groups' struggles while portraying their resilience, intricate relationships with the environment, and their rich cultural heritage. Through the characters of Piya, Fokir, and others, Ghosh highlights the complexities of their lives, shedding light on the socio-economic challenges, cultural richness, and the need for recognition and empowerment of these often overlooked communities.

## **18.8 LET US SUM UP**

Amitav Ghosh intricately weaves together several thematic threads throughout its narrative. Firstly, it delves into the intricate relationship between humanity and the natural world, particularly the Sundarbans, exploring how human actions impact and are impacted by the environment. Secondly, the novel sheds light on the marginalized indigenous communities like the Mundas and fisherfolk, emphasizing their cultural identity, struggles, and resilience against socio-economic challenges and ecological changes. Thirdly, it highlights the interconnectedness and diversity of lives within the Sundarbans, showcasing how characters like Piya, Fokir, and Kanai, from diverse backgrounds, converge amidst the dynamic ecosystem of the delta. Lastly, Ghosh integrates historical narratives, scientific knowledge, and mythical elements, examining their intersection and influence on the characters' lives, beliefs, and aspirations within a landscape undergoing rapid change. Through these themes, the novel paints a vivid and multi-layered portrait of the Sundarbans and its inhabitants, exploring the intricate complexities of the human experience within this dynamic and challenging environment.

## **18.9 ANSWER KEY**

### **CYP**

1. sixth
2. two
3. Sunderbans
4. True
5. True
6. False
7. Kanai Dutt
8. translator

9. True

10. The Badabon Trust

### MCQs

- |                         |                         |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. A) Sundarbans        | 2. C) Piya Roy          |
| 3. B) Irrawaddy Dolphin | 4. A) Kanai Dutt        |
| 5. B) Fokir             | 6. B) A cyclone         |
| 7. A) Tigers            | 8. D) Space exploration |
| 9. C) A boat accident   | 10. C) Jatra            |

### 18.10 SUGGESTED READING

1. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. Harper Collins, 2004.
2. Ferdous, Hasan, "The Chronicle Interview: Amitav Ghosh: The Hungry Tide." [http://www.un.org/pubs/chronicle/2005issued4/0405p48htmlpara 2](http://www.un.org/pubs/chronicle/2005issued4/0405p48htmlpara2).



## ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

### STRUCTURE

- 19.0 Introduction
- 19.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 19.2 Ecocritical Study of *The Hungry Tide*
- 19.3 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 19.4 Examination Oriented Questions
- 19.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 19.6 Answer Key (MCQs)
- 19.7 Glossary
- 19.8 Suggested Reading

### 19.0 INTRODUCTION

Dear Learner, in the preceding lesson, the plotline, themes, and symbols of *The Hungry Tide* were explained to you. Now in this lesson let us further enhance your appreciation of the novel by moving towards a fundamental concern, that is, an ecocritical reading of the novel.

### 19.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME

The objective of this lesson is to help the learner make a connection between humans and nature in *The Hungry Tide*. The learner would appreciate the ecocritical concerns in the novel.

After going through this lesson, you will be

- able to recognize Amitav Ghosh's concern with environmental issues and his ecological vision
- be able to analyse the text as per the critical approach ecocriticism and establish the text as a fine example in the genre of ecocriticism
- be sensitised towards the various environmental concerns facing the world today and the need to maintain a harmonising bond between man and nature.

### 19.2 ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

Ecocriticism is the interdisciplinary territory which incorporates the study of literature and environment. The word ecocriticism has been first used in William Rueckart's paper



Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* deals with writing about nature. This novel unmistakably brings out the fury of nature and fragility of people that are helpless before nature. Ghosh here presents nature not as the setting of pleasant magnificence alone but also as ravenous of human blood. The tide and its surges represent all the overwhelming parts of nature. The story explores refugee resettlement in the forest reserves of Marichjhapi, Sundarbans and the complex human-animal relationship in the archipelagos ecosystem. This novel focuses on the ongoing tension between humanity and the environment in the Sundarbans, the Tide country of West Bengal, India and Bangladesh.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, set in the Sundarbans, tells the story of Indo-American marine biologist Piya Roy and the two characters Fokir, a local fisherman who helps her to locate dolphins in Garjiontda pool and Kanai Dutta, a Delhi-based businessman who meets her on his way to visit his aunt Nilima.

Ghosh has done a heavy research work and has presented the ecosystem in a unique way. He has studied the presence of animals and its ecological balance in the region. He gives so much information about gigantic dolphins, and about flora and fauna of the locality. He not only shows that Sundarbans is not only the confluence of rivers and the sea but also a meeting point of different cultures, which seems impossible at any other place. It also portrays the very strange attachment story between Piya and Fokir. The nights and days they spent in the vast river on a tree. Where they both could not exchange words with each other.

The novel considers the struggle between the environment and between the groups intended on preserving the Sundarbans' unique aquatic life and tiger population, sometimes at the expense of its residents. The novel's central character is a scientist, so it is not surprising that technology appears throughout the story. *The Hungry Tide* considers not only the issue of environmental conservation but the issue of how we might begin to understand the diversity of the human not only as a readjustment between different kinds of human societies and values, but also as a readjustment of the idea of how the human is defined in itself and how this needs to reflect the broader categories of life across species and even across the idea of the whole interrelated pattern of living forces that constitute the planet.

Mother Nature is thoughtful to man. It not only gives comfort to man but is also a great teacher and a guardian. Only when a man/woman lives amidst nature would he/she be able to be a human. With nature slowly losing itself, man/woman too is becoming an animal. *The Hungry Tide* shows the Sundarbans ecosystem of mangrove forested islands and mud flats, representing the constant transformations it undergoes, because of daily tidal flows with sections of island being temporarily submerged under seawater. The region has derived its name from the sunderi tree (mangrove) as it is locally called.

When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the

conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles. There are no towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos. Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moment can human beings have any doubt on the terrain's hostility, to its presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy and expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles.

The ecological bond between man/woman and nature is unbreakable, even though our environment is very volatile. To the inhabitants of Sundarbans this land is known as *bathirdesh* – tide. This is a land half submerged at high tide. It is only in falling that the water gives birth to the forest.

Water is of unique importance in Hindu mythology. Water is primarily connected with fertility, immortality, place, creation and the feminine. Running water is considered holy in Indian folklore. As per the Rig Veda, the waterway is a continuation of the heavenly waters that stream from paradise to earth. Mythology has it that when the Ganges plummeted from the sky, so powerful were its flows that it took steps to suffocate the actual earth. Shiva, expecting the storm, caught the waterway in his dreadlocks. It is just when the stream approaches the ocean that it unravels into a thousand strands framing an immense archipelago of the Sunderbans. The water that covers tigers, crocodiles and snakes and supports the mangrove tree likewise shields the region from enormous scope of deforestation and surprisingly incessant normal disasters like tempests and storms.

Conversely, the post pilgrim Sundarbans saw expanding human action, declining bio-variety and acknowledgment and showcasing of the uniqueness of the Sundarbans. At present the bio organization of the Sundarbans observes the move from an undermining environment to a compromised biological system. The tides arrive in excess of two hundred miles inland, and consistently a great many sections of land of mangrove backwoods vanish just to reappear hours after the fact. For many years, just the genuinely confiscated and the miserable visionaries of the world have overcome the man eaters and the crocodiles who rule there, to squeeze a dubious presence from the immovable mud.

The settlers in this land were refugees from Bangladesh like Kusum, Fokir and Moyna; life is extremely precarious. Attacks by deadly tigers are common. Unrest and eviction are constant threats. Without warning, at any time, tidal floods rise and surge over the land, leaving devastation in their wake. The island has suffered much hardships, poverty, famine, catastrophes and failed dreams. Death is a stalk reality. In spite of these dangers people like Kusum feel at home in these islands and even while on exile in Bihar, she had dreamed of returning to this place, of seeing once more these rich fields of mud, these trembling tides.

India is a country that is rich in its biodiversity. The country's flora and fauna richness is

therefore consequently found in the works of authors. *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, is such a novel that interconnects literature and nature. The protagonist of the novel, Piya, studies nature and its wonders and she is seen as eco- feminist. She cannot bear the killing of tigers and does not understand the practical ruthlessness of people of Sundarbans.

The amicable relationship between nature and man/woman is explained in the novel. Piya starts with a mistranslation of people and place around her and afterwards continues to address a development towards equity among first class and subaltern culture. *The Hungry Tide* isn't just the story of pioneers and their environmental surroundings in the Sundarbans but also an investigation into the hearts of the characters. The idea of coexistence in the novel shows that without establishing a relationship between man/woman and nature, life is not possible at all. Ecology has proven itself as the striving force that alters the way of life people lived in the past and in the present throughout the work. Ghosh surprisingly has incorporated the components of alert through each character conveyed in the novel. Moyra, who is portrayed to be perhaps the most courageous character with will power, fears nature to safeguard her son's life. Towards the end of the novel, when Piya and Fokir are caught in the cyclone, it is the fight and desperation to live that unites them. Piya starts with a mistranslation of individuals and climate around her and continues to address a development towards uniformity among world class and inferior culture. Ghosh suggests the world to see the positive change through social anthropology and the need to promote such cross cultural relations.

According to Wordsworth, nature is our Guide, Companion, teacher and compassionate mother, whereas Ghosh depicts or portrays the physical relationship of our environment. Our nature is highly volatile. It is sometimes calm, sometimes furious, sometimes bright, sometimes dark, sometimes destructive and sometimes creative. Amitav here presents both optimistic and pessimistic notes on nature. He also presents the progressions which are happening in nature and their outcomes upon us. The Upanishads also mention that the Universe along with its creatures belongs to the God. No creature is superior to any other: Human beings should not be above nature. Let no one species encroach over the rights and privileges of other species.

In the novel Kusum narrates to Fokir the story of Bon Bibi, a good spirit who fights with the evil spirit Dokkhin Rai for control of the forests and waterways. In this story, there is a man named Dhona who is seduced by the evil spirit into offering a young lad named Dukhey as food to Dokkhin Rai, who sometimes takes the form of a tiger. But Bon Bibi saves Dukhey at the last minute. Kusum passes this legend from her childhood memories. Her father had built a little temple in Bon Bibi's honour on the island of Garjontola, and her son Fokir – and later, he and his son Tutul – often visit there. The story has a strong and lasting effect, therefore, on her, on her child Fokir, and on her grandson Tutul, but Kusum sadly admits that Bon Bibi had not helped her years before (when Kusum had called out to her to save her own father, from whom she had learned the legend) from a tiger. In fact, soon after passing along the story to Fokir, Kusum herself abandons him.

The novel showcases though the natural world is revered and believed to be protected by the goddess Bon Bibi, conservation efforts implemented by the government have increased the conflict between people, especially the poor, and the local environment as they try to preserve nature at the cost of humans' livelihoods and even lives. Even the forest department, part of the government, does nothing to stop the deadly tiger attacks in the area. Fokir and Piya are both deeply connected to nature as a fisherman and a marine biologist, respectively, but they take drastically different approaches to this conservation issue at first. Furthermore, the characters constantly face danger from the unpredictable tides of the Sundarbans, crocodiles and tigers, and in the climax of the novel, a cyclone. One of the central issues of the novel is the plight of a group of refugees who settle on one of the islands of the Sundarbans, but are ordered to leave, then violently removed, by the government in order to preserve the land and environment. For these mostly impoverished refugees, the benefits of conservation come at the cost of their basic needs. Another example of this conflict is the killing of a tiger, which is illegal in the Sundarbans. Piya initially opposes this killing strongly, even though the tiger has already killed two people and threatened more. Ultimately, Piya revises her views and creates a new sort of conservation organization that will work with local people rather than against them.

*The Hungry Tide* is said to be an investigation on an endangered ecosystem- the Sundarbans in the Bay of Bengal. By taking the most threatened mangrove forests in the world as the location of the novel, Ghosh works around the ecocritical concerns. Throughout the novel nature is projected as something that comes before human beings. The metaphor of hunger in the title is a thought provoking one. We have to think about whose hunger is to be given importance. Whether the hunger of the tidal people who are fighting for a living or that of tigers, who are facing extinction?. Ghosh calls the change in climate and the ensuing problems as "The Great Derangement" the catastrophic result of the excessive pursuit of modernity, and calls for literature to be the bridge for the latent ecological archetypes in our "collective unconsciousness" to pass into our consciousness.

### 19.3 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. What is the primary setting for *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, emphasizing the delicate ecological balance and human-nature interaction? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Himalayas
  - B) Sundarbans
  - C) Western Ghats
  - D) Ganges Delta
2. Which character in the novel is an American marine biologist studying the rare Irrawaddy dolphins in the Sundarbans, showcasing the novel's concern for biodiversity? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A) Moyna
  - B) Piya Roy
  - C) Nirmal

- D) Fokir
3. What environmental issue is prominently portrayed in *The Hungry Tide*, threatening the Sundarbans' ecosystem? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) Air pollution  
B) Deforestation  
C) Climate change and rising sea levels  
D) Soil erosion
4. Which mythological figure in the novel symbolizes the protection of the Sundarbans and its inhabitants against the adversities of nature, emphasizing the ecological and cultural significance? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) Ganga Devi  
B) Bon Bibi  
C) Durga Mata  
D) Kali Ma
5. What natural calamity serves as a turning point in the narrative, highlighting the Sundarbans' vulnerability to environmental forces? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) Tsunami  
B) Earthquake  
C) Cyclone  
D) Tidal wave
6. What cultural belief system and folklore play a significant role in shaping the characters' perspectives on the Sundarbans' ecosystem and the balance of nature? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) The myth of the Loch Ness Monster  
B) The legend of Atlantis  
C) The tale of Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli  
D) The story of King Arthur
7. Which character in the novel represents a way of life deeply connected to the Sundarbans' environment, relying on fishing and honey collection for survival, emphasizing the human-nature relationship? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) Piya Roy  
B) Nirmal  
C) Fokir  
D) Kanai Dutt
8. What prevalent theme in the novel reflects the struggle for coexistence between human inhabitants and the natural world in the Sundarbans? \_\_\_\_\_.

- A) Technological advancement
  - B) Industrial revolution
  - C) Urbanization
  - D) Man-nature interdependence
9. Which character's pursuit of scientific knowledge in the Sundarbans emphasizes the importance of biodiversity and ecological conservation? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) Moyna
  - B) Piya Roy
  - C) Fokir
  - D) Kanai Dutt
10. What overarching message does *The Hungry Tide* convey regarding humanity's responsibility towards the environment and the need for sustainable practices in fragile ecosystems? \_\_\_\_\_.
- A) Preservation of cultural heritage
  - B) The necessity of urban development
  - C) Stewardship of natural resources
  - D) Exploitation of wilderness for economic gain

#### 19.4 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

**Question1.** How is the novel *The Hungry Tide* a comment on climate sustainability?

**Answer:** *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh provides a nuanced commentary on climate sustainability by exploring the intricate relationship between human activities and the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans. The novel serves as a compelling narrative that delves into the consequences of climate change, emphasizing the urgency for sustainable practices and environmental consciousness. Through vivid descriptions of the Sundarbans' ecological intricacies, Ghosh portrays the region's susceptibility to rising sea levels, cyclones, and the erosion of the natural habitat due to human intervention.

The narrative underscores the vulnerability of the Sundarbans and its inhabitants in the face of environmental challenges, depicting the repercussions of unsustainable practices on both the ecosystem and the lives of the local communities. It sheds light on the need for sustainable livelihoods, conservation efforts, and the recognition of the delicate balance between human existence and the environment. Ghosh's portrayal of characters like Piya Roy and Fokir, whose lives are intricately connected to the natural world, emphasizes the importance of understanding and respecting the ecosystem's complexities.

Overall, *The Hungry Tide* serves as a potent commentary on climate sustainability by urging readers to reflect on the impact of human actions on the environment, advocating for responsible stewardship of natural resources, and highlighting the imperative need for



sustainable practices to ensure the preservation of fragile ecosystems for future generations.

**Question2.** Explain the myth of Bon Bibi.

**Answer:** In Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*, the myth of Bon Bibi holds significant cultural and symbolic importance within the context of the Sundarbans and its inhabitants. Bon Bibi is revered as a guardian deity, worshipped by the local communities dwelling in the Sundarbans, particularly by those engaged in fishing and honey collection in the dense mangrove forests.

The myth of Bon Bibi revolves around the story of a young girl, Bon Bibi, and her brother Shah Jongoli, who possess supernatural powers. According to the legend, they are protectors of the Sundarbans and its inhabitants, safeguarding them from the dangers posed by the malevolent force known as Dokkhin Rai, represented as a tiger demon or spirit. The myth of Bon Bibi emphasizes the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, symbolizing the struggle against adversity and the preservation of balance within the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans. It represents the local belief system, encapsulating themes of courage, protection, and the reverence for the natural world. The reverence for Bon Bibi transcends religious boundaries, uniting people from diverse backgrounds in their faith in her protective powers.

Throughout the novel, the myth of Bon Bibi serves as a guiding force for the characters, offering solace and hope amidst the perilous challenges faced in the Sundarbans. It embodies the cultural heritage and spiritual connection of the inhabitants with the environment, reinforcing the idea of respecting and living in harmony with nature, which is crucial in their everyday struggle for survival in this unique and hazardous landscape.

**Question 3.** What role does religion play in the novel?

**Answer:** Though none of the most prominent characters—Kanai, Piya, Nirmal, and Nilima—express religious beliefs in *The Hungry Tide*, religion is an important way for many people in the Sundarbans to control their relationship with nature, which often threatens to annihilate them. By believing in the protection of the goddess Bon Bibi, people are able to gain a sense of security and hope. Religion is also a way for other characters to relate to people native to the Sundarbans. Though Kanai and Nirmal are both initially dismissive of religion, it ultimately allows them to get closer to others. For example, Nirmal comes to appreciate the experience of traveling to the shrine to Bon Bibi with Horen and Kusum, while Piya is moved by Fokir's expression of his beliefs.

**Question 4.** Do you think Nirmal's life ended up having no meaning, as he feared? Why or why not?

**Answer:** While Nirmal didn't achieve as much as he could have had he been more

practical or more willing to compromise, his life did make a difference. His notebook could draw new attention to the issues faced by the refugees in their struggle against the government, whose voices have been silenced. Furthermore, the cyclone shelter he built was vital to the survival of Lusibari's people when a cyclone hit. Though Nirmal's regrets are understandable, his life did have meaning and a significant impact.

**Question 5.** How is gender explored through Kanai's character arc in the novel?

**Answer:** At the beginning of the novel, Kanai primarily sees women as objects of romantic interests, even as prizes. Yet by the end of the narrative, he has formed a mutually respectful friendship with Piya. Furthermore, he comes to recognize the importance of Nilima's work. Though she dismisses him as a predator at one point, he ultimately decides to include her side of the story with his rewriting of Nirmal's journal, giving her her due.

## 19.5 LET US SUM UP

*The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh is a novel deeply immersed in ecocritical facets, presenting a vivid portrayal of the Sundarbans, a unique and complex ecological landscape. Ghosh adeptly navigates the intricate relationship between humans and their environment, highlighting the Sundarbans' vulnerability to natural forces and the impact of human interference. The novel meticulously showcases the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans, characterized by its mangrove forests, tides, and the ever-present threat of cyclones. Through vivid descriptions, Ghosh emphasizes the interconnectedness of the region's biodiversity, acknowledging the delicate balance that sustains life within this ecosystem.

Moreover, Ghosh's narrative underscores the intertwined lives of the characters with the natural world, illustrating their dependency on the tides, forests, and wildlife for survival. The story also addresses the environmental challenges faced by the inhabitants due to rising sea levels, climate change, and the erosion of traditional ways of life. Through Piya Roy's study of the rare Irrawaddy dolphins and the various characters' struggles within this environment, the novel emphasizes the human impact on the ecosystem and the need for sustainable coexistence. "The Hungry Tide" serves as a poignant commentary on the intricate relationship between humans and nature, urging readers to contemplate humanity's responsibility in preserving fragile ecosystems and fostering a deeper appreciation for the delicate balance of the natural world.

## 19.6 ANSWER KEY (MCQs)

1. B) Sundarbans
2. B) Piya Roy
3. C) Climate change and rising sea levels



4. B) Bon Bibi
5. C) Cyclone
6. C) The tale of Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli
7. C) Fokir
8. D) Man-nature interdependence
9. B) Piya Roy
10. C) Stewardship of natural resources

## 19.7 GLOSSARY

fury: very great anger

fragility: the quality of being delicate and vulnerable

refugee: a person who has been forced to leave his/her country for political or religious reasons, or because of a war, etc.

gigantic: of very great size or extent

confluence: the place where two or more rivers or areas of water join together to become one single river

gnarled: rough and having grown into a strange shape, because of old age or hard work

foliage: all the leaves of a tree or plant

fetid: smelling extremely unpleasant

amicable: characterised by friendliness and absence of discord

volatile: a situation that can change suddenly and unexpectedly

## 19.8 SUGGESTED READING

Mambrol, Nasrullah. *Eco criticism: An Essay*. November 2016, <https://literariness.org/2016/11/27/ecocriticism/>.

Ross, Mallick. "Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: Morichjhapi Massacre." *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1999:58:1.

Jalais, Annu. "Dwelling on Morichjhapi" EPW Special article, April, 23, 2005.

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## LANGUAGE IN *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

### STRUCTURE

20.0 Introduction

20.1 Objectives and Outcome

20.2 Importance and Difficulties of Language and Intertextuality in *The Hungry Tide*

20.3 Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs)

20.4 Examination Oriented Questions

20.5 Let Us Sum Up

20.6 Answer Key (SAQs)

20.7 Suggested Reading

### 20.0 INTRODUCTION

Dear learner, the preceding lessons have explained the various aspects of the novel *The Hungry Tide*. In this lesson, you will be introduced to another important aspect, that is, the issue of language and translation, as well as intertextuality.

### 20.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint you with the issues of language and translation along with the intertextuality in the novel *The Hungry Tide*.

After reading this lesson, you will be

- able to analyse the various dimensions of the novel concerning language and translation
- able to evaluate Amitav Ghosh as a writer by delving into the linguistic aspects of the novel.

### 20.2 IMPORTANCE AND DIFFICULTIES OF LANGUAGE AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

Despite his use of English for creative writing, Ghosh is thus very much aware of its position as the language of the imperialist, and that it continues to maintain its imperial dominance at the expense of other languages. These are among the reasons for his decision to withdraw *The Glass Palace* from participating in the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2001, although the novel had already been awarded the Eurasia regional prize. To him, the word "Commonwealth" is synonymous with the British Empire, and he did not want to be associated with a prize that, to him, appeared to gratuitously celebrate the English language's dominance.

One of Ghosh's persistent worries about the English language concerns its adequacy to describe the situation in India. He suspects that English "could limit his writing about India." He finds it problematic to translate dialects of his native language Bengali in his fictional works. He believes that he should not present any of the dialects as "masala English," which can be done by dropping in occasional words in the dialect. Although he does drop occasional words in other languages, such as the Bengali words in *The Hungry Tide*, he does this in order to imbue his fictional works with the appropriate local atmosphere, and also, because some of these words cannot really be translated into English.

Ghosh is not only cognizant of dialectal varieties and the need to respect them as linguistic systems in their own right, but also, more generally, of the heteroglossic tendencies of all languages, or their inherent "polylingualism."

Kanai runs a thriving translation bureau in Delhi. The Rilke poems that Nirmal is so besotted with, come to him in the form of translations. Piyali, born of Indian parents, raised in Seattle and back in India on the trail of dolphins, needs to have the words spoken in Bengali translated to her. Ghosh in the novel himself has translated a longish poem on the glory of Bonbibì, the presiding deity of the forest. The poem is in rhyming couplets and retains the incantatory beat of the original.

As a professional translator and interpreter, Kanai naturally views translation or the interpretation of other languages more positively than the other characters. To him, there are moments in which the act of interpretation had given him the momentary sensation of being transported out of his body and into another. In spite of Kanai's positive view of translation and the fact that there are times when it cannot be avoided, it is not always viewed positively in *The Hungry Tide*. It keeps one away from a sense of being at home, where everyone speaks the same untranslated language.

Looking at translation in the broad sense, this is something that animals, in their own way, seem to "know" better than humans (*Hungry Tide*, 206): . . . the animals

"already know by instinct we're not comfortably at home in our translated world," which resonate throughout the novel.

Art of translation becomes negative in Kanai's hands as translation becomes commodified and distanced from aesthetic considerations, only because he wants to make a living out of it:

"To put it briefly," he said, "I quickly discovered that while both Bengali and Arabic possess riches beyond accounting, in neither is it possible to earn a living by translating literature alone.

Moreover, translation between languages is not always easy. There are times, indeed, when it is impossible. At one point in *The Hungry Tide*, Piyali Roy, or "Piya" in short—the Americanized cytologist in the novel who cannot understand Bengali—asks Kanai to explain the

meaning of the words spoken by the illiterate fisherman Fokir. But this is beyond the professional capability of Kanai, who, at other points of the novel, is convinced of the ability of translation to render or explain almost everything from one language to another:

“What’s he saying?” Piya said to Kanai. “Can you translate?”

“I’m sorry, Piya,” Kanai said. “But this is beyond my power. He’s chanting a part of the Bon Bibi legend and the metre is too complicated. I can’t do it.” (309)

However, the impossibility of translation may not always lie with translation itself, but with the limitations of language and its vocabulary.

The ephemeral nature of words is something that Moyna, the trainee nurse and wife of the illiterate Fokir in the novel *The Hungry Tide*, knows very well. To Moyna “words are just air,

Kanai-babu. . . . When the wind blows on the water, you see ripples and waves, but the real river lies beneath, unseen and unheard” (258). However, the limitations of language do not prevent communication from taking place, even when there is no shared language, or the lack of translation to facilitate understanding between two or more persons who speak different languages. Indeed, in a broad sense, going beyond the narrower concerns with translation, the possibility and difficulty of communication is what the novel is about. The characters in the novel seek to cross multiple barriers—the barriers of language, religion and social class, those between human beings and nature, between traditional and cosmopolitan India, between urban and rural, between India and the wider world.

In *The Hungry Tide*, the Americanized Piya is at the center of the attempt to communicate in spite of linguistic differences. In spite of being of Bengali origin, she does not speak the Bengali language. However, Piya’s inability to speak Bengali does not prevent her from communicating with and understanding some of the characters who do not speak English in and around the Sundarbans, where she does her research on a species of riverine dolphins that are only found in the area. This supralinguistic communion is especially seen in her relationship with Fokir. She could not have used a common language with Fokir. She reveals the nature of her relationship to him in her response to Kanai, who asks her a question:

“And all that while, you couldn’t understand a word he was saying, could you?”

“No,” she said, with a nod of acknowledgement. “But you know what? There was so much in common between us it didn’t matter.” As S. Prasannarajan appropriately puts it, it is not only the exchange of paralinguistic and kinetic gestures between Piya and Fokir, but the natural environment as well, especially the river, that lead to their epiphanic understanding of each other.

Fokir, as a fisherman, depends on and has to understand the river very well, as his livelihood depends on it. Piya however, has a scholarly attitude toward it. They have different

pathways toward understanding it. Their different perspectives of the river are caricatured by Kanai: “He’s a fisherman and you’re a scientist. What you see as fauna he sees as food” (268). It represents that language cannot express everything, and understanding can sometimes be achieved nonlinguistically, through silence.

Though Kanai learns about the Sundarbans from the written journal of his late uncle, Nirmal, his most transformative experiences occur at moments when language is insufficient, such as his terrifying encounter with a tiger, which leaves him babbling. Ultimately, Kanai and Piya use their experiences to transform their approaches to language as Piya modifies her view towards conservation and writes grant proposals to begin a new sort of work, while Kanai integrates the experiences of his aunt Nilima into his recreation of his uncle’s journal.

Intertextuality too is a promising part of the novel from Rainer Maria Rilke’s poetry, to Nirmal’s testimonies, to Kanai’s translations, to Kusum’s folklore of the “Bon Bibi,” to Piya’s scientific notebooks, and to Fokir’s mystical chants and songs. Kristeva introduces the term Intertextuality as the “transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another.” In this sense, the concept of intertextuality becomes very useful in the discussion of Ghosh’s use of polyphonic discourses or a plurality of types of narratives in his novel—poetry, scientific notebooks, testimonial memoirs, myths and legends, and so on.

The tide country, as a textual space, has its own vocabulary, a *mohona*, a *maidan*, and the *bādh*, histories, and etymologies: *bhati* means not just tide, but a particular tide, the ebb tide, the *bhata*. Ghosh describes, in “the language of the place” (7), this ever-changing, unpredictable land-waterscape that is “a universe unto itself” (7), enticing the reader into the world of the tide country: “There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily. Ghosh’s purpose in bringing together or transposing the different strands of “signifying systems” is to demonstrate ultimately the diverse ways of contact and communication in the world and the heterogeneity of human reality.

*The Hungry Tide*, which is an important work that expresses his meditations on language, goes a step further. It not only dwells on the limitations of English, but questions the ability of language itself to explain or convey everything, including entities or situations that are profoundly important to the human condition, such as mutual understanding and love.

### 20.3 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS (SAQs)

1. Which poet is repeatedly referenced in Nirmal’s writing?
2. What is the name of the Scottish man who set up a (temporarily) successful egalitarian society in the Sundarbans?
3. Who is the goddess who protects the Sundarbans?
4. Which animal features as a significant symbol in the novel?

5. What does Piya plan to name her project after at the end of the novel?
6. Where is Piya waiting for a train to take her when Kanai first sees her?
7. Who meets Kanai at the train station in Canning?
8. What is Nirmal's political ideology?
9. Why do Nilima and Nirmal move to the Sundarbans?
10. What is Kanai's occupation?
11. What does Nilima create in the Sundarbans as her life's works?
12. Who saves Piya from drowning?
13. How many languages does Kanai speak?
14. How does Piya communicate with the forest guard and the boat pilot?
15. Which language is known by Piya?
16. What does the novel suggest about the spoken and written language?
17. What does Piya find more effective means for communicating with others?
18. Although Fokir, a local fisherman, is not able to communicate in English with Piya, then how does Piya communicate with him?

## 20.4 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

**Q.1** For Kanai, language is an all-important tool to not only communicate with others, but to navigate the world as a whole. But Piya, on the other hand, comes to rely on non-verbal communication when she is with Fokir, with whom she doesn't share a common language. Ultimately, does the novel suggest that language is an effective means of communication, or is it insufficient in some way?

**Answer:** Though human language has its advantages, *The Hungry Tide* focuses on the ways in which verbal communication can be lacking and nonverbal communication can be more powerful. Even Kanai often relies on nonverbal communication—when he first meets Piya, he is able to learn a great deal about her from her appearance and demeanor without even speaking to her. When he sees a tiger, language fails him, and he can only babble, showing that some experiences cannot be represented by language. Furthermore, the strength of Piya and Fokir's relationship and the extremely effective ways in which they communicate shows how important nonverbal communication is as well.

**Q.2** Is Kanai's confidence, or perhaps arrogance, more of an advantage or disadvantage in the novel? Why?

**Answer:** Kanai's confidence is ultimately more of a disadvantage for him, though he overcomes it to some extent. Because of his confidence, Kanai spends much of the novel viewing Piya as a prize to be won. He doesn't get to know her at first, and though his feelings towards her grow stronger as he learns more about her life, it's too late for him to capture her affection. Additionally, Kanai risks overestimating his knowledge of the Sundarbans because he's been there before, despite the unpredictability of the region. For example, his unfamiliarity with nature leads him to make risky decisions and ignore dangers.

**Q.3 Comment on the use of intertextuality and polyphonic voices in the novel *The Hungry Tide*.**

**Answer:** Amitav Ghosh masterfully employs intertextuality and polyphonic voices to enrich the narrative, creating a multi-layered and nuanced portrayal of the Sundarbans and its inhabitants. Intertextuality: Ghosh seamlessly weaves together various texts, myths, and histories within the narrative. He incorporates scientific texts, folklore, and historical accounts to contextualize the Sundarbans, adding depth and complexity to the story. By referencing diverse sources, Ghosh creates a tapestry of interconnected narratives that bridge the gap between the past and the present, highlighting the region's cultural richness and its intertwining with broader historical and scientific discourses.

Polyphonic Voices: The novel presents multiple perspectives and voices, allowing for a polyphony of narratives. Characters like Piya, Kanai, Fokir, and others offer diverse viewpoints, reflecting their unique experiences, cultural backgrounds, and relationships with the Sundarbans. Through these polyphonic voices, Ghosh captures the multifaceted nature of the region and its inhabitants, portraying their struggles, aspirations, and complexities. This multifaceted approach contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the Sundarbans, emphasizing its ecological, cultural, and human dimensions.

By incorporating intertextuality and utilizing polyphonic voices, Ghosh enriches *The Hungry Tide*, presenting a multi-dimensional narrative that intertwines history, myth, science, and the diverse perspectives of its characters, creating a rich and layered portrayal of the Sundarbans and the people who inhabit it.

## **20.5 LET US SUM UP**

To sum up, Amitav Ghosh employs rich and immersive language that vividly depicts the Sundarbans' landscapes and the lives of its inhabitants. His lyrical prose beautifully captures the physical beauty of the mangrove delta while delving into the emotional depth of the characters' experiences and their intricate connections with nature. Through skillful and evocative language, Ghosh creates a sensory and immersive reading experience, transporting readers into the heart of the Sundarbans and its compelling human and environmental narratives.



## 20.6 ANSWER KEY (SAQs)

1.) Rainer Marie Rilke, 2.) Sir Daniel Hamilton. 3.) Bon Bibi, 4.) Tiger, 5.) Fokir, 6.) Canning, 7.) Nilima, 8.) Marxism, 9.) Political persecution, 10.) Translator and Interpreter., 11.) A Hospital, 12.) Fokir, 13.) Six languages, 14.) Through gestures and mime., 15.) English, 16.) These are insufficient means of communication, 17.) Visual cues, 18.) Using gestures, drawings and her laminated flashcards with pictures of the dolphins.

## 20.7 SUGGESTED READING

Gabriel, Sharmani Patricia. "The Heteroglossia of Home: Re-‘Routing’ the Boundaries of National Identity in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 41, no.1 (2005): 40–53.

Jones, Stephanie. "A Novel Genre: Polylingualism and Magical Realism in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason*." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 66, no. 3 (2003): 431–441.

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## **“DUST ON THE MOUNTAIN” AND “KOKI’S SONG”**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 21.0 Introduction
- 21.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 21.2 Introduction to the Author
- 21.3 Check Your Progress (CYP)
- 21.4 Summary of the story “Dust on the Mountain”
- 21.5 Summary of the story “Koki’s Song”
- 21.6 Nature in the stories “Dust on the Mountain” and “Koki’s song”
- 21.7 “Dust on the Mountain” and “Koki’s Song” as Children stories/ Children literature
- 21.8 Theme of Friendship
- 21.9 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 21.10 Examination Oriented Questions
- 21.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 21.12 Answer Key (CYP, MCQs)
- 21.13 Suggested Reading

### **21.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear learner, now we come to the sixth unit. By now, hope you are familiar with the concept of ecocriticism as well as how the concept is explored in different literary genres. Now let us move to the genre of short story. This lesson will acquaint you with Ruskin Bond’s short stories “Dust on the Mountain” and “Koki’s Song.” In this lesson you will be introduced to Ruskin Bond, a distinguished Indian author of British descent. You will also be introduced to his two stories “Dust on the Mountain” and “Koki’s Song.” In the stories “Dust on the Mountain” and “Koki’s Song”, the writer has brought forth the importance of nature, a harmonious relationship of humanity with nature, eco-consciousness, childhood, love and friendship. The stories are the reflection of the author’s thoughts and life. The childhood experiences that he narrated in the stories are rooted in his childhood memories.

## 21.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint the learner with the author and his works “Dust on the Mountain” and “Koki’s Song.”

After reading this lesson, you will

- be acquainted with Ruskin Bond, his life and contribution to Indian English literature
- be able to summarize “Dust on the Mountain” and “Koki’s Song” as well as analyse the short stories as nature stories and children stories
- appreciate Ruskin Bond’s eco-consciousness which stresses the need for a harmonious relationship between nature and humans.

## 21.2 INTRODUCTION TO THE AUTHOR

Ruskin Bond (Owen Ruskin Bond) is an Indian author of British descent. He was born to Edith Clarke and Aubrey Alexander Bond on 19 May 1934 in Kasauli, Punjab States Agency, British India. His father, Aubrey Alexander Bond, was in the Royal Air Force. Aubrey was born in a military camp in Shahjahanpur, north India. Later he became the tutor of the princesses of Jamnagar palace. He taught them English. Ruskin also studied there for his first six years. When his father joined the Royal Air Force in 1939, Ruskin along with his mother Edith and sister Ellen went to live at his maternal home at Dehradun. Soon afterwards, Ruskin was sent to a boarding school in Mussoorie. When he was eight years old, his mother Edith Clerk separated from his father and married a Punjabi Hindu, Hari. Ruskin was very close to his father. Ruskin’s father brought him to New Delhi, where he was posted. The period with his father 1942-44, Ruskin describes this period as one of the happiest times of his life. Bond’s time in New Delhi was filled with books, visits to the cinema, music, and walks and conversations with his father—a dream life for a curious and wildly imaginative boy, which turned tragic all too soon. Bond lost his father at the age of 10 who died due to Malaria while he was posted in Calcutta. Bond was at his boarding school in Shimla and was informed about this tragedy by his teacher. Aubrey Alexander Bond was buried in Bhowanipore War Cemetery in Calcutta. Bond was heartbroken and later was raised in Dehradun by his grandmother (“Ruskin Bond”, Wikipedia). For the rest of his childhood, he was raised by his mother and stepfather. As a child, Bond often felt loneliness. He found solace in the lap of nature. Hence, nature forms an integral part of his writings.

Ruskin Bond received his early education at St. Joseph’s Convent School in Shimla, where his father was posted. He later attended Bishop Cotton School in Shimla from where he graduated in 1951. After completing his education, he moved to London, where he worked as a clerk and continued to write. He did not attend any formal education for higher studies (source *Knowledge Glow*). Soon he returned to India as he found his heart and identity here.

While in London, when he was seventeen years old, he wrote his first novel *The Room on the Roof* which was published in 1956. *The Room on the Roof* is about love and friendship. The main character in the novel is Rusty who is a seventeen-year-old orphaned Anglo-Indian boy living in Dehradun. He is living with his guardians Mr. and Mrs. Harrison. Mr. Harrison wants him to be

distant from Indians because of his prejudice. He wants to groom Rusty as an Englishman. Rusty, who is unhappy with his life at his guardian's house, runs away and lives with his friend Somi. Somi gets him a job as an English teacher at the Kapoors' house to teach their son Kishen. Mr. Kapoor is a drunkard. His wife Meena Kapoor falls in love with Rusty. However, on her way to Delhi, she dies in a car accident. Rusty decides to return to England but before leaving, he wants to say goodbye to his friends and finds Kishen. Kishen convinces Rusty to change his mind to leave India. Rusty and Kishen walk away together to have a life without any worry and form their new world.

For *The Room on the Roof*, Ruskin Bond received the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957. The advance money which he got from publishers of his novel *The Room on the Roof*, he used to pay for the sea passage to Bombay and settle in Dehradun. He worked for a few years freelancing from Delhi and Dehradun. He did acquire success as a freelancer. However, in Dehradun, he continued to struggle as a journalist as he explains in his book *Rain in the Mountains*, 1993 page viii, "In those days, there were hardly any book publishers around (apart from those who brought out textbooks), so that one really had to concentrate on journalism" (viii). Norah Nivedita Shaw in her book *Ruskin Bond of India* affirms:

This was truly the case in the fifties and sixties. The various journals and magazines which helped [Ruskin Bond] sustain during the time, were *The Statesman*, *The Illustrated Weekly*, *The Tribune*, *Shanker's Weekly*, *The Leader*, *Mother India*, etc. Subsequently, things improved in the seventies when he discovered foreign journals like *The Christian Monitor* (Boston), *The Asia Magazine* (Hong Kong) and *Blackwood's* (Edinburgh). In the eighties, Penguin India started publishing his books. This, in short, is the story of Bond's survival as an author in independent India. (17)

Despite all his struggles as a writer, Bond recounts his "struggle with satisfaction" (17). Bond has written over "500 short stories, essays and novels which includes 69 books for children" (Source NDTV, 2022). Bond was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992 for *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* which is a collection of autobiographical stories. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1999 and Padma Bhushan in 2014. Presently, he lives with his adopted family in Uttarakhand's small cantonment town of Landour.

Ruskin Bond's literary works are replete with the subjects of nature, children, friendship, love, forgiveness, resilience and simplicity.

### 21.3 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (CYP)

Dear learner, now that you are familiar with the author as well as the summary of the two stories, you can now take a break from reading and try to solve the practice exercise given below. Just in case if you encounter any difficulty, you can re-read the sections or check out the answer key.

1. Ruskin Bond is an Indian author of \_\_\_\_\_ descent.
2. Ruskin Bond was born in \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Ruskin Bond graduated from \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Ruskin Bond worked as a \_\_\_\_\_ in London.

5. Ruskin Bond's first novel is titled \_\_\_\_\_.

6. Ruskin Bond was awarded the SahityaAkademi Award for his work \_\_\_\_\_.

#### **21.4 SUMMARY OF THE STORY "DUST ON THE MOUNTAIN"**

Bisnu lives with his younger sister Puja and mother in the small village of Tehri Garhwal. Due to deforestation and climate change, the region has received scanty rainfall and no snow last year. Consequently, there is no yield from the fields and no fruits from orchards. The streams and rivers are dry and the villagers are facing problems because of inadequate ration and they have failed to get any income from the farming. Each person in the village is waiting for the monsoon as it is only the monsoon that can solve their problems.

Winter came and went, without so much drizzle. The hillside was brown all summer and the fields were bare. The old plough that was dragged over the hard ground by Bisnu's lean oxen made hardly any impression. Still, Bisnu kept his seeds ready for sowing. A good monsoon, and there would be plenty of maize and rice to see the family through the next winter.

Summer went its scorching way, and a few clouds gathered on the south- western horizon.

"The monsoon is coming," announced Bisnu

His sister Puja was at the small stream, washing clothes.

"If it doesn't come soon, the stream will dry up," she said.

"See, it's only a trickle this year, Remember when there were so many different flowers growing here on the banks of the stream? This year there isn't one."

"The winter was dry. It did not even snow," said Bisnu.

"I cannot remember another winter when there was no snow," said his mother. "The year your father died, there was so much snow the villagers could not light his funeral-pyre for hours....And now there are fires everywhere." She pointed to the next mountain, half-hidden by the smoke from a forest fire. (131-32)

Deforestation is at its peak. One can see fire everywhere and the woodcutters are busy cutting trees and clearing the forests. Bisnu and his family can see the dire spreading lie a red line across the mountain.

At night they sat outside their small house, watching the fire spread. A red line stretched right across the mountain. Thousands of Himalyan trees were perishing in the flames. Oaks, deodars, maples, pines; trees that had taken hundreds of years to grow. And now a fire started carelessly by some woodcutters had been carried up the mountain with the help of the dry grass and a strong breeze. There was no one to put it out. It would take days to die down. (132)

As a result, there is no monsoon. Against his family's wishes, Bisnu decided to go to Mussoorie to save his family from starvation. He convinces his mother that during summer, Mussoorie is a recreation spot for tourists from the plain areas.

There were clouds the next day but they brought only a drizzle...there would be nothing to store away for the following winter....And there was no money to be earned in the village.

"I will go to Mussoorie and find work," announced Bisnu. "But Mussoorie is a two-day journey by bus," said his mother.

"There is no one there who can help you. And you may not get any work."

"In Mussoorie there is plenty of work during the summer. Rich people come up from the plains for their holidays. It is full of hotels and shops and places where they can spend their money."...

"There is money to be made there, And if not, I will come home..." (132-33)

After much searching, Bisnu finds a job as a helper at a tea stall near a cinema hall the Picture Palace. His salary has been fixed at fifty rupees a month. But he has to be very careful as the money will be deducted from his salary if he happens to break cups or plates. There he becomes friends with the two boys Chittru and Bali who are also working at the tea stall. Bisnu's job is to "help prepare the tea and samosas, serve these refreshments to the public during intervals in the film, and later wash up the dishes." Bali is also working as a poster boy. He will push the big poster board around Mussoorie or stick posters on convenient walls.

Bisnu will observe all the customers and their different personalities like 'the large gentleman with soup-strainer moustache,' 'bright, painted women,' etc., and try to make out the difference between urban life and village life. Bisnu receives his first month's pay which he sends most of home. Bisnu is satisfied with his work and life. However, as September approaches, the cinema shuts down for winter. Bali moves to Delhi in search of work while Chittru and Bisnu decide to go to a mine site in the hope of getting some work. The contractor at mine keeps Chittru for the work but rejects Bisnu on account of being young. Pritam, a Sikh truck owner, takes Bisnu as a cleaner on his truck out of pity. Bisnu says bye to Chittru and goes along with Pritam. Bisnu is happy with the salary he receives from Pritam. Both Bisnu and Pritam become good friends. They work for the mine site where deforestation and blasting of mountains are done to generate lime powder. However, Bisnu feels hurt and depressed at the sight of mountains losing their greenery and becoming bare, dry and dusty.

"No trees, no grass, no water—only the choking dust of mines and quarries."  
(149)

One day, in one of the trips, to save a mule being crushed under the truck, Pritam swings the steering and the truck goes over the edge. The truck topples and goes rolling down in a valley until it is stopped by a scraggy old oak tree. Bisnu has not been hurt and other labourers manage to escape the accident. However, Pritam is brutally wounded and has broken bones, fractured ribs and a dislocated shoulder. In the hospital Pritam says had they were not stopped by that tree, they would have died by falling in the valley: "It was the tree that saved me." Pritam

decides to live with his sons and Bisnu decides to return to his village to take care of his family and the nature around him.

“I’ll work on my land. It’s better to grow things on the land than to blast things out of it.”  
(153)

1. “Dust on the Mountains” is a story about a boy named \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Bisnu decides to go to \_\_\_\_\_ to save his family from starvation.

## **21.5 SUMMARY OF THE STORY “KOKI’S SONG”**

When Koki was nearly twelve, she and her Mother went to spend part of the year with Koki’s maternal Grandmother who lived in a lonely old house near the riverbed. Her Mother was busy all day, cooking and washing clothes, while her Grandmother, a round, bouncy little woman, would sit in the sun recounting stories from her own childhood.

Koki would spend the morning helping her Mother and the afternoons talking to her Grandmother. Towards evening the old lady would go indoors, and then Koki would be on her own in the large garden.

The garden had not been looked after too well, and it was overrun with semi- wild Marigolds, Nasturtiums and Roses. Koki liked it this way because she could wander about discovering flowers emerging from tall grass and thistles. A wall went round the garden, and on the other side of the wall, a stretch of grassland went sloping down to the riverbed. A shallow stream ran along the middle of this otherwise dry watercourse. During the monsoon rains it was a rushing torrent, but just now, it was a murmuring brook, with little silver fish darting about in the water.

Koki seldom went beyond the garden wall, because across the riverbed was jungle, and wild animals frequently came down to the water to drink. The wild boar, who were often seen, frightened her. But once she saw a deer, quite close, moving about with supple grace and dignity. It was a chital, a spotted deer. Koki stared at the animal in fascination, and the deer must have become conscious of her gaze, for it looked up and stared back at Koki. What the deer saw was a small dark face, half- hidden by a lot of loose black hair, and two large brown eyes shining with wonder.

The deer and the girl stared at each other for two or three minutes, then somewhere a twig snapped and the startled deer went bounding away across the stream.

One evening, Koki heard the distant music of a flute. She had not heard it before, and she looked over the wall to see where it came from.

A boy sat near the stream, playing on a flute, while his small herd of cows grazed on the slope. He had a thin shawl thrown over his shoulders, his feet were bare and his clothes dusty and torn. But Koki did not notice these things; she was enthralled by the simple, plaintive melody of the flute and, for her, the boy was a prince who made beautiful music.

She climbed up on the wall and sat there with her legs dangling over the other side. When the boy looked up and saw her, he rose and came nearer. He sat down on the grass about twenty metres



from the wall, put the flute to his lips again and, with his eyes on Koki, continued his playing.

It reminded Koki of the day she and the deer had stared at each other, both fascinated, neither of them stirring or making a sound. Only now it was for a much longer time, and one played while the other listened.

Next evening, Koki heard the flute again and was soon sitting astride the wall. When the boy saw Koki, he put down his flute and smiled at her, and then began playing again. That evening, besides playing and listening, all they did was smile at each other.

On the third evening, Koki asked the boy his name. "Somi," he said, and he played on the flute and did not say another word.

But on the fourth evening, he asked Koki her name, and she told him.

"I will make a song about you," he said, and he played the sweetest melody Koki had ever heard. She found herself putting words to it and singing softly:

"When you are far away,

I'll sing this song,

And in my heart you'll play

All summer long."

After that, Somi always played Koki's song.

It wasn't long before Koki came down from the wall, and sometimes she and Somi would walk up the riverbed and paddle in the cold mountain water. They never said much to each other, and yet, a lot seemed to have been said. Somi would leave at dusk, herding the cattle before him, calling each by a different name, and Koki would watch him go until he was a speck on the dusty road and the cowbells tinkled distantly. She never knew where he came from or where he went. She thought she might ask him some day, but it didn't seem necessary. They both became friends, possibly lovers.

During summer the grassland becomes brown and dry. Hence, Somi had to take his cattle up in the mountains. He gifted his flute to Koki and said if she would miss him she could play that flute. Koki tried to play but fumbled instead.

Koki missed Somi and longed for his return. While lingering around the stream one day, she dropped the flute, and it flowed away with the sweeping currents. She tried to catch up but to no avail. She grew sad.

At the end of summer, one day she heard the familiar flute music, she ran for it and surprisingly found Somi. However, it was the time for Koki to return to her home in town where she had to attend school, but she promised Somi that she would come to this place in the last of every month.

1. Koki meets a cowherd named \_\_\_\_\_ near her grandmother's country home.

2. Koki went with her mother to spend part of the year with her \_\_\_\_\_.

## 21.6 NATURE IN THE STORIES “DUST ON THE MOUNTAIN” AND “KOKI’S SONG”

There is an innate feeling in human beings to be with nature. Human origin is from nature, therefore, it cannot separate itself from nature. Nature pervades every aspect of human life. Literature is a reflection of life. And human life is weaved around nature. Hence, nature finds expression in nature as well. Nature is celebrated in literature with all its glory. It is considered a religion and seer by William Wordsworth; a source of delight, memory and escapism for John Keats, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Frost; or used to give expression to thoughts and ideas for William Shakespeare and Ted Hugh; and mysticism for Emily Dickinson. The writings of Ruskin Bond express his deep bond with nature. Neeraj Kataria in his article “A Study of Nature in Ruskin Bond’s Writings” writes:

Ruskin Bond, who has been living in Mussoorie for over thirty years, has made the Himalayas a part of his life....He finds endless material for stories in the trees and wild flowers, birds and animals, rocks and rivers, and simple hill folk who are an essential part of the mountains. Through his poems, essays, works of fiction and autobiographical writings for young children, Bond explores his own and his protagonists’ changing relationship with the Himalayas from the freedom of childhood to a deep love and communion with various manifestations of nature. (1222)

Ruskin Bond’s writings are about nature. He is an ardent lover of nature. In his book *Rain in the Mountains* which is a collection of his essays, poems and journal entries, Ruskin Bond states, “If someone were to ask me to choose between writing the essay on the Taj Mahal or on the last rose of the summer, I’d take the rose even if it were down to its last petal” (185). One can see a profound influence of nature on Bond and his closeness towards nature. Bond finds nature as a friend and companion. Every rain is a joy for him and the chirping of birds, the greenery of woods, and animals are a source of happiness to him. He is such in deep connection and love relationship with the flora and fauna, that he has portrayed a friendship and love bond between a boy and a leopard in the story “No Room for a Leopard.” The plants and animals talk to him and are his friends. In the story “Dust on the Mountain,” there is a description of flora and fauna in the village of Bisnu. Not only this, Ruskin Bond is deeply concerned and sad about the destruction of nature by human activities and its impact on plants and animals, atmosphere, climate and humans too. The ‘eco-consciousness’ is one of the important subjects in Ruskin Bond’s stories.

The environmental challenges which the earth is facing today have inter- connection with human exploitative activities towards natural resources. Today, the earth is facing problems like Pollution of air, soil and water, emission of Greenhouse gases, depletion of the ozone layer, deforestation, climatic changes, and extinction of plant, bird and animal species, etc. All these problems are the focus of global attention. Bond’s stories like “The King and the Tree Goddess,” “Copperfield in the Jungle,” “The Leopard,” “A Crow for all Seasons,” “The Last Truck Ride,” “The Cherry Tree,” “The Kite Maker,” “An Island of Trees,” “No Room for Leopard,” “The Prospect of



Flowers,” “The Tunnel,” “An Escape from Java,” “Dust on the Mountain” “A Long Walk for Bina,” “Romi and the Wild Fire,” etc. Ruskin Bond’s story “Dust on the Mountain” expresses this eco-consciousness. The title of the story is itself reflects concerns about deforestation which makes hills and mountains bare of trees and what left in the last only ‘dust’. The expressions like:

“Winter came and went, without so much as a drizzle. The hillside was brown all summer and the fields were bare....

A good monsoon, and there would be plenty of maize and rice to see the family through the next winter.

Summer went its scorching way, and a few clouds gathered on the south- western horizon.” (131)

The long wait for monsoon like:

““The monsoon is coming,” ... “If it doesn’t come soon, the stream will dry up,” she [Bisnu’s sister Puja] said...

“The winter was dry. It did not even snow,” said Bisnu....

...Thousands of Himalayan trees were perishing in the flames. Oaks, deodars, maples, pines; trees that had taken hundreds of years to grow. And now a fire started carelessly by some woodcutters had been carried up the mountain...

But there were to be no downpours that year. Clouds gathered on the horizon but they were white and puffy and soon disappeared. True monsoon clouds would have been dark and heavy with moisture. There were other signs—or lack of them—that warned of along dry summer. The birds were silent, or simply absent. The Himalayan barbet, who usually heralded the approach of the monsoon with strident calls from the top of a spruce tree, hadn’t been seen or heard. And the cicadas, who played a deadening overture in the oaks at the first hint of rain, seemed to be missing altogether.” (131-133)

The skeletons of a few trees remained on the lower slopes. Almost everything else had gone—grass, flowers, shrubs, birds, butterflies, grasshoppers, ladybirds....A rock lizard popped its head out of crevice to look at the intruders. Then, like some prehistoric survivor, it scuttled back into its underground shelter. (143)

Hence, the destruction of forests because of human greed has affected plants, animals and humans immensely. The habitat of plants and animals is destroyed and due to no rains, the crops have been affected. Some species of plants and animals have been extinct if they had never existed in the world.

The importance of nature and the protection offered by nature is emphasized at the end of the story when Pritam is saved by a tree. Pritam’s truck met an accident and it stroked against an old oak tree which stopped the truck from rolling down in the valley, Pritam says to Bisnu:

“But for that tree, the truck would have finished up at the foot of the mountain, and I wouldn’t be here, all bandaged up and talking to you. It was the tree, that saved me. Remember that, boy.” (153)

Hence, the message of the story is that nature never leaves its temperament of protection. The trees which the humans are killing for their greed, ironically, it is the tree which saves a human. Therefore, for the destruction, devastation and imbalance caused by human beings to nature, it is the human being only who is responsible, not nature.

The story “Koki’s Song” is also replete with nature imagery. Just in the tone of Robert Frost’s poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” as it starts as: “Whose woods these are I think I know. His house is in the village though;”; Ruskin Bond’s story “Koki’s Song” starts as “...in a lonely old house near the riverbed”

(102). And the description of nature in the story follows this phrase:

...her grandmother, a round, bouncy little woman, would sit in the sun recounting stories from her own childhood.

...Koki would be on her own in the large garden.

The garden had not been looked after too well, and it was over run with semi-wild marigolds, nasturtiums and roses. Koki liked it this way because she could wander about discovering flowers emerging from all grass and thistles. A wall went round the garden, and on the other side of the wall a stretch of grassland went sloping down to the riverbed. A shallow stream ran along the middle of this otherwise dry watercourse. During the monsoon rains it was a rushing torrent, but just now it was murmuring brook, with little silver fish darting about in the water.

Koki seldom went beyond the garden wall because the riverbed was jungle, and wild animals frequently came down to the water to drink. The wild boar, who were often seen, frightened her. (102-03)

The communication between nature and humans is illustrated when both Koki and a deer try to communicate with each other:

But once she saw a deer, quite close, moving about with supple grace and dignity. It was a chital, a spotted deer. Koki stared at the animal in fascination, and the deer must have become conscious of her gaze, for it looked up and stared back at Koki. What the deer saw was a small dark face, half-hidden by a lot of loose black hair, and two large brown eyes shining with wonder. (103)

The music of Somi’s flute represents the music of nature and the promise of Koki to Somi to return in the last of every month symbolizes the return of human beings again and again to nature.

Ruskin Bond’s preference for country as compared to city areas is clearly expressed in the story “Dust on the Mountain.” Bisnu’s refusal to go to Delhi for work and money and his return to

his village is suggestive of Bond's decision to return again and again to nature and mountains and his roots which he finds in India. The return of Bisnu and Koki's promise to return is a reflection of Bond's decision to return to India where he finds his identity rooted instead of settling in London "I knew I did not belong there and I disliked the place intensely" (Bond, *Scenes* 131).

To conclude, Ruskin Bond's works and his short stories "Dust on the Mountain" and "Koki's Song" present Bond's profound belief in nature's power that soothes souls and helps in forging an intimate bond with it. His literary works celebrate nature in its fullest form. In his writings, a space has been given to whether it is a flower, bird, tree, river, rain or animal to speak and disseminate its message. Bond's works are about living in communion with nature. His narratives are about preserving ecology and maintaining harmony with nature and the environment.

## **21.7 "DUST ON THE MOUNTAIN" AND "KOKI'S SONG" AS CHILDREN STORIES/ CHILDREN LITERATURE**

Children's literature is literature about children, childhood, child sensibilities, emotions, feelings, attachments and influences. These are the written works and accompanying illustrations produced to entertain or instruct young people. Children's literature also called juvenile literature includes stories, books, magazines, and poems that are created for children and about children. When a writer chooses to write about a child or childhood, s/he is presenting her/his own past experiences or some lack of her/his childhood which the writer wants to fill through the writing.

'Children' is the most important subject in Ruskin Bond's writings. He is called a pioneering writer of children's literature in India. In an article published by Firstpost on April 09, 2014, it quotes Ruskin Bond as:

I have always written a lot about the past. I go back into my life. So, in a way the older I get the more I have to write about because you have more people to remember—friends, family, incidents and events.

Many people ask me why do I write so much about children which I started doing in my 40s. Before that I was writing more or less about adults. I had a pretty lonely childhood and it helps me to understand a child better. (Firstpost)

Bond's writings are the reflection of his lonely childhood which he lived after the separation of his parents and the sudden death of his father. Bond's writings are drawn from his own life experiences and childhood period. It is his delicate childhood that made him create a happy childhood for others. Not only for the parents' love but he also longed for grandparents' affection. He was not able to spend his childhood time with his maternal and paternal grandmother. The meetings were short. Both his grandfather died before he was born. Therefore, he invented (as he states) "this imaginary grandfather and made him this uncommon man, colourful, good-humoured. Although a lot of my stories are based on real people, grandfather-perhaps the most loved, is someone I created" (Sen). A lot of his stories revolve around a happy, eccentric grandfather who loves animals like in "A Tiger in the House" and "Grandfather's Private Zoo." He states:

So I'd missed the companionship and attention that grandparents can often give. My father had been the best of companions, but now there was no one to take his place . . . In some of my children's stories I have written about fun-loving grandfathers and doting grandmothers, but this was just wishful thinking on my part. (Bond, *Scenes* 34)

He found this bond in his neighbourhood like with Miss Kellner, Miss Kennedy and Dukhi (his granny's gardener). The time spent with these three persons became an inseparable part of his life. These persons became the source of inspiration for many of his stories' characters. Similarly, the reader can find this attempt at fulfilment in the story "Koki's Song" in which Koki, a "nearly twelve" went along with her mother to visit her maternal grandmother. Koki's grandmother is described as:

...her grandmother, a round, bouncy little woman, would sit in the sun recounting stories from her own childhood. Koki would spend the morning helping her mother and the afternoons talking to her grandmother. (102)

He craved this talking with his parents and grandparents. Gopal in "When the Guavas are Ripe," Miss Mackenzie in "The Prospect of Flowers," and Miss Kellner in "So Well-remembered: Miss Kellner and the Magic Biscuit Tin" are a few fine examples of the relationship children strike with elders.

The yearning for love, affection and closeness made him look for a space which he could call his own where he could find a sense of security and privacy. This space he found in books and nature gave him a liberating sense of self and independence which he was not able to find in the company of his mother and stepfather. He writes, "...trees gave me a feeling of security, as well as privacy and a calm haven" (Bond, *Scenes* 35). Hence, nature becomes a fundamental part of his writings. Ruskin Bond's characters, plot and themes were inspired by Indian life specifically Dehradun and Mussoorie where he spent most of his childhood. Hence, the stories "Dust on the Mountain" and "Koki's Song" have their Indian settings in hills and mountains.

Bisnu in "Dust on the Mountain" is a model of an adolescent fighting his life battle independently and gives his readers an idea of reality and child psychology. The character Bisnu and his life is about childhood where one can notice innocence, struggle and adventure. This Bond derives all from his childhood which is also about happiness as well as sadness: "I don't suppose I would have written so much about childhood or even about other children if my own childhood had been all happiness and light" (Bond, *Scenes* 4). Bisnu has lost his father. Due to no rain, there are no crops and money to have the basic amenities in his village. Hence, he decides to go to Mussoorie to earn some money for his family. He finds work at a tea stall near the cinema hall. The story of Bisnu is an attempt to present the life of poor children in India who are in want of money and despite going to school they work as labourers, workers and servants. One can find how sensitively Bond has tried to present this issue. Later, Bisnu starts working with a truck driver to do the cleaning job as the quarry foreman finds Bisnu as small and he will not be able to break stones or lift the heavy rocks. Bisnu needs money and hence Pritam, a truck driver, takes Bisnu with him.

“Koki’s Song” is about a girl who is nearly twelve. The story is about the children’s love of their maternal grandmother (in the Indian Hindi language as ‘Nani’) during vacation. The story portrays the love of children to be at Nani’s house, to feel the warmth of Nani’s love, to taste the food cooked by Nani and at night listen to Nani’s stories. Koki loves to do that and also explores the surroundings near her grandmother’s house which creates childhood memories when being an adult, a person remembers those flowers, trees, roads, streets and animals which once were his childhood companions.

The pictures and illustrations in his stories are again linked to children’s literature. Children love pictures, especially drawing or painting. The pictures in Ruskin Bond’s stories stimulate a child’s imagination and pleasure.

## **21.8 THEME OF FRIENDSHIP**

Friendship in childhood plays a great role in developing the personality of an individual. Alone childhood leaves a much impact and adverse influence on the development of an individual. Having no friends can lead to anxiety and low self- esteem in a child. The adverse and good moments with friends during childhood are the earliest impressions of socialization which remain ingrained in a person’s mind. Recalling the happiest moments with friends during childhood transports us back to a time when life was carefree and joyful. Childhood friendships teach children the skill of empathy and why someone is experiencing a particular feeling. Friendships also build a sense of security in children.

Ruskin Bond’s stories are remarkably woven with the subject of friendship. His children’s characters are marked with purity of heart and hence can befriend even a flower or a pool or a dog or a leopard. Children strike lifelong friendships thereby making the most out of their evenings and vacations. Bond’s stories like “The Visitor,” “Koki’s Song,” “No Room for Leopard,” “The Fight,” “Dust on the Mountain,” etc. illustrate the significance and happiness of the friendship bond.

In the story “Dust on the Mountain,” friends like Bali, Chittru and Pritam provide care, support and a sense of security to Bisnu in the unknown place Mussoorie. Bali and Chittru take care of the Bisnu’s needs while working at the tea stall. Bali and Bisnu sleep together at the cinema. Bali makes things comfortable by setting his poster board at an angle to the wall which gives them a little alcove where they can sleep protected from the wind. Bali and Chittru act as family and sources of information for finding work and earning money. Chittru accompanies Bisnu to the post office and helps him to fill in the money order form. Bisnu has been to the village school, but he has not been used to forms and paperwork. Later Chittru also takes him to a limestone quarry to find some work. When Bisnu is not able to get any work at the quarry, Pritam comes to his support and keeps him cleaning his truck. Both Pritam and Bisnu become friends and Pritam treats Bisnu on equal terms which is most important for the friendship between two individuals.

The theme of budding friendship is specifically created in the story “Koki’s Song” between Koki and Somi. The story illustrates the value and purity of childhood friendships. The bond between

Koki and Somi is untouched by any selfishness. Both Koki and Somi are unaware even of the names of each other or their family background. And the promise of visiting is the promise of friendship to be there for each other.

Bond during his childhood enjoyed his friendship with his friends Somi, Mohan, Kishen and Haripal. This friendship gave him the sense of security, support and care that he was craving for. His childhood friends also have become the characters of his stories and his writings reflect this friendship and bond. The time he spent with his friends added normalcy to the environment in which he was living.

To conclude, Ruskin Bond's writings and stories are replete with the theme of love and friendship. "Dust on the Mountain" and "Koki's Song" are children's stories. There is a celebration of purity and love of childhood in its full form. Reading these stories one goes deep down to the memory of childhood. These stories bring forth the importance of a happy childhood.

### 21.9 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

- i. Ruskin Bond was born in \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Kasauli
  - b. Mussoorie
  - c. Ludhiana
  - d. None of the above
- ii. Ruskin Bond's first novel is \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Dust on the Mountain
  - b. An Island of Trees
  - c. The Room on the Roof
  - d. Rain in the Mountains
- iii. *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* is a \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Collection of Poems
  - b. Novel
  - c. Collection of Autobiographical Stories
  - d. Collection of Short Stories
- iv. Ek Tha Rusty, a Doordarshan show based Season 1 was broadcast in \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. 1994
  - b. 1996
  - c. 1997
  - d. 1995
- v. Who played the flute in "Koki's Song"? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Somi
  - b. Koki
  - c. Koki's mother

- d. None of the above
- vi. Somi gave \_\_\_\_\_ as a parting gift to Koki.
- Flute
  - Leaf
  - Drum
  - Flower
- vii. Which of the following are the themes in the story “Dust on the mountains”:\_\_\_\_\_.
- Friendship
  - Nature
  - Eco-consciousness
  - All of the above
- viii. Bisnu in the story “Dust on the Mountain” went to work in \_\_\_\_\_.
- Delhi
  - Shimla
  - Mussoorie
  - Mumbai
- ix. For which work, Ruskin Bond received the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize?
- \_\_\_\_\_.
- The Room on the Roof*
  - Dust on the Mountain*
  - Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*
  - An Island of the Trees*
- x. Father of Ruskin Bond, Aubrey Alexander Bond, is buried in \_\_\_\_\_.
- London
  - Kolkata
  - England
  - None of the above

## 21.10 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

- a. Discuss Ruskin Bond as a Writer.
- Ans.** Refer section 1, 2, 5 to 7.
- b. Write a note on the themes in the story “Dust on the Mountain.”
- Ans.** Refer section 3, 5 to 7
- c. Write a note on the themes in the story “Koki’s Song.”
- Ans.** Refer section 4 to 7



- d. Evaluate autobiographical elements in Ruskin Bond's stories "Dust on the Mountain" and "Koki's Song."

**Ans.** Refer section 1, 5 to 7

### 21.11 LET US SUM UP

- a. Ruskin Bond is an Indian author.
- b. His first novel is *The Room on the Roof*, published in 1956.
- c. He has authored more than 500 short stories, essays, and novels which includes 69 books for children.
- d. Bond's works reflect his Anglo-Indian experiences and the changing political, social and cultural aspects of India, having been through colonial, postcolonial and post-independence phases of India.
- e. His works are also called as children literature as they present child sensibilities.
- f. Ruskin Bond's literary works are replete with the subjects of nature, children, friendship, love, forgiveness, resilience and simplicity.

### 21.12 ANSWER KEY (CYP, MCQs)

#### CYP

1. British
2. Kasauli
3. Bishop Cotton School, Shimla
4. clerk
5. *The Room on the Roof*
6. *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*

#### MCQs

- |        |         |        |
|--------|---------|--------|
| i.a;   | ii.c;   | iii.c; |
| iv.d;  | v.a;    | vi.a;  |
| vii.d; | viii.c; | ix.a;  |
| x.b    |         |        |

### 21.13 SUGGESTED READING

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## **“HOLIDAY HOMEWORK” BY JAHNAVI BARUA**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 22.0 Introduction
- 22.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 22.2 Author and Her Works
- 22.3 Introduction to the short story collection
- 22.4 “Holiday Homework”: Introduction
- 22.5 “Holiday Homework”: Summary
- 22.6 Check Your Progress (CYP)
- 22.7 “Holiday Homework”: Analysis
- 22.8 “Holiday Homework”: Themes
- 22.9 “Holiday Homework”: Major Characters
- 22.10 Let Us Sum up
- 22.11 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 22.12 Examination Oriented Questions
- 22.13 Answer Key (CYP, MCQs)
- 22.14 Suggested Reading

### **22.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear learner, let us now move to the next short story “Holiday Homework” by Jahn timer Barua. “Holiday Homework” is a simple narrative about friendship and it recounts a sweet relationship formed between people who belong to different generations. As an unlikely friendship is formed between an old man, a young woman, and a small child, they all learn different things and are consequently benefitted emotionally.

### **22.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME**

The objective of the lesson is to introduce the short story collection, especially the story “Holiday Homework” prescribed in the course to the learner.

After going through this lesson, you will be

- familiarised with Jahn timer Barua, an Indian writer of short stories hailing from northeast India
- able to summarize the short story as well as analyse the major characters and thematic concerns.

## 22.2 AUTHOR AND HER WORKS

Set mostly in her native Assam, India's north-eastern state known for its tea estates and natural beauty, Jahn timer Barua's collection is replete with O Henryesque twists. In "River of Life", a mentally challenged young man tries to change the course of a river and ends up changing the course of his life in the bargain. In "Holiday Homework," a friendship is forged between an old man and a young boy, but there is more than meets the eye. Her writing is simple, yet her stories are skilful. There is love here in many forms—filial love, love for her land and its people—and she delicately handles matters of the heart.

## 22.3 INTRODUCTION TO THE SHORT STORY COLLECTION

The political upheaval in Assam attracted the attention of the world, and subsequently the struggles and insurgency began to acquire prominence. The struggles provided the subject matter for a variety of literary works. The literature of North East India acquired prominence after the emergence of talented writers in English such as Mitra Phukhan, Siddharth Deb, Jahn timer Barua and Aroopa Thagadia Kalitha whose works were translated from Assamese into English. The close examination of literary works from this region leads to conclude certain broad features. There is a tranquility and stillness in the life of North East India. Another is serene and vast stretching nature in the narration. There is an unfailing reference to insurgency in the region. The narration sometimes has a strong protest element against the political establishment. Many of the characters from the works are guileless peasants, who work hard to earn their living. Women characters as they are everywhere in any social set up are suppressed and looking for salvation.

Barua published her first collection of short stories *Next Door* in 2008. In 2010, she published a novel *Rebirth*. Her stories are set in Assam and have an unmistakable flavor of North East India. The book is titled *Next Door* and is an expansive picture of geographical distance and the cultural differences. It is a heavy dose of the Assamese culture, expression, simple and uncomplicated desires of the people of this region that comes through her 11 short stories. The author takes inspiration from everyday life and events and manages to touch her readers' heart with simplistic narration. The plot of the short stories happens to be remote areas of Assam, unfamiliar to many readers. The works of Jahn timer Barua serves as a link between North East region and India. Her stories unveil the life of the North Eastern people on a larger canvas. She not only presents the individuals of the region but generalizes the passions of human beings. In her stories she reveals the characteristic charm associated with the North Eastern Indian life. One critic opines about Barua's characters as complex patterns that define

human relationships. And just as the mighty Bramhaputra River, known for its flash floods, yet is the lifeline of the Assamese people, so also it flows through her stories and also a sprinkling of Assamese words throughout, which though hard to understand, gives it a unique essence. The stories are drawn from diverse walks of life. The characters include a wife and a husband, an unmarried girl waiting for marriage, a mentally retarded child, a sick mother, a rebel fighting against the government forces, farmers. Janavi Barua in one of her interviews admits that human relationships and the human experience are what interest me most and thus, how all of the above disparate elements influence or impact this experience. Her experiences as a doctor shaped the stories of “The Magic Spell,” “Holiday Homework,” and “Honeybees and Awakening” in the collection of short stories *Next Door*.

#### **22.4 “HOLIDAY HOMEWORK”: INTRODUCTION**

The second story in the collection “Holiday Homework” deals with the dignity of a dying woman with which she steers the life of her four-year-old son. In the story, a sick mother yearns for her child as she is steadily progressing towards death. She feels that her child would live alone after her death, and this very idea brings gloom in her life. Amrita, the mother of Siddhartha suffering from cancer leads a wretched life worrying about the future of her son, though she is well assured of the husband to provide affection towards the boy. Shiva Prasad Barua, an old man of 75 years, their neighbor closely watches their sorrow and shares their agony and lends emotional support. The protagonist, an old man, Mr Barua, after observing his new neighbours (a young couple and their son) and the intense love between the mother and the son for a few days, decides to befriend them, and soon discovers that the young lady is suffering from cancer. The rest of the story goes on to narrate the unusual friendship formed between the three of them and the climax, though predictable, is so moving, that the reader cannot escape the emotional tension it creates.

Barua uses no melodramatic situation or poetic words to describe the last few days of a breast-cancer patient, rather transverse the pain through only simple acts and poignant words.

#### **22.5 “HOLIDAY HOMEWORK”: SUMMARY**

The story begins as an old man Shiva Prasad Barua, a retired policeman, observes a young boy Siddharth Sarma, next door. The young boy has shifted there a week ago with his family. Being a young kid, Siddharth keeps running here and there without taking rest and only stops when he gets very tired. However, he does not make much noise which is very unlikely for kids of his age which amazes the old man and he draws a contrast with his grandchildren who visit him once every three or four years. Whenever they come, they fill the old man’s house with noise. Most of the time, Shiva Prasad Barua, the old man is grappled by silence since his wife Ila and his old friend Bhagwati living next door have passed away. The old man laments at his loneliness and thinks that he had been a fool all along to have thought of spending his old age surrounded by his kids as all his kids have moved far away. He is taken care of by Romesh, his cook, and Sita, his maid.

As time passes, the old man sometimes catches a glimpse of Siddharth playing in his lawn. One day as the old man is out on the street he is inadvertently drawn towards his house. The old man sees the kid carelessly swinging on the gate and he looks no more than the age of four or five years. The old man smiles at him and says hello to him to which the young boy does not reply. The old man then notices a young woman, the young boy's mother Amrita who is reclining on her chair. As she sees the old man she waves her hand to him, a gesture which offends the old man as he believes that the young should greet the elderly by getting up from the chair. As the old man observes the woman, he notices that she looks very thin, as if she is ill or is recovering from some illness. The old man smiles at her and sees the young boy running towards his mother. He decides to leave as he was not invited but came on his own to meet them.

Over the course of the next few days, the old man observes the day-to-day activities of the mother and son. Siddharth is taken to school by his father and he comes back at one o'clock in the afternoon. After coming home, he goes straight to his mother and then is mostly assisted by the maid in his playing activities as the mother keeps looking at him lying on her bed covered with a thin blanket even during the summer, something which looks unusual to the old man. One day the old man gets emotional as he sees the young boy hugging his mother and in the process lighting up the eyes of the mother. This moment of affection between the mother and the son makes him realise the lack of warmth and affection in his life. The old man then decides to visit the mother and the son.

As the old man goes to their house and opens the gate, the young boy comes running towards him. The old man asks him his name and sees the mother smiling at them from her bed. The old man reaches out to the woman and introduces himself and in the conversation that follows the old man comes to know that Amrita is the daughter of one of his old friends from Shillong. Amrita further tells him that she is suffering from Breast Cancer and this is the reason that the family has moved from Shillong to Guwahati as the weather is favourable here. The old man feels a sense of comfort with the mother and son although he has not known them for a long time.

Four months pass and the old man's bond grows stronger with Amrita and Siddharth so much so that the old man starts addressing Siddharth affectionately as son. The old man remarks that it is a very unlikely friendship as it spans three generations. Every afternoon during the weekdays the old man goes to their house, Amrita takes care of him and serves him tea as he observes the young boy playing in the lawn, absorbed in a world of his own. The old man notices that the mother and son are connected as if by some invisible string because the boy always responds, almost instinctively, to the calls of his mother. He is obedient but very fearless also. The old man recounts an incident that once as he was in the lawn, a snake came towards him. But the young boy did not cry or shout or run away in panic. Rather, he kept sitting still and the snake went away after a few moments. The old man here is

amazed at the bravery and fearlessness of such a small child. The old man and the child bond with each other over the course of the next few days as they share interest in birds. The old man feels alive around Amrita and Siddharth and develops compassion towards them realising in the process that it is compassion which sweetens life.

Time passes and winter approaches. Although the old man neglects his own health and even catches cold and fever, he takes good care of Amrita, always making sure that she is thoroughly covered so as to not take any chance with her recovery. One day the old man notices that Amrita's lawn has been cleared up and only a few potted plants are left giving the old man an impression of desolation. The old man panics at the thought of Amrita and son having left and immediately calls them. The call is received by the maid who tells him that Amrita is inside as the cold weather does not suit her. The old man then talks to Amrita who, in a frail voice tells the old man that son is missing him. Later that day, the son arrives at the old man's house and they talk about birds and the old man gifts the boy a bird book which makes him ecstatic. During the course of their conversation, as Siddharth comes to know that the old man was a policeman, he exclaims, "I want to be a soldier. A General." Siddharth keeps visiting the old man for the next few days and the old man feels stronger in his presence.

One day, Amrita calls the old man and invites him for dinner the next day. The old man is ecstatic. He makes preparations for the dinner, gets his clothes ready and buys gifts for Amrita and Son as it is also the time of Durga Puja. The old man arrives for dinner and as soon as he enters, he observes Amrita, looking much weak than before and wrapped up in layers of clothes like a baby. The old man hands over the gifts to Amrita and son. The kid is excited as he sees the jigsaw puzzle. Amrita looks at her gift, a shawl and laments "Why for me? Such a waste!" making the old man unhappy.

It is now the day of *visarjan*, the day the idol of goddess Durga is laid to rest in water. The son arrives holding an envelope in his hand early morning to surprises the old man. He hands the envelope to the old man and says his mother asked to give him that letter when she went on her holiday making the old man apprehensive. The boy further tells the old man that the letter contains his 'holiday homework,' that is, a list of things that he needs to do. The old man starts reading the letter which is titled "Siddharth's Holiday Homework." The list of things to do include taking a walk every day, spot new birds, draw their pictures with the old man, learn to grow plants, eat well, be brave but also gentle, and always have a kind heart. The list of things includes singing out loud whenever he misses his mother as she will listen to him wherever she might be. The old man's heart is overflowed with emotion at this moment and he abruptly stops as he reads the words "Remember your Ma." The old man scolds himself inwardly as he had failed to see Amrita's impending death. However, he soon recovers and gets ready to leave for the daily walk with as desired by Amrita and he tells him that he will assist him in realising his goal of becoming a General and make his mother proud.

## 22.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (CYP)

1. Shiva Prasad Barua is a retired \_\_\_\_\_.
2. At the beginning of the story, the old man is living with \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Amrita is suffering from \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Amrita's family has come to Guawahti from \_\_\_\_\_.
5. The old man affectionately addresses Siddharth as \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Siddharth is an obedient child. (True/False)
7. Siddharth panics as he encounters the snake in his lawn. (True/False)
8. The old man gives Siddharth a \_\_\_\_\_ book.
9. The old man gifts Amrita a \_\_\_\_\_.
10. Amrita's letter of to-do list for Siddharth is titled \_\_\_\_\_.

## 22.7 "HOLIDAY HOMEWORK": ANALYSIS

"Holiday Homework" takes us into the private, individual world of its characters. The private world of Shiva Prasad Barua, the old man is explored as time and again he gives voice to his agonies. As an old man living alone without the much needed support of his family, he feels a void in his life. Loneliness characterises his life as he continues to spend his life alone. The story also explores the sufferings of Amrita, a mother who knows that she is soon going to die, leaving her young son without motherly affection and care. Although we do not get a direct peep into the mind of Amrita, the writer has used various suggestions through which her distress becomes apparent. Amrita never responds optimistically whenever there is a mention of the future, she considers the gift bought by the old man a waste, knowing she will not be able to use that gift. The young boy, Siddharth, also never explicitly talks about his feelings, but, again the various hints thrown by the writer in the narrative serve to make us aware of his sorrow also. As Shiva Prasad Barua observes Siddharth, he notices that he is a peculiar child. He is not like the other kids of his age, and he is an unproblematic child who sincerely obeys his mother and looks mature than his age. This behaviour of the young boy can be attributed to the fact that he has been raised in a manner so that he is prepared to spend his life without the care and protection provided by the mother. He is unusually strong and fearless as is made apparent during the incident when he bravely faces the snake. The child also seems to have accepted the death of his mother in a heroic way as he comes to the old man in a calm and composed way to deliver the letter written by his mother. The story "Holiday Homework" therefore, exposes the intricate mesh of emotions so often concealed under the facade of everyday lives. Jahnavi Barua has presented these complex emotions very casually. It is as if the reader is reading a very real, life-like story of some characters who are very true to life and inhabit our world and can be seen around us.

The title of the story “Holiday Homework” is very interesting and looks apt as per the story. “Holiday Homework” is something we typically associate with school-going children as it contains a list of things to be done by children during their school break. Holiday Homework, therefore, connotes innocence as it is so closely associated with the world of kids. However, in this story, it is not the child who is going on a holiday, rather it is the mother who is going on an eternal holiday never to come back again. Before leaving her son forever, Amrita leaves a list of things that he would need to do which will make him a better person. We know, therefore, the moment of the mother’s demise acts as a transition phase for Siddharth as his world of innocence is soon going to be transformed into that of experience. Siddharth’s holiday homework, that is, the list of things to be done, therefore, is Amrita’s way of preparing him for the future. In this way, the title looks appropriate as the child is entrusted with certain things to be done in his mother’s absence from his life.

## **22.8 “HOLIDAY HOMEWORK”: THEMES**

**Friendship:** Friendship or Camaraderie can easily be categorised as one of the important themes of “Holiday Homework.” The story is a moving account of how a friendship formed among three people who are markedly different from one another has a lot to teach them. The three people in the story are an old man, a young woman, and a child. Going by the age difference which characterises them, a friendship between them is very unlikely to be formed. However, as the characters interact and develop friendship they derive strength from one another’s presence. Their friendship develops to the point where the old man starts addressing Siddharth as son. And at the end of the story, he also becomes a kind of foster parent to him.

**Loneliness:** As soon as we meet the old man, we at once realise that he is engulfed by loneliness, as his wife has died, his family does not stay with him, and his old friend living nearby has also died. At the outset the loneliness characterising the old man might seem troubling but as we move through the pages of the narrative, we realise that the loneliness becomes a boon for the old man. It is only because of this loneliness that the old man is drawn towards the child resulting into a lasting friendship. The old man, therefore, has a way to battle his loneliness in his connection with the young boy. Similarly, the young boy can also look forward to the old man for battling his loneliness which has developed in his life because of his mother’s demise.

**Hope:** “Holiday Homework” on one level is about a mother and child who are soon going to be separated, as the mother is battling breast cancer. Towards the end of the story, we get to know that the mother has died. Viewed thus, the story might look bleak and gloomy with a hopeless ending. But the story actually builds on an element of hope as we see the old man getting ready to share the responsibility of the young boy’s upbringing as desired by his mother. He also affirms that he will make sure the young boy fulfils his ambitions. At the end, therefore, we see the old man getting hopeful about his future as he sees it with the young boy, a hope unlikely for the elderly.



Family: Jahnabi Barua in "Holiday Homework" has a different perspective to offer on family which is in contrast to the one generally propagated in society. In the story the one family that we get to meet does not behave as one. That is the old man's family as he is abandoned by his children and grandchildren. After the death of his wife, he does not have the support of his family and he is forced to spend his days alone, in the care of servants. However, as soon as the old man meets Amrita and Siddharth, it does not take him much time to form a familial bond with them. He has a daughterly affection towards Amrita who is his friend's daughter and he also develops a family like bond with Siddharth, and starts referring him as son. Even when Amrita passes away, she gives the old man the responsibility to look after him and he happily accepts the responsibility without hesitation. The story, therefore, seems to be conveying that it is not necessarily your family which will take up a familial role in your life and you can as well bond with people who can serve the role of family in your life, even if they are not biologically connected to you.

## **22.9 "HOLIDAY HOMEWORK": MAJOR CHARACTERS**

**Shiva Prasad Barua, the old man:** Shiva Prasad Barua is an old man who is a retired policeman. He is living a retired life at the beginning of the story. However, as his wife has died, he is lonely and is living alone as none of his children live with him, and they visit him only occasionally. Viewed thus, the old man is living a life without a purpose. He is simply spending his days with nothing to look forward to. However, his life changes completely when he befriends a mother-son who come to live next door. This very unlikely friendship with a woman who is the age of his daughter, and her son who is the age of his grandson teaches the old man lessons in friendship, compassion, and empathy. The old man develops a familial bond and becomes increasingly involved with them so much so that he affectionately addresses Siddharth as son. The old man, therefore, finds purpose in his life in his interaction with them. Moreover, the old man becomes so fundamental to their lives that when Amrita dies, she desires that Siddharth's responsibility be shared by him. In doing so, Amrita provides a purpose to him and he has something to look forward to in his life. The old man in this way completely changes from a person leading a rather aimless life to one where he sees a purpose in life and he readily accepts this change.

**Siddharth Sarma, the young boy:** Siddharth is a young boy, somewhere around the age of four or five as observed by Shiva Prasad Barua. He is an unusual child, he is not restless, loud, or mischievous. He is a very calm and obedient boy. He pays attention to what his mother tells him and obeys her. The young boy is extremely close to his mother and it appears as if the mother and son are connected to each other by an invisible string. The young boy is fearless, strong, and courageous and although he is young, he appears to be ready to heroically face the very unfortunate impending event of his mother's death. Siddharth is also symbolically important as he becomes a symbol of the old man's future hope.

**Amrita:** Amrita is Siddharth's mother. She is a young woman, who is battling breast

cancer. This condition makes Amrita incapable of living her life like the rest of the women of her age. For the most part of the story, she looks ill, her voice sounds frail, and she also appears irritated and bleak whenever there is a mention of the future. However, Amrita still shows resilience and it is manifested in the way she raises her son. It is her upbringing which makes him ready for future.

## 22.10 LET US SUM UP

*Next Door Stories* by Jahnvi Barua holds significance for its compelling portrayal of human emotions and relationships within the vivid landscape of northeastern India. Through its diverse narratives, the collection illuminates the universal themes of nostalgia, identity, familial ties, and the interplay between tradition and modernity. Barua's evocative prose and nuanced storytelling offer readers a poignant exploration of the human experience, capturing the essence of everyday life while infusing it with regional flavors and universal truths, making the collection a resonant and insightful reflection of the intricacies of human existence.

In the story "Holiday Homework," she expresses the simple longings of an old man and his psychological trauma. The protagonist, an old man, Mr. Barua, after observing his new neighbours ( a young couple and their son) and the intense love between the mother and the son for a few days, decides to befriend them, and soon discovers that the young lady is suffering from cancer. The rest of the story goes on to narrate the unusual friendship formed between the three of them and then it ends with a moving climax. This story is thus painting the picture of a solitary gentle man whose bond with the little boy next does help him discover meaning in an empty nest. The writer has been drawing attention to the predicament of an old man in modern Assamese nuclear families.

## 22.11 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. When was the short story collection *Next Door Stories* published?\_\_\_\_\_.
  - (a) 1998
  - (b) 2002
  - (c) 2006
  - (d) 2008
2. From where does the author takes inspiration? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - (a) From rustic old life
  - (b) From everyday life and events
  - (c) From upper class lifestyle
  - (d) From pastoral life
3. Jahnvi Barua belongs to the Indian northeast state of \_\_\_\_\_.

(a) Assam	(b) Nagaland
(c) Arunachal Pradesh	(d) Manipur

4. How many short stories are there in the collection *Next Door Stories*? \_\_\_\_\_.  
 (a) six (b) ten  
 (c) eleven (d) nine
5. Jahnvi Barua's stories are mostly set in? \_\_\_\_\_.  
 (a) Shillong (b) Assam  
 (c) Manipur (d) Nagaland
6. In "Holiday Homework" the name of the old man's wife is? \_\_\_\_\_.  
 (a) Amrita (b) Ila  
 (c) Jahnvi (d) None of the above
7. What is Siddharth doing when the old man visits his home for the first time? \_\_\_\_\_.  
 (a) playing cricket (b) sleeping  
 (c) reading (d) swinging on the gate
8. What is Amrita's reaction on seeing the old man for the first time? \_\_\_\_\_.  
 (a) hugs him (b) waves her hand to him  
 (c) scolds him (d) ignores him completely
9. Which of these festivals find a mention in the story? \_\_\_\_\_.  
 (a) Durga Puja (b) Diwali  
 (c) Christmas (d) Holi
10. Siddharth wants to become a \_\_\_\_\_ when he grows up.  
 (a) Teacher (b) Cricketer  
 (c) General (d) Singer
11. The old man's gift for Siddharth as he arrives for dinner is a \_\_\_\_\_.  
 (a) Jigsaw Puzzle (b) book  
 (c) bat (d) t-shirt

## 22.12 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

- Q.1 Why do you think the old man is able to form a friendship with Amrita and Siddharth so easily?

Ans: The old man had been living a life away from his family. After his wife died, he is living all alone and his children and grandchildren visit him only occasionally. In this way, the old man is practically living without any kind of familial connection. So, as soon as the old man sees the sweet bond of Amrita with her son Siddharth, he is reminded of his family and becomes even more aware of the void in his life. In order to fill that void, the old man is drawn towards the mother and son. Fortunately Amrita and Siddharth also respond positively to the old man's attempts to connect with them. Consequently, Amrita and Siddharth become a sort of replacement for his family.

- Q.2 What does Siddharth's encounter with the snake tell the old man about him?

Ans: Siddharth encounters a snake as he is innocently playing in his lawn. The old man

and Amrita see Siddharth as he comes face to face with the reptile. However, everything happens so fast that neither Amrita nor the old man is able to rescue Siddharth and all they can do is become spectators to what is happening before their eyes. However, the old man notices that upon seeing the snake Siddharth does not panic and does not try to run away in fright. The young boy, Siddharth does not even raise any hue and cry upon seeing the snake and it appears that the young boy understands the behaviour of animals. He, therefore, stays still in order not to frighten the animal. After a few moments, the snake goes away without harming Siddharth. The incident makes the old man realise that Siddharth is a brave boy. He is amazed at the courage that the young boy has shown. The courage shown by Siddharth is unusual for his age and the old man is amazed by this.

Q.3 What perspective on family is provided in the story?

Ans. Refer to section 22.8 Themes

Q.4 What do you know about Shiv Prasad Barua? Attempt a character sketch of the old man.

Ans. Refer to section 22.9 Major Characters

Q.5 Comment on the theme of friendship in the story “Holiday Homework.”

Ans: Refer to section 22.8 Themes

Q.6 Comment on the title of the story “Holiday Homework.”

Q.7 Which character you like the most in “Holiday Homework” and why?

Q.8 What is the main argument in the story “Holiday Homework”?

### **22.13 ANSWER KEY (CYP, MCQs)**

#### **CYP**

1. policeman
2. his servants
3. Breast Cancer
4. Shillong
5. Son
6. True
7. False
8. bird
9. shawl
10. “Siddharth’s Holiday Homework”

### MCQs

- 1 (a) Assam
- 2 (c) eleven
- 3 (b) Assam
- 4 (b) Ila
- 5 (d) swinging on the gate
- 6 (b) waves her hand to him
- 7 (a) Durga Puja
- 8 (c) General
- 9 (a) Jigsaw Puzzle

### 22.14 SUGGESTED READING

Barua, Jahnavi. *Rebirth*. Penguin Random House India, 2018. Barua, Jahnavi. *Next Door*. Penguin Books India, 2008.



## **TEMSULA AO: “LABURNUM FOR MY HEAD”**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 23.0 Introduction
- 23.1 Objectives and Outcome
- 23.2 Introduction to short story
- 23.3 Life and Works of the Author: Temsula Ao
- 23.4 Check Your Progress (CYP)
- 23.5 Summary of “Laburnum for My Head”
- 23.6 Glossary
- 23.7 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 23.8 Eco-critical Exploration in “Laburnum for My Head”
- 23.9 “Laburnum for My head” as a feminist short story
- 23.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 23.11 Examination Oriented Questions
- 23.12 Answer Key
- 23.13 Suggested Reading

### **23.0 INTRODUCTION**

Dear learner, this lesson like the previous two lessons deals with another short story “Laburnum for my Head” written by Temsula Ao. Short story is a prose narrative which includes the elements of a novel but is significantly shorter in length. According to the celebrated American writer of short story Edgar Allan Poe, a short story should be brief and should take between thirty minutes and two hours to read. The short story should have a single mood and single climax. A short story should also maintain the unity of effect, action, and place.

This lesson will introduce you to the writer Temsula Ao, one of the major literary voices from Northeast India, her life and significant works. The lesson will also provide you a detailed summary of “Laburnum for my Head” as well as certain important aspects of the same.

### **23.1 OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOME**

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint you with the short story “Laburnum for my Head” written by Temsula Ao. The learner will also be introduced to the eco-critical and feminist perspective in the short story.

After reading this lesson, you will

- be acquainted with Temsula Ao, her biography as well as her literary contributions
- become familiar with the genre of short story, and how it is different from a novel
- be able to summarize the short story “Laburnum for my Head”
- appreciate the ecocritical as well as the feminist elements in the story.

### **23.2 INTRODUCTION TO SHORT STORY**

Throughout the ages, Nature and literature have shared a close relationship in the works of poets and writers across cultures. Literature is enriched with the depiction of natural sights and imagery, which not only illustrate human emotions and feelings for the environment, but also illustrate human attitude and concern towards it.

A short story is a fictional work of prose shorter than a novel. In contemporary fiction, a short story can range from 1,000 to 20,000 words. Because of the shorter length, a short story usually focuses on one plot, one main character (with a few additional minor characters), and one central theme, whereas a novel can tackle multiple plots and themes, with a variety of prominent characters. Short stories also lend themselves more to experimentation, using uncommon prose styles or literary devices to tell the story. The short story deals primarily with one perspective.

The short story “Laburnum for my Head” has taken into account eco-critical and feminist perspectives, which will be discussed further in detail.

The short story “Laburnum for my Head” by Temsula Ao is about a widow’s fascination for the Laburnum tree to the extent that she wants it to be planted on her grave instead of having the customary tombstone of marble or granite. Lentina, the protagonist, is enchanted with Laburnum tree because she associates it with femininity and humility, unlike the garish gulmohars with their bright orange flowers. She goes to great lengths to fulfill her wish, antagonising her children and her kith and kin in the process.

### **23.3 LIFE AND WORKS OF THE AUTHOR: TEMSULA AO**

Temsula Ao was born on 25 October 1945 to Imnamutongba Changkiri and Nokintemla Longkumerin Jorhat. She had five siblings. When her youngest brother was only beginning to crawl, her parents died within a period of nine months. Thereafter, her youngest two siblings were taken to their ancestral village Changki in Mokokchung district to live with their father’s younger brother. The four eldest siblings—Khari, Tajen, Temsula, and Along stayed at Jorhat under the guardianship of Khari, who was temporarily employed at Jorhat Mission Hospital. Soon, the youngest among the four, Along, was also taken to Changki. When Tajen got appointed as an

assistant teacher in the village primary school, he took on the responsibilities of the younger siblings at Changki. Ao summarises her difficult childhood and adolescence in her memoir *Once upon a Life* as ‘fractured childhood.’ Her ancestral family were involved in the early settlement of Changki village and her visits and affinity to the village helped her “reaffirm the sensibilities that have given me my intrinsic identity.”

She studied in Golaghat Girls’ Mission for six years as a boarder. She studied in Assamese-medium there until class six. For her matriculation exam later, she even wrote two papers in the Assamese language. She completed her matriculation from Ridgeway Girls’ High School in Golaghat. Temsula Ao received her B.A. with distinction from Fazl Ali College, Mokokchung, Nagaland, and her M.A. in English from Gauhati University Assam. From English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, she received her Post Graduate Diploma in the Teaching of English and PhD from North Eastern Hill University (NEHU).

Temsula Ao began teaching English at NEHU as a lecturer in December 1975. She completed her PhD in May 1983, titled “The Heroines of Henry James,” under the guidance of Dr. D. P. Singh. She examined female protagonists in Henry James’ stories who emerge victorious in their sophisticated and civilised society. She served as Director of the North East Zone Cultural Centre, Dimapur, from 1992 to 1997. She was a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Minnesota 1985-86. In 2010, Temsula Ao retired as a professor and dean of the English Department at NEHU.

Temsula Ao received the Padma Shri Award in 2007. She was also the recipient of the Governor’s Gold Medal 2009 from the government of Meghalaya. She was widely respected as one of the major literary voices in English to emerge from Northeast India along with Mitra Phukan and Mamang Dai. Her works have been translated into German, French, Assamese, Bengali and Hindi.

She has published seven poetic works, which are *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992) published by Writers Workshop Kolkata. *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), and *Songs From The Other Life* (2007) were published by Kohima Sahitya Sabha, North Eastern Hill University and Grasswork Books respectively. Heritage Publishing House, Dimapur, published the recent poetry collections *Book of Songs: Collected Poems 1988-2007* (2013) and *Songs along the Way Home* (2019).

When she was at the University of Minnesota as a Fulbright fellow, she came in contact with Native Americans. She learned about their culture, heritage and especially their oral tradition. This exposure inspired her to record the oral tradition of her own community, Ao Naga. After returning from the University of Minnesota, she worked on the oral tradition for about twelve years. She collected myths, folktales, folklore, rituals, laws, customs, and belief systems. This ethnographic work was published in 1999 as the Ao-Naga oral tradition from Bhasha Publications, Baroda. This book is the most authentic document about the Ao-Naga community.



Temsula Ao has published three short story collections. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone*(2005), *Laburnum for my Head*(2009) and *The Tombstone in my Garden: Stories from Nagaland* (2022). *These Hills Called Home* consists of ten short stories and deals with the insurgency in Nagaland fired by the right to self-determination of the Naga people. *The Tombstone in my Garden: Stories from Nagaland* collection of five stories described as holding ‘a mirror to the lives of everyday people beyond the headlines.’ She published a book of literary criticism, *Henry James’ Quest for an Ideal Heroine*, in 1989 by Writers Workshop. *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry And Bloody Rags* (2014) is her only memoir.

Her poems, short stories and fiction are set in the lush green forest and hills of north-east India. She writes about her own people, their emotions and her own traditions and beliefs (Naga tradition). Besides this, her first book of short stories, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, was translated into Kannada.

Temsula Ao also served as Chairperson of the Nagaland State Commission for Women from 2013 to 2019 for two terms. As the chairperson, Ao was very vocal for women’s rights in the state often challenging the traditional status quo and legal stalemate.

#### **23.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (CYP)**

Dear learner, let us stop for some time to answer these questions.

##### **Fill in the Blanks:**

- (i) Temsula Ao was born on 25 October 1945 in\_\_\_\_\_.
- (ii) Temsula Ao had \_\_\_\_\_siblings.
- (iii) Temsula Ao summarises her difficult childhood and adolescence in her memoir\_.
- (iv) Temsula Ao’s ancestral family were involved in the early settlement of \_\_village.
- (v) The title of Temsula Ao’s PhD thesis completed in 1983 is\_\_.
- (vi) \_\_\_\_\_was a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Minnesota 1985-86.
- (vii) \_\_\_\_\_works of poetry are written by Temsula Ao.
- (viii) *Henry James’ Quest for an Ideal Heroine* by Temsula Ao is published by\_\_ in1989.
- (ix) Temsula Ao is one of the major literary voices in English to emerge from Northeast India along with \_\_\_\_\_and \_\_\_\_\_.
- (x) Temsula Ao’s first book of short stories, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* is translated into \_\_\_\_\_.

## 23.5 SUMMARY OF “LABURNUM FOR MY HEAD”

The story begins with a magnificent description of the laburnum trees in blossom in the cemetery of a sleepy little town. The author captures the stunning beauty of the yellow flowers and narrates how they outshine the tombstones erected by the humans to keep their memories alive. Blessed by nature, the yellow blossoms of the trees conceal the concrete structures, marble and granite headstones erected in the graveyard and declare the permanency of the ever unchanging nature and the futility of human claims to immortality. After offering an impressionistic picture of the laburnum in May, the author presents the central character of the story.

A woman named Lentina desires to have some laburnum bushes in her garden. She loves laburnum flowers because of their femininity and humility. The yellow splendour of laburnum is associated with femininity and their earthward bending is taken as a gesture of humility. She purchases a few saplings from the nursery and plants them in the corners of her garden. In the first year, the gardener pulls out the small saplings along with the weeds around them. She plants again and this time stray cows enter her garden and eat up plants they find including the laburnum. Undaunted, she plants a few more saplings and takes good care of them. As fate has it, a worker from the health department sprays a deadly DDT concoction on the edges of the garden while she is visiting a friend. Heavy rain floods the garden and all her flowers except full grown trees wither and die including the laburnum. Devastated, she thinks her efforts to grow the plant will not be successful yet she yearns more!

Her husband and children believe that she is developing an unhealthy fetish for laburnum and talk about it openly in close family gatherings. She fails to understand their concern and feels inwardly hurt by their insensitivity to beauty around them. This forces her to keep her desire within herself and she refuses to talk or plant any more laburnum plants.

In the meanwhile, her husband shows signs of a strange disease and passes away quite one night in his sleep. As her husband is a prominent member of the society, elaborate funeral services are arranged. When the hearse is about to leave for the cemetery, she surprises everyone by announcing her plan to accompany her husband on his last journey. Usually, it is men who take part in the last rites at the gravesite and her decision is not challenged because of the somber atmosphere. At the graveyard, she ruminates on the human futility of erecting headstones on the graves to defy death, and suddenly, she gets an epiphanic sensation. She is delighted with the idea of planting a laburnum tree on her grave instead of a silly headstone, and this way, her desire to have a laburnum tree close to her would be fulfilled. In spite of the somber occasion, she smiles to herself, a relative notices and she leaves for home.

Back at home, she searches for someone who would understand her deep seated longing for the laburnum to plant a tree on her grave. She considers her sons and daughters and feels that they would not carry out designs. Even servants, cooks or the gardener can not be entrusted with the task. Finally, she settles on the driver, who has been serving the family for many years and is

a widower. The next day, she asks the driver to take her to the cemetery and she searches for a spot where she can be buried. She informs Babu, the driver, of her plan to reserve a spot in the graveyard for herself. She entrusts the hesitant Babu to arrange a document from the Town Committee to ensure her grave on the spot she prefers and makes him vow to keep the issue confidential. Babu discusses the issue with his son-in-law and the latter informs him of the need to submit a request to the Town Committee. Babu informs Lentina of the requirement which she dismisses as it reveals her identity to the public. She is forced to devise another strategy to fulfill her desire, and this time, she plans to buy the land adjacent to the cemetery, which she hopes would eventually become a part of the graveyard.

The arrival of Khalong, son of her late husband's friend, in her household to offer condolences turns out to be a golden chance for Lentina to buy the land adjacent to the cemetery as it belongs to Khalong's property. He is in financial constraints and is willing to sell the land but there are no takers as it is close to the graveyard. Lentina is excited to hear the news and expresses her willingness to buy the land at the price fixed by him. Her sons come to know the deal only after she owns it and she pacifies their disapproval. She is tactful in subduing her daughters-in-law. The Town Committee visits Lentina as the ground near the cemetery is to be only in the custody of either the church or other religious organizations with due permission from the committee. She acknowledges their concerns and puts forward her demands to hand over the land to the Town Committee. The Committee agrees with her demand not to erect any marble or granite headstones for people who get buried in the land and permits her to choose a gravesite for herself.

Lentina and Babu, the driver, make frequent visits to the gravesite and plant laburnum saplings. He cares for the plant and gradually becomes an ever faithful friend to her. Meanwhile, Lentina grows tired and sick, and Babu comes to her aid. He visits the gravesite and informs her of the growth of the laburnum plants. Gradually Lentina recovers from the illness and resumes her role in the family. She befriends daughters-in-law, gifts them and offers advice to her sons on business and family matters.

Among the two laburnum saplings planted at the gravesite, one has dried up and the other has sprouted tiny flowers. Next year, the tree has blossomed so much that anyone passing by may notice the growth. Lentina requests Babu to take her to the gravesite and they watch the laburnum blossom. As Babu expected, she considers the blossom as a sign for her to leave earthly life and prepares for the final journey. She confines herself in her room for five days and on the fifth day, asks her maid to help her bathe and to dress in her favourite dress. She orders her to bring her dinner early. Her servant enters her room the next day to know that she has passed away in her sleep.

Every May, the laburnum trees blossom and one cannot see a single stone monument. So every May, something extraordinary!

## 23.6 GLOSSARY

Magnificent incongruity: extremely beautiful but at the same time strange and not suitable in a situation.

Consecrated ground: ground that has been made or declared sacred or holy, and is therefore suitable for Christian burial.

Recriminations: an angry statement that somebody makes accusing somebody else of something, especially in response to a similar statement from them.

Epiphanic sensation: an intuitive grasp of reality through our senses that is usually simple and striking, an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure of something witnessed through our senses.

A glint in her eyes: an expression in somebody's eyes showing a particular emotion, often a negative one.

Frail woman: physically weak and thin.

Onerous duty: a task or responsibility that needs great effort; causes trouble or worry.

Luxuriant blossoms: flowers or masses of flowers that are growing thickly and strongly in an attractive way.

## 23.7 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. Temsula Ao is a major literary voice from which part of India?\_\_\_\_\_.
  - (a) South
  - (b) North
  - (c) Northeast
  - (d) East
2. Which is Temsula Ao's recent short story collection? \_\_\_\_\_.
  - (a) *These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone*
  - (b) *Laburnum for My Head*
  - (c) *The Tombstone in my Garden: Stories from Nagaland*
  - (d) *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry And Bloody Rags*
3. In which year Temsula Ao received the Padma Shri Award?\_\_\_\_\_.
  - (a) 1999
  - (b) 2007
  - (c) 2005
  - (d) 2010
4. Temsula Ao received the Sahitya Akademi Award for her short story collection\_\_\_\_\_.

- (a) *Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*
  - (b) *Laburnum for My Head: Stories*
  - (c) *These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone*
  - (d) *Henry James' Quest for an Ideal Heroine*
5. *Henry James' Quest for an Ideal Heroine* by Temsula Ao is \_\_\_\_\_.
- (a) short story collection
  - (b) poetry collection
  - (c) literary criticism
  - (d) verse drama
6. *Laburnum for My Head: Stories* is a collection of short stories about the people of \_\_\_\_\_.
- (a) Manipur
  - (b) Assam
  - (c) Nagaland
  - (d) Meghalaya
7. What is the name of the protagonist's driver in the short story "Laburnum for My Head"? \_\_\_\_\_.
- (a) Raju
  - (b) Babu
  - (c) Somu
  - (d) Hari
8. In the first year, how do Laburnum flowers get destroyed? \_\_\_\_\_.
- (a) the gardener pulled out the small saplings along with the weeds.
  - (b) stray cows ate up plants they found including the laburnum.
  - (c) a health department worker sprayed a deadly DDT concoction on the edges of the garden while Letina was visiting a friend.
  - (d) None of the above.
9. When exactly did Letina decide firmly to plant Laburnum trees on her grave? \_\_\_\_\_.
- (a) after two unsuccessful attempts at planting Laburnum at home.
  - (b) after an 'epiphanic sensation' for Laburnum trees on the occasion of Letina's husband's death.
  - (c) after stray cows ate up plants they found including the laburnum.
  - (d) All of the above.
10. What is the single passionate wish of Letina? \_\_\_\_\_.
- (a) to grow a Laburnum tree in the garden of her home.
  - (b) to plant gulmohars throughout the town.
  - (c) The Laburnum tree should bloom once a year on her grave.
  - (d) None of the above.

## 23.8 ECO-CRITICAL EXPLORATION IN “LABURNUM FOR MY HEAD”

Eco-criticism analyzes the role that the natural environment plays in the imagination of a cultural community at a specific historical moment, examining how the concept of “nature” is defined, what values are assigned or denied it and why, and the way in which the relationship between humans and nature is envisioned. Eco-criticism gives human beings a broader view or a better understanding of nature. Man always feels that he is a superior creature that inhabits this biosphere. Man’s voracious urge to conquer nature is a well-known fact. For a very long time nature was not given its due consideration. Now we have come to understand that nature is also a co-inhabitant and not a subsidiary.

In conventional practice, gravestones are erected vertically along with the tomb to keep the sacred reminiscence of the deceased person. Such stones are inscribed with epitaphs often quoted sayings from the religious scriptures. These are symbolic as they explicitly display the eminence and wealth of the dead person in the society. This traditional style of cemetery has later been replaced by the natural cemetery or eco-cemetery or green cemetery. Eco-conscious people perform the burial in nature’s lap. It is a kind of deep yearning to unify with nature or to become part of the natural environment. In natural cemeteries, there are no conventional gravestones. Rather, natural tree or bushes is planted to venerate the departed soul.

Temsula Ao’s short story “Laburnum for My Head” registers an egalitarian thought when she moves to create a beautiful eco-cemetery or green cemetery sans concrete headstones but only flowering trees. This innovative step on her part would not only sketch a beautiful picture of nature but also conserve and promote the environment and offer a green impact on the society amidst the concrete life of the town. The story is about an aged woman, Lentina, who had an obsession for laburnum trees: She had always admired these yellow flowers for what she thought was their femininity; they were not brazen like the gulmohars with their orange and dark pink blossoms. She tried hard to have one such tree in her garden, but all of her efforts became futile: “Lentina was devastated and began to think that her efforts at bringing the strange beauty into her garden would never be successful”(3). In the first year, the new gardener pulled out the small saplings along with the weeds growing around them. On the second occasion she found that some stray cows “had rushed into her garden and were blissfully munching on the plants...including her precious laburnum saplings” (3). In the third year, another disaster struck. A worker from the health department came in her absence and sprayed deadly DDT and the subsequent heavy rainfall on that day flooded the entire garden making the laburnum saplings withered and dead.

But after an ‘epiphanic sensation’ for Laburnum trees with a beautiful flourish of buttery-yellow blossoms on the occasion of her husband’s death, she was firm to have one tree living on her grave to keep alive her memory rather than a boasting tombstone which can hardly commemorate any dead person. Though she did not conceive this new and innovative idea about planning like an environmentalist but her honest endeavour to plant such a tree surely



makes her heroic. She wished to change which would be an example of noble gesture in society and environment also. Lentina's sturdy willpower and the Town Committee's approval of her proposal paved the way for the foundation of the area converted to eco-cemetery. Lentina's plan was neither a precious alteration nor a mere superficial greenwashing to appeal or pacify. She succeeded since she did not negotiate with the socio-economic forces of the society. The story "Laburnum for My Head" has an ecological extension depicting human representations of nature. Eco-critics speak about the silenced nature of the 'other' like the women kind. But the story of Tamsula Ao depicts genuine instances of a liberated and sustainable environment. The story is not of any barely audible voice of a woman or an environment under the wreck of man. It is the narrative of a woman who harbours careful details in realising her dream of having a laburnum tree on her grave instead of a solid gravestone, which, according to her, is nothing but "the specimens of human conceit." She has a complete family, but the death of her husband makes her take a journey to the cemetery. Amidst the grave and sombre place of eternal sleep of the deads she conceived the idea of life. According to Lentina, this concrete headstone certainly speaks of "man's puny attempts to defy death" and defy nature.

"Laburnum for My Head" foresees an environment initiated by the strategic development of Lentina's vision in the story. She does not allow the internal environment of the story to become stagnant as she constantly gears ways and means to convert her plot of newly purchased land into an area of greenery where people irrespective of their socio-economic status would yield to a common cause of creating a better environment in the heart of the town life, a place of adjoining concrete experience. Human pride had to bow down to the green aim of Lentina. In the future, the cemetery's presence would renovate the town with its greener ecological vision, adding gorgeousness to the narrative of the story, even through the image of death. Death is lurking in the story from the beginning with the death of Lentina's husband. Thereafter, Lentina's methodical design to immortalize her and her memories for her progeny by planting a laburnum. For Lentina, the human world was as elementary as the non-human world. To fulfill her vision, she undertook a mission and on its expedition she did not seek the help of her sons and daughter-in-law as she did not prefer their company as they seemed to her too materialistic. She rather sought the help of her humble driver, Babu a widower and none by him to mention as family. She tried to complete her fastidious job of obtaining a plot of land with the help of her intimate Babu and even tried to get help from his son-in-law. Lentina, therefore, tried to attain spiritual satisfaction after her final adieu from the human world to the world of vegetation. Lentina is not opposed to by any member of the society though her sons called her plan 'crazy.' She presents herself as a dignified and respectable member of society. She's also calculating and has an insight for commercial profit when we see her after a coincidental meeting with Khalong, immediately she grabs the opportunity to buy the plot of land from Khalong. We see her evolving from a simple lady with a simple wish to a strong willed person. She is well aware that the members of the Town Committee would ask her on the matter of ownership about the plot of land adjacent to the cemetery. To end the trouble of the Town Committee and also to maintain her long cherished aim

for greenery she donates the plot of land to the Town Committee with some clauses like:

1. The new plot of land could be dedicated as the new cemetery and would be available to all fulfilling the condition that only flowering trees and not headstones would be erected on the gravesites.
2. Lentina, as the donor, should be the first to choose plot for herself.
3. Plots would be designated by Numbers only and records of names against Plot Numbers would be maintained in the Committee Register.
4. The terms were to be widely publicized and the Town Committee would ensure that they were adhered to strictly. (12)

Each tombstone in the cemetery proudly possesses the name of the deceased human. But Letina, wants the plots should be designated by Numbers only, and not by names as if trying to affirm that names are only social constructs put on human beings after birth, and therefore should be removed with death. Lentina frees herself from this social construct. These conditions would not only partially fulfill her aim but also create a sustainable environment in the years to come. The next challenge that she faces is to look after the laburnum plant and to see it bloom before her last breath. However, the critics prevail upon the fact that the patriarch oppresses women as well as nature and the environment and overshadows women's involvement towards society, their scholarship and her involving relationship with nature. In this story, Lentina explicitly exposes her views, which were indisputable and irreversible. Lentina proves that women can manoeuvre changes if the economic power remains within the grasp of the women in society. The story narrates how Lentina becomes economically independent and socially accountable. She executes the role of a reigning matriarch and consequently challenges the male dominated society. She chooses her gravesite before her death and denying the "already embarked [space] beside my master [her husband]," she gets herself liberated from the patriarchal grip. Very fascinatingly, she frees herself from the male dominated economic setup of the society; as she is shown in an angry outburst to her sons and daughter-in-laws "I have not spent anyone else's money...you need not worry about any headstone for me." Her liberation is followed by the liberation of nature from the cruelties of mankind which is like "an environment liberated from all human pretensions to immortality. Lentina portrays an environment of change and the laburnum tree figuratively stands for the projection and creation of the matriarch, the environment of sustainability. She establishes an environment which facilitates the growth of life amidst the deads. The ultimate survival of the tree and its bloom reflects the blossoming of the 'other,' marginalized, the women class, and the environment. The environment, the greenery in Temsula Ao's short story emerges unharmed as there is an aspect of social change in the story without which no society or the ecology and the biotic and abiotic factors can survive or thrive. The sapling which is planted, symbolizes hope of the matriarch. With much expectation, Lentina awaits its growth and exuberance as the previous attempts at planting one were frustrated by numerous untoward events. She becomes a bundle of nerves at times and preferred seclusion



with the exception of Babu's intermittent intrusion to inform her about the tree when she was unwell. Never in the story has she lamented upon the deceased husband. Maybe the passing away of her husband made her understand the uselessness of life, and this led to the expansion of a spiritual empathy with the world of nature. She also might have realized that men, after their death, hanker after name and fame and want to immortalize one's glory and pomp in the form of some stony edifice. She calmly worked on her mission and with Babu. The narrative portrayed her as: "A strong-willed woman and her faithful servant were thus drawn into an unusual bond of common humanity, based on trust and loyalty" (17).

There is a harmony among two sharply contrasting social strata steered in a social change which fosters the growth of the environment, which will usher in sustainability. She is respected and revered by her sons and daughters-in-law. When she fell sick, her family waited upon her and tended to all her needs. The environment that Lentina created with the assistance of Babu was not only reared by her but also by Babu when she was in a weakening state of health. Babu was the custodian of the enclosure of nature amidst the prospective cemetery. He could read her mind very well as well as measure its inner turmoil and agitation at not seeing the laburnum bloom. Babu feared that the occasion of the Laburnum's bloom would invite her end as she wished to see the tree bloom before her death.

Even though the tree bloomed modestly Babu did not report to her as that might invite her end sooner. So he postponed the piece of news until next year when the tree would produce dense foliage and the perfect bloom to appease Lentina and fulfill her long cherished wish. And when she witnessed the sombre beauty of the Laburnum, only sighed and withdrew her. She sprang back to activities and busied herself with chores. Her self-imposed isolation continued, and on the fifth day, she called upon the maid to help her bathe and dress and bade her an early goodnight only to find her breathing her last breath in her sleep the next morning.

Lentina has gone through internal disturbance when her earlier efforts did not succeed. The agencies like the gardener, straying cows, and the deadly DDT prove fatal to her laburnum sapling. This has created a psychological conflict which has ruined her physical condition. She dies but fulfills her last yearning and her reminiscences are immortalized by the Laburnum tree. So, at last we witness women and humble nature integrate into some amazing permanence. She wants to be immortalised in the lap of nature. Here, Lentina succeeds in being an eco-philosopher. The yearly flowering of the laburnum tree is symptomatic of resurrection and the arrival of new life. It is really a sign of hope. Life is not ended but it is a route towards perpetuity. This mystery of life and death, flowering and withering in nature, gives great implication to Lentina's longing to be observed every year when her laburnum blooms, representing the transience of life. It is the scheme of nature to bless humanity with a development in the environment that will sustain future generations. It will inspire and teach humanity that trivial pride or vanity fails to immortalize men. It is an enduring action which will bring men on the verge of a better environment.

### **23.9 “LABURNUM FOR MY HEAD” AS A FEMINIST SHORT STORY**

Lentina, the central character of the story, is a woman of her own choices and the story is a record of her struggles to fulfill her desire to have some Laburnum bushes in her garden. She loves laburnum flowers because of their femininity and contrasts them with the brazen orange and dark pink blossoms of gulmohars. In the context of the troubled politics of the North-East, her preference for the yellow mellow beauty of laburnum over the dark pink blossoms of gulmohar is very significant. Traditionally, the colour yellow refers to happiness, optimism, enlightenment and creativity whereas the dark pink is associated with energy, passion etc. This choice of colour itself informs her politics of identifying with the victims of political aggression in Nagaland and her desire for the golden shower evokes a desire for easing down the tensions. She attributes humility to the way the laburnum flowers hung their heads earthward. In short, her love for the flowers spring out of their femininity and humility.

In the beginning of the story, the writer offers a stunning impression of a laburnum in blossom and describes how the flowers conceal the monuments erected by men of prominence on their graves. It is customary among the wealthy to erect marble/granite or concrete structures on their graves to keep their memories alive and to defy the forgetfulness imposed by death. The feminine flowers of the laburnum help to erase the marks of prominent members of the society and bring out a sense of equality among all humans and declare the victory of nature over everything the patriarchs have created. In another instance, Lentina's love for the flowers is taken as a fetish and is openly spoken about in close family gatherings. This shows the intolerance practiced by the society on women's choices and how it forces her to stop planting saplings in her gardens. Though this stops her from talking about the tree in public and planting them in her garden, her love for the golden shower does not cease.

Lentina's decision to join the funeral party of her husband to take part in the last rites at the gravesite is a challenging act to the patriarchal tradition which reserves this to man. Though she is not warmly welcomed, no one stops her from carrying out her plan as the gravity of the situation requires them to keep calm. Her strength lies in her sensitivity to the cultural codes of the society. Her struggles to buy a piece of land of her own choice brings out her extraordinary powers of perseverance and make members of her family to acknowledge her strengths and seek her advice on matters running business and family.

In her search for fulfilment, she breaks free of human relationships established by the patriarchal system and redefines them. For example, the nature of her relationship with Babu, the driver, was that of a master-slave and now she considers him as an 'ever faithful friend' and a confidant. Her determination to select a plot for herself and negotiations with the Town Committee show her strength as a woman and she erases marks of patriarchy in the process.

### **23.10 LET US SUM UP**

Women and environment play crucial role in enriching the human civilization. Women

plant trees at their graves instead of gravestones as they try to protect ecology and environment through their love of nature. In that way they carve a niche for themselves in this male dominated patriarchal world. Further, they play the role of beloved and mother and are capable of raising and protecting their children in the face of extreme difficulty. Tamsula Ao's stories redefine women identity and enable a peep into women's world from a woman's viewpoint. The stories tell us that non-human animals form an indispensable component of our biological environment/ ecosystem and needs to be protected.

### 23.11 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

- Q.1 Write a short note on the writer Tamsula Ao.
- Q.2 Write a brief character sketch of the protagonist Letina.
- Q.3 Why is Letina fascinated with the Laburnum tree?
- Q.4 "That particular spot displays nothing that man has improvised; only nature, who does not possess any script, abides there: she only owns the seasons." Discuss with reference to Tamsula Ao's short story "Laburnum for My Head."
- Q.5 Describe the kind of relationship Letina shares with her servant Babu.
- Q.6 Discuss Tamsula Ao's "Laburnum for My Head" as an eco-critical text.
- Q.7 Attempt an ecofeminist reading of Tamsula Ao's short story "Laburnum for My Head."

### 23.12 ANSWER KEY

#### CYP

(i) Assam (ii) five (iii) *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* (iv) Changki (v) The Heroines of Henry James (vi) Tamsula Ao (vii) Seven (viii) Writers Workshop (ix) Mitra Phukan and Mamang Dai (x) Kannada

#### MCQs

- 1 (c) Northeast
- 2 (c) *The Tombstone in my Garden: Stories from Nagaland*
- 3 (b) 2007
- 4 (b) *Laburnum for My Head: Stories*
- 5 (c) literary criticism
- 6 (c) Nagaland
- 7 (b) Babu
- 8 (a) the gardener pulled out the small saplings along with the weeds.

9 (b) after an ‘epiphanic sensation’ for Laburnum trees on the occasion of Letina’s husband’s death.

10 (c) The Laburnum tree should bloom once a year on her grave.

### **23.13 SUGGESTED READING**

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Huggan, Animals, Graham and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Oxon: Routledge, 2010.

Kumar, Pradeep, T. *Environmental Education*. New Delhi: P.H Publishing Corporation, 2009.

Nayar, K. Pramod. *Contemporary New Literary and Cultural Theory*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley (India), 2010.

