



INSTITUTE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION
IDE
Rajiv Gandhi University



MAENG-502

Indian English Literature–I

MA ENGLISH
3rd Semester

Rajiv Gandhi University

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Indian English Literature I

MAENG502
III SEMESTER



RAJIV GANDHI UNIVERSITY

Arunachal Pradesh, INDIA - 791 112

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About the University

Rajiv Gandhi University (formerly Arunachal University) is a premier institution for higher education in the state of Arunachal Pradesh and has completed twenty-five years of its existence. Late Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, laid the foundation stone of the university on 4th February, 1984 at Rono Hills, where the present campus is located.

Ever since its inception, the university has been trying to achieve excellence and fulfill the objectives as envisaged in the University Act. The university received academic recognition under Section 2(f) from the University Grants Commission on 28th March, 1985 and started functioning from 1st April, 1985. It got financial recognition under section 12-B of the UGC on 25th March, 1994. Since then Rajiv Gandhi University, (then Arunachal University) has carved a niche for itself in the educational scenario of the country following its selection as a University with potential for excellence by a high-level expert committee of the University Grants Commission from among universities in India.

The University was converted into a Central University with effect from 9th April, 2007 as per notification of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.

The University is located atop Rono Hills on a picturesque tableland of 302 acres overlooking the river Dikrong. It is 6.5 km from the National Highway 52-A and 25 km from Itanagar, the State capital. The campus is linked with the National Highway by the Dikrong bridge.

The teaching and research programmes of the University are designed with a view to play a positive role in the socio-economic and cultural development of the State. The University offers Undergraduate, Post-graduate, M.Phil and Ph.D. programmes. The Department of Education also offers the B.Ed. programme.

There are fifteen colleges affiliated to the University. The University has been extending educational facilities to students from the neighbouring states, particularly Assam. The strength of students in different departments of the University and in affiliated colleges has been steadily increasing.

The faculty members have been actively engaged in research activities with financial support from UGC and other funding agencies. Since inception, a number of proposals on research projects have been sanctioned by various funding agencies to the University. Various departments have organized numerous seminars, workshops and conferences. Many faculty members have participated in national and international conferences and seminars held within the country and abroad. Eminent scholars and distinguished personalities have visited the University and delivered lectures on various disciplines.

The academic year 2000-2001 was a year of consolidation for the University. The switch over from the annual to the semester system took off smoothly and the performance of the students registered a marked improvement. Various syllabi designed by Boards of Post-graduate Studies (BPGS) have been implemented. VSAT facility installed by the ERNET India, New Delhi under the UGC-Infonet program, provides Internet access.

In spite of infrastructural constraints, the University has been maintaining its academic excellence. The University has strictly adhered to the academic calendar, conducted the examinations and declared the results on time. The students from the University have found placements not only in State and Central Government Services, but also in various institutions, industries and organizations. Many students have emerged successful in the National Eligibility Test (NET).

Since inception, the University has made significant progress in teaching, research, innovations in curriculum development and developing infrastructure.

About IDE

The formal system of higher education in our country is facing the problems of access, limitation of seats, lack of facilities and infrastructure. Academicians from various disciplines opine that it is learning which is more important and not the channel of education. The education through distance mode is an alternative mode of imparting instruction to overcome the problems of access, infrastructure and socio-economic barriers. This will meet the demand for qualitative higher education of millions of people who cannot get admission in the regular system and wish to pursue their education. It also helps interested employed and unemployed men and women to continue with their higher education. Distance education is a distinct approach to impart education to learners who remained away in the space and/or time from the teachers and teaching institutions on account of economic, social and other considerations. Our main aim is to provide higher education opportunities to those who are unable to join regular academic and vocational education programmes in the affiliated colleges of the University and make higher education reach to the doorsteps in rural and geographically remote areas of Arunachal Pradesh in particular and North-eastern part of India in general. In 2008, the Centre for Distance Education has been renamed as "Institute of Distance Education (IDE)."

Continuing the endeavor to expand the learning opportunities for distant learners, IDE has introduced Post Graduate Courses in 5 subjects (Education, English, Hindi, History and Political Science) from the Academic Session 2013-14.

The Institute of Distance Education is housed in the Physical Sciences Faculty Building (first floor) next to the University Library. The University campus is 6 kms from NERIST point on National Highway 52A. The University buses ply to NERIST point regularly.

Outstanding Features of Institute of Distance Education:

(i) At Par with Regular Mode

Eligibility requirements, curricular content, mode of examination and the award of degrees are on par with the colleges affiliated to the Rajiv Gandhi University and the Department(s) of the University.

(ii) Self-Instructional Study Material (SISM)

The students are provided SISM prepared by the Institute and approved by Distance Education Council (DEC), New Delhi. This will be provided at the time of admission at the IDE or its Study Centres. SISM is provided only in English except Hindi subject.

(iii) Contact and Counselling Programme (CCP)

The course curriculum of every programme involves counselling in the form of personal contact programme of duration of approximately 7-15 days. The CCP shall not be compulsory for BA. However for professional courses and MA the attendance in CCP will be mandatory.

(iv) Field Training and Project

For professional course(s) there shall be provision of field training and project writing in the concerned subject.

(v) Medium of Instruction and Examination

The medium of instruction and examination will be English for all the subjects except for those subjects where the learners will need to write in the respective languages.

(vi) Subject/Counselling Coordinators

For developing study material, the IDE appoints subject coordinators from within and outside the University. In order to run the PCCP effectively Counselling Coordinators are engaged from the Departments of the University, The Counselling-Coordinators do necessary coordination for involving

resource persons in contact and counselling programme and assignment evaluation. The learners can also contact them for clarifying their difficulties in then respective subjects.

SYLLABI-BOOK MAPPING TABLE

Syllabi

UNIT I: History of Indian English Literature I

UNIT II: Toru Dutt

Our Casuarina Tree

UNIT III: Nissim Ezekiel

Night of the Scorpion & Goodbye Party for Miss T. Pushpa

UNIT IV: A. K. Ramanujam

A River & Obituary

UNIT V: Jayanta Mahapatra

The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street and Hunger

INTRODUCTION

Indian English Literature is a book which has been designed to give students an insight into various aspects of Indian writing in English and what it means in the context of a modern world. 'Indian english literature' is a term used to refer to the body of works in India, which uses English as the medium in which prose and poetry is written. Indian writing in English is also associated with the works of the members of the Indian diaspora whose native language could be any of the numerous regional languages and is frequently referred to as Indo-Anglian literature. This comes under the broader realm of post-colonial literature - work that has emerged from previously colonized countries such as India.

The purpose of *Indian English Literature* is to acquaint students with writers who have established Indian writing in English as it included prose and poetry. Apart from the matter, students are expected to understand the aesthetic drive of the writers who have been mentioned in this book. It is a fact well established that a quintessential Indianness is what constitutes the craft and the imaginative sensibility of the practitioners of Indian writing in English.

This book - *Indian English Literature* - has been designed keeping in mind the self-instruction mode (SIM) format and follows a simple pattern, wherein each unit of the book begins with the **Introduction** followed by the **Unit Objectives** for the topic. The content is then presented in a simple and easy-to-understand manner, and is interspersed with **Check Your Progress** questions to reinforce the student's understanding of the topic. A list of **Questions and Exercises** is also provided at the end of each unit. The **Summary, Key Terms** and **Activity** further act as useful tools for students and are meant for effective recapitulation of the text.

This book is divided into five units:

Unit 1: Discusses the elements of Indian English prose and poetry

Unit 2: Explains the selected poetry of Nissim Ezekiel and A. K. Ramanujan

Unit 3: Critically analyzes the problem of poverty and prostitution in the selected poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra

Unit 4: Summarizes and explains the novels *The Guide* by R. K. Narayan and *Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand

Unit 5: Discusses the predicament of the Partition and a growing modern-urban sensibility in Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*

UNIT1 BACKGROUND TO INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

Structure

- 1.0 Introduction
- 1.1 Unit Objectives
- 1.2 British East India Company: English Language and India
- 1.3 Indian English Prose and Poetry
- 1.4 Indian English Novels
- 1.5 Indian English Drama
- 1.6 Contemporary Period
- 1.7 Summary
- 1.8 Key Terms
- 1.9 Answers to 'Check Your Progress'

- 1.10 Questions and Exercises
- 1.11 Further Reading

1.0 INTRODUCTION

It is almost impossible to do justice to a body of literature that expands for more than two hundred years while discussing about it within such a limited space. This unit is meant to provide a bird's eye view on a topic that is commonly identified as Indian •English. To put it simply, Indian English refers to works written by Indians in English language. Indian English literature is an umbrella term used to identify literature composed by Indian writers who chose to write in English instead of their native or co-native language are spoken. Indian English literature also extends to the compositions that are penned by members belonging to the community addressed as the Indian diaspora. This gamut of Indian literature, many a times, is referred to as Indo-Anglian literature. Sometimes it is associated with post-colonial literature (literature produced by those countries that were colonized by the European powers). At the outset, it might appear a bit odd to read about the background of Indian English literature; after all our day-to-day life is replete with English language—newspapers, magazines, books, everyday conversation, hoardings/billboards and advertisements on TV to name only a few. In other words, it may appear strange to understand the history of Indian writing in English where mundane life, even in remote places, seems interspersed with English words. Without realizing the facts of its foreign origin, many of us use words such as bus, cycle, biscuit, train, station, chalk, telegram, film in our everyday life. English language in India has a wide currency and is used as a medium to produce an exclusive body of literature which is vibrant, massive and potent.

1.1 UNIT OBJECTIVES

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

- Recall the events that led to the establishment of the British East India Company
- Discuss elements of Indian English prose and poetry
- Critically analyze the rise of Indian English novels and drama
- Critique the contemporary period

1.2 BRITISH EAST INDIA COMPANY: ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND INDIA

Before we proceed to investigate the literary aspect, we must first understand the socio-political scenario that led to the inception of the English language in India. In the introduction of his edited work, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra takes the year 1800 as the 'starting point' for 'the literature written largely by Indians in English'. This year is not relevant for any specific literary contribution, but holds more substance as a historically important juncture. By this period, the British had managed to annihilate every kind of political opposition that could have posed a challenge to their authority in the Indian continent. Before the English came to India many other European powers had made their mark felt. After Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama arrived in India (Calicut, 17 May 1498) through the sea, the Portuguese established trade relationships here. Within a few years, Dutch East India Company (1602) was formed and obtained the powers to wage wars, sign treaties and acquire territories. The Dutch soon set up factories all over India and managed to dethrone the Portuguese as the sole European representative in India. But after a while the Dutch had to retreat and abandon their mission to expand their empire as the English defeated them in the Battle of Bedera (1759). But before the East India Company made a formal presence in India, English merchant John Mildenhall made his way to India in the year 1599 with the sole purpose of trading. In the same year (1599) the English East India Company was established by an assembly of merchants who functioned under the banner *Merchant Adventurers*.

By the year 1608, the East India Company undertook a resolution to build a factory at Surat. As a result, Captain Hawkins arrived in India (Mughal emperor Jahangir's court) in the year 1609, to request for permission for the same. By 1613, Jahangir issued *afarman* allowing the English to set up their factory. After the first permission was granted, Sir Thomas Roe arrived in the court of Jahangir as a representative of James I to seek authority for building factories in other parts of the country as well. The other foreign power that made a brief appearance in Indian history after the emergence of the English in India was the Danes. The Danes East India Company landed in India in the year 1616. Without much ado, they established their settlements in Tamil Nadu (1620) and Bengal (1676). However, they could not exercise much of their influence; by 1854 they were compelled to sell off all their administrative power in India to the British. The other influential foreign power that had its commercial interests in India was France. The state of France played an influential role in forming the French East India Company (1668). This was an individual initiative (unlike the English East India Company) undertaken by Colbert. The first French factory was set up by Francois Caron at Surat (1668). On the political front, things seemed to be moving smoothly until the arrival of Dupleix as the French governor of India (1792). His governance triggered an Anglo-French conflict which resulted in a series of wars between the English and the French (also known as Carnatic Wars); ultimately overpowering the French power in India and thus, establishing the English as the superior foreign power in India. The British dominion not only overpowered any competition from the foreign shores, but also vanquished all the local powers that posed a threat to their authority. Some of the prominent wars included

the Battle of Plassey (1757) and Battle of Buxar (1764) (both battles were fought by the East India Company against Nawabs of Bengal), the Anglo Mysore Wars (finally concluding with the Fourth Anglo Mysore War, 1799, with the death of Tipu Sultan) and Anglo Maratha Wars (ending with the Third War that was waged all through 1817-1888, ended with the defeat of the Marathas).

With the consolidation of political power the British Empire slowly but firmly made its way into other aspects of Indian—social, cultural and economic. Ranjit Guha in his seminal work *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (1997) points out an interesting outcome that came about. According to him, this incident 'brought together in one single instance all the three fundamental aspects of colonialism in our subcontinent, namely, its origin in an act of force, its exploitation of the primary produce of the land as the very basis of a colonial economy and its need to give force and exploitation, the appearance of legality.' The most significant of all their contributions can be seen in the ways in which English language became a part of the Indian language system.

As we delve deep into the subject, we have to keep in mind that Indian writings in English are a byproduct of the historical interaction between two influential cultures—Indian and Western; an association that lingered for about almost two hundred years. It is not to imply that Indians were not exposed to foreign culture or foreign rule prior to the advent of the English in the Indian coasts (as has already been discussed) but what made the English rule more influential was the introduction of the new economic system. After Renaissance, Europe was brimming with the welcoming changes that the Industrial Revolution had brought with it. The economic sphere benefited greatly as advanced technology integrated with everyday life. This phenomenon was termed as Capitalism by Marx. Before the British established their authority in India, India by and large followed a feudal system of economy. India was, in many ways, a closed world that thrived within its multifarious caste system and religious beliefs. In fact, the much needed change to the Indian political scenario emerged with the advent of the English in a backdrop of weakening and disintegrating Mughal power. Credit goes to British rule for managing to penetrate this closed society. Once in full control of the power structure they brought about the most significant cultural change with the establishment of four universities with which the Western system of education was formally introduced in India. English language paved the way for Indians to be introduced to Western culture as well as Western system of knowledge. Being acclimatized with English education many writers chose to apply the newly acquired Western aesthetics into writing, even though they wrote in their native language. Yet there was another group which decided to go ahead and express themselves in English language instead of their focal Indian language. As a result, there was an interesting mixture of expression: Indian ideas and English tongue. This interesting confluence is termed as Indo-Anglican literature.

By the late seventeenth century, the printing press had made its way into the Indian terrain. But its utility was limited to bringing out fresh editions of the Bible or government orders. These mundane publications succeeded the advent of newspaper culture in India. The year 1779 holds a special significance in the Indian social scenario. It was the year when the first English newspaper, *Hickey's Bengal Gazette* came out. The very same year James Rennel came out with his *Bengal Atlas*. Lord Clive had appointed Rennel as the first Surveyor-General of Bengal, who had spent years extensively studying the coastal belt of southern India. With cartography being an indispensable aspect to empire building, Rennel's efforts were imitated by many of

his fellow counterparts, which resulted in the English consolidating and exploring new avenues. Apart from map building, the English intellectuals started exploring other cultural and noetic knowledge of the conquered territories through philosophy and translation. As A.K. Mehrotra identifies Sir Charles Wilkins, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, Sir William Jones, John Gilchrist and Henry Colebrooke as 'orientalists' for their contribution to Oriental learning. The Western world's interest in Indian culture and more specifically, in Indian languages, was nurtured by the desire to handle the administration effectively. Without this particular access, things would have been difficult for them. In fact, the English system of education (that generated an entire class of native bourgeoisie), was introduced with the need to create a group of locales who would aid the English in their administrative purpose. The colonial rulers were not keen on imparting formal English education in India for 'educating' the masses; rather their intention was to acquaint the local populace in their mother tongue. It were the efforts of people such as Raja Rammohan Roy (1774-1833) and his fellow compatriots who made British rulers introduce the English language to primary education so that it could be taught along with the rest of the Indian subjects. However, not every scholar was truly interested to learn the Indian traditional system of knowledge. There were some scholars who were genuine pursuers of knowledge, Sir William Jones being the most remarkable scholar. Sir Jones had established his reputation as a scholar of Oriental studies long before he arrived in India. After his arrival in India as a supreme court judge, he established the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784.

The formal link between India and the English language can be traced back to the introduction of the English language as a means of communication in India and the casual treatment of English literature as a subject of study in various Indian universities. Macaulay's Minute presented in 1833 made way for the inclusion of English language as a medium of teaching with the proclamation that 'the English tongue would be the most useful for our native subjects'. As he was introducing his famous minute, Macaulay, without any hesitation admitted that he was not acquainted with any of the works written in Sanskrit or Arabic and yet he did not mind shying away from making a biased announcement:

.. .A single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. ... All the historical information, which has been collected in the Sanskrit language, is less than what may be found in the paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools of England...

With this statement, we realize that India had become another ground of testing for which reason, the rulers decided to launch English literature in classrooms and test its efficiency, especially at a time when European universities were still engrossed with the literatures of the antiquity—Latin and Greek. English was, as a result, introduced in educational organizations, legal structures (such as courts) and other offices as a means of communication and documentation in India. This shift in communication came as a blow to the traditional language of India—Arabic and Sanskrit—which were the official languages prior to the introduction of English. In the year 1835, Lord William Bentinck had declared that the ruling powers would 'favour English language' and would make subsequent arrangements to create 'knowledge of English literature and science through the medium of English language.' The Wood Dispatch of 1854 proclaimed that the Universities at Bombay, Madras and Calcutta would be set, thus making English language accessible to learners, teachers

and also the official staff appointed at government offices. As expected, the introduction of English at every level of life had some interesting effects. The term '*Babu English*' was coined during this era to mark the encounter between the language of the colonizers (English) and the natives. This was also the time for literary studies in India to flourish.

1.3 INDIAN ENGLISH PROSE AND POETRY

The year 1794 is a benchmark for Indian literature in English. Dean Mahomet (1759-1851) acquired the distinction of being the first Indian author who published and composed his work in English. The book titled *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1794) documents his travel experiences, that is non-fictional in nature and has the overtone of a travelogue. But a more coherent body of work composed in English by Indians can be traced back to the era of Raja Rammohan Roy. To go back to Raja Rammohan Roy and his contributions to the Indian English literary scenario, we realize that he was a pioneering figure in the field of Indian English literature. His exposure to the language was honed by his experience of working with British officials. Through his knowledge and exposure, he tried to infuse new thoughts and removed old and redundant rituals through his organization the Brahmo Samaj. Through Brahmo Samaj, Roy educated the masses for social uplift that was in favour of women and other marginalized sections of the society. He advocated that *Sati* practices ought to be done away with. He also worked for the freedom of press. With his diligence and effort he managed to create a niche for this kind of writing and laid the foundation for future Indo-Anglian literature. His successors included luminaries such as, Henry Derozio, Kashiprosad Ghose, the Cavally Brothers, Hasan Ali, R Rajagopual, Mohanlal and Michel Madhusudan Dutt.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838 -1894) are two other prolific writers of the time who deserve a mention for their contribution to Indian English writings. Dutt composed epic verses in English and Chatterjee wrote a novel *{Rajmohan's Wife}* in English language of the colonizers. *Rajmohan's Wife* was first published in a serialized form in a magazine. But it finally came out as a book in the year 1935. This novel was set in the rural belt of Bengal. Though the story was of a simple domestic setting, it brought into focus the central issue: the significance of renunciation over one's own well-being. Creative writings such as these, produced after the initial encounter, created a sense of unease that has trickled down over the decades. Salman Rushdie referring to such discomfort, considers this first novel composed by an Indian in English of mediocre quality.

Michael Madhusudan Dutta had an interesting and colourful personality. Moreover, his not so conventional yet tragic life has magnified his power and charm that is associated with his name. He was known as man who was generous with his friends, often romantic and charming. His creativity was paramount in changing the Bengali literary scene. Credit goes to Michael for first introducing blank verse in the year 1860, in the play titled *Padmavati*, that was based on a Greek myth. Though initially criticized for the use of blank verse, his later work puts an end to his share of criticism, thereby firmly establishing the style of blank verse in literature.

Madhusudan's *Meghnad-Badh*, an epic poem, is supposed to be his greatest work till date. The epic is composed in blank verse. The work is based on the epic, Ramayana, but is highly influenced by Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In Madhusudan's composition, the evil Ravana is transformed into a hero figure. This vast heroic-tragic

epic is in nine cantos. The use of such a style is extremely unique in the world of Bengali literature. As has been pointed out by many critics, *Meghnad-Badh* is the first original epic found in Bengali literature and that is why Madhusudan earned the status of an epic poet. This man was a genius who indulged in experiments in forms and types of literature which gave a new dimension to Bengali literature.

Irrespective of their significant contribution, neither of these writers ever thought of writing anything in English thereafter. This occurred despite their contribution as prominent writers of Bengali literature.

A young lady who was writing in English around this time was Toru Putt (1856 -1877). She penned poems and wrote novels in both French and English. In her short span of life, twenty-two years, she had many published and unpublished works to her credit. Her two unpublished novels were *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d'Arvers* and *Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden*. The former is considered to be the first novel in French written by an Indian author, whereas the latter is identified as the first novel in English composed by an Indian woman. That apart, she also penned *Ancient Ballads* and *Legends of Hindustan*, two unfinished volumes of poems in English.

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) is considered to be the first Indian English poet. He had written verses composed in English in India. He joined as a teacher at the Hindu College (Calcutta) in English literature. Derozio's poetry has influences of Keats in his dealing of nature. He seemed to be extremely influenced by the English Romantics: Byron, Shelley, Keats, Scott and Moore. Derozio's life was untimely cut short by the debilitating effects of cholera in 1831.

The mid-nineteenth century saw many social reformations taking place in India. During this time, thinkers and reformers such as Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, Kesub Chunder Sen and Swami Dayanand Saraswati — the founder of the Arya Samaj — contributed a great deal in the field of social justice, educational reforms and religious practices which brought about a kind of renaissance in India.

It was a time when Hindu society in Bengal was facing considerable disturbance. In the year 1828, Raja Rammohan Roy established his reformational organization Brahmo Samaj, which appreciated Hindu ideals but did not approve of idol worship. Such a stance led to negative repercussions within orthodox Hindu society. With this social backdrop, Derozio joined Hindu College as a lecturer where he instilled notions for a social change that had already been laying its foundation. His lectures were based on his extensive readings that always put forward reasonable arguments. Being a man of reason, he encouraged his students to focus on authors such as Thomas Paine (*Rights of Man*) and other liberal rationalists. Derozio, despite being a Christian became an atheist. He insisted other likeminded people to question the orthodox Hindu norms and conventions and their validity in society. He motivated his students to understand and appreciate the value of freedom of expression and the quest for knowledge and a zeal to live a life that was worthy while simultaneously questioning certain irrational cultural exercises. Derozio's unexpected enthusiasm for teaching and his ability to introduce new ideas made him a great success among students and a popular figure at Hindu College. In fact, his students were called Derozians. He coordinated debates where motley aspects of society were discussed without any hesitation. In the year 1828, Derozio stimulated his students to form a literary as well as a debating club that was called the Academic Association. In the 1830s, the club successfully came up with a magazine, titled *Parthenon*. These students not only

brought out articles criticizing dogmatic practices of Hindu religion, but also advocated for the emancipation of women and censured many facets of the British rule. With the help of Derozio, students took up journalism through which they could put their ideas and communicate with their society freely. The idea was to bring about radical changes in the society and work towards freeing minds from oppressive dogma. Derozio found immense pleasure in interacting with his students and composing sonnets for them: 'Expanding like petals of young flowers, I watch the gentle opening of your minds....'

Another author who deserves mention here is Kashiprosad Ghose (1809-1837), a major contributor to the Indo-Anglian literature. Ghose's contribution to Indian English literature can be equated with Henry Derozio in its extensiveness. Ghose's *The Shair and Other Poems* (1830) is remarkable for many reasons. Researchers point out that he was the first Indian who had published a regular series of English verse. *The Hindu Intelligence* was an English weekly that was edited by Ghose. His verse collections are considered to be original yet conventional in description.

Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848-1909) was Torn Dutt's cousin. Romesh Dutt had cleared his Indian civil service examination in the year 1869 and had worked in various parts of India. He played a significant role in bringing out literary creations in both Bengali and English. Dutt translated some of his works into English, such as, *The Lack of Palms* (1902) and *The Slave Girl of Agra* (1909). He also dealt with history in his works, which included works such as, *A History of Civilization in Ancient India*, *The Economic History of British India*, *India in the Victorian Age* and *A brief History of Ancient and Modern Bengal*. But his *magnum opus* was his translation of verses and passages from *Rig Veda*, Buddhist literature, the *Upanishads*, Kalidasa's *Kumarasambhava* and Bharavi's *Kiratarjuniya* into English.

Manmohan Ghose (1869-1924) is another author whose mention is important to our present discussion. Manmohan was the brother of Sri Aurobindo. He had studied at Manchester and Oxford. The first poetry collection that he brought out was *Primavera* (1890). The book was well received by literary scholars and his fellow batchmates at Oxford. Just like Derozio, Manmohan Ghose chose to become a teacher of English at Presidency College (Calcutta). In the year 1898, he brought out another collection of poems titled *Love Songs and Elegies*. Around this time he composed a five act play named *Perseus the Deliverer*. His ability to use the precise English words and infuse a sense of rhythm, made him very popular among other literary craftsmen as well as those English scholars who worked in England. His poetry earned the reputation of being thoughtful and the rhythm was considered remarkable. Manmohan Ghose's verses in many ways stood out distinctly from the rest of the Orientalist poetry. His works reflected his desire to return to England, a place where he had spent a substantial time (twenty-two years) of his life. It might seem a bit odd that while his fellows in India, as well as his brother Aurobindo Ghose, were busy composing elements on nationalistic themes and were relying on ancient Indian culture for their inspiration, Manmohan Ghose time and again looked at England for inspiration.

By now Indian literature in English had acquired a distinct identity. But it was not until the time of Rabindranath Tagore that took the whole experience to a different level and won the Noble Prize for literature. Indo-Anglian literature now had a global presence. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was not just a gifted author but a true nationalist as well. Even today he is addressed as *rishi* and *gurudev* among many other titles conferred on him. Being a man of immense talent he left behind his mark as a poet, producer, musician, dramatist, actor, painter, educationist, reformer,

philosopher, novelist, story writer and a critic of literature. Tagore in his initial days wrote mostly in Bengali and eventually translated his verses and plays into English. Even before he attained the age of eighteen, he had managed to write poetry of more than 7000 lines. It was *Gitanjali* (1912) which won him the Noble Prize for literature and made him a renowned poet. Soon after his Noble achievement, his works, including *Gitanjali*, were translated by critics and scholars into several foreign languages. Tagore is credited with many poems, songs, critical pieces and plays, both in Bengali and English.

To this purpose the contributions of Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) is of critical importance. He is one of those figures whose contributions to Indian literature is invaluable. Aurobindo's long stretch of poetic journey earned him the stature of a literary master who commanded the Indo-English literary league. Ghose was not just inclined literarily, he showed remarkable interest in teaching, poetry and politics as well. Ghose's *Songs to Myrtilla* and a longer piece composed in the early period-*Urvashi* came out in published form in the year 1895 and 1896, respectively. He was influenced by the classics and used the diction of Milton. This classical influence can be traced in *Love and Death*, a poem of 1100 lines composed in blank verse. The central theme of this poem is love which lays its foundation on the ancient Hindu legend that had an unlikely resemblance to the Greek legend of, Orpheus and Eurydice. Apart from his volumes of verse and plays, Aurobindo is famous for his work *The Life and Divine*. It is a work of prose which is artistic and is hailed as one of the greatest philosophical books ever composed.

But the one work that surpasses his reputation as an Indo-English writer is *Savitri*. The book is published in three parts. It is divided into twelve books or forty nine cantos that has a total of 23,813 lines. It was an ambitious task and the author is said to have spent no less than fifty years of his life composing it. M.K.Naik writes in his *A History of Indian English Literature*:

Savitri was continuously revised by the poet almost till the end of his days and shaped into an epic of humanity and divinity, of death and life divine. It is a kind of poetic philosophy of the spirit and of life, and an experiment in mystic poetry cast in heavy symbolism.

It might seem that the Indo-English literature in its initial days was exclusive to male authors. Not many women writers were writing in English at that time, though one can trace the presence of a number of female writers in regional languages. Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) probably appears to be an exception because she was the only female contributor of this era who worked relentlessly towards the cause of Indo-English literature. Her education at London and Cambridge developed her style of lyrical art. She was a woman of multiple talents. She was not just a writer but an able administrator as well. She was in charge of some of the most prestigious official positions in India. Her first anthology of poetry, *The Golden Threshold*, was published in 1905. It was followed by *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing* (1917). The compositions consolidated her position as a poetess of great repute. In terms of style, her lyrics were well structured that had remarkable quality.

In her works, Naidu displays great depth in handling various meters and stanza forms. She earned herself the sobriquet of the Nightingale of India. In addition to this, she was an influential political figure in India and had taken position as the president of the Indian National Congress. Her skills in oratory had earned her fame as a national

leader. Naidu was a rare combination of creative genius and political mind. When she was writing, the nationalistic movement in India had taken a revolutionary term.

Unrest had preceded peace in the political and social scenario. Waves of change could be felt across the nation. Moreover, the world wars had set new horizons for India and the demand for freedom could be heard more vehemently from every corner of the country. Among the political leaders, Mahatma Gandhi singularly changed the political front of India with his perseverance and determination ushering an era of change. It is interesting to note how Gandhi's contribution to Indo-Anglian literature made way for a new generation of literature that later came to be known as Gandhian literature. We must remember that Gandhi himself was not author or a writer, nor did he ever extend his genius to the sphere of writing, but he remained influential in producing a body of work that had great impact not only at a national level but also globally. He has left a mark on all aspects of humanity—economical, educational, political, social and religious apart from influencing language and literature.

Father of the nation, Gandhi, was a revolutionary who laid the foundation of positive change in India. He raised his voice for women rights, abolition of untouchability, religious reformation, uplift of the depressed classes (or *Harijans*) and many other evils within the Indian society. These issues later influenced various Indian authors who wrote in Indian languages as well as in English. Mahatma Gandhi achieved the heights of greatness through his life experiences. His autobiography titled *My Experiments with Truth* (1925) documents his extraordinary life with amazing honesty. Till date this remains as one of the best autobiographies to have been ever composed. The work synthesizes socio-political, ethical, cultural and spiritual issues. For our convenience of understanding, we can divide Gandhi's writing period into three phases:

London period (1888-1891): In this phase he wrote a fifty-five page long essay recounting his personal experiences in London.

The South African period (1893-1915): This was intellectually a highly productive phase for Gandhi. He wrote many pamphlets such as *The Indian Franchise* (1895), *An Appeal to Every Briton in South Africa* (1896), *Grievances of the British Indians in South Africa* (1896) to name a few. *Indian Opinion*, a journal launched by him also came out in this period and his first major work *Hind Swaraj* (1909) was published in this journal.

The Indian period (1915-1948): During this period he launched two other journals, *India* (1919-1932) and *sadHarijan* (1933-1948). Most of Gandhi's later writings appeared in these journals.

The next writer of significance who helped expand the scope and horizon of Indo-Anglian literature was Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964). Like Gandhi, his contribution largely swayed towards non-fiction. Nehru, hailed from one of the politically acclaimed families of India (his father was Motilal Nehru) and was greatly influenced by Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore and later on went to lead India from the political helm in post-Independence period. He was a prolific orator and a great writer and discharged the role of Prime Minister of India for seventeen years. Being educated at Harrow and Cambridge and exposed to the ideas of Karl Marx and Lenin, Nehru proved to be a visionary and had the capacity to think ahead of his times. *Soviet Russia* was his first published book. It came out in 1928. The book contains certain specific views about Russia and considers it to be a friend to India. In the

Indo-Anglican body of literature Nehru's letters hold a special significance. His *Letters from a Father to His Daughter* (1930) is a collection of thirty-one letters which were addressed to his daughter Indira Gandhi. His other collection of letters, *Glimpses of World History* (1934), was composed while he was in prison and contains 196 letters. It analyzes the history of the world from earlier days to the mid-nineteenth century. But his autobiography, *An Autobiography* (1936), consolidates his position as an aliterary writer. He chronicles his life with sincerity and shows his leniency towards a scientific approach, Marxism and nationalism. The book is an authentic historical record of the era it represents. Nehru's passion for India can be seen through his work *The Discovery of India* (1946). This analytical survey of India, starting from the Indus Valley Civilization and ending with the mid-nineteenth century, remains a milestone composition assimilating the literary, political and historical perspective

1.9 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

1. The year 1800 has been considered the 'starting point' for 'the literature written largely by Indians in English' by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. This year is not relevant for any specific literary contribution, but holds more substance as a historically important juncture. By this period, the British had managed to annihilate every kind of political opposition that could have posed a challenge to their authority in the Indian continent.
2. Initially there were three categories of writing that were being published widely. These were: newspapers, atlases as well as maps of different regions.
3. The formal link between India and the English language can be traced back to the introduction of the English language as a means of communication in India and the casual treatment of English literature as a subject of study in various Indian universities. Macaulay's Minute presented in 1833 made way for the inclusion of English language as a medium of teaching with the proclamation that 'the English tongue would be the most useful for our native subjects.'
4. The basic idea behind the foundation of the Brahmo Samaj was to remove old and redundant rituals and give way to new ideas. It also worked to improve the position of women in the society.
5. Toru Dutt was a poet and novelist who wrote in both French and English.
6. Sarojini Naidu contributed immensely towards the cause of Indo-Anglican literature. Her first anthology of poetry *The Golden Threshold* was published in 1905 followed by *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wing* (1917).
7. *Raj Mohan's Wife*, written in 1864 by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay is regarded as the first known English novel written by an Indian.
8. After the First World War, some of the novelists were attracted by ideas and thoughts that questioned the existence of capitalism and colonialism, like the ideas expressed by Marx. One of the prominent writers of this period was Mulk Raj Anand.
9. A notable feature of Aurobindo's plays was that they narrated lives of people from various parts of the globe that echoed a multitude of experience, moods and emotions.

10. A prominent name among women playwright that emerged in the colonial era was that of Bharati Sarabhai's.
11. Narayan presented a world immersed in humor and irony, sympathy and fantasy yet not undetached from realism. Narayan's writings displayed his inclinations towards philosophy. Narayan's endearing appeal also lay in his simplicity.
12. Some of the eminent Indian English playwrights of post-Independence era were Pratap Sharma, Asif Currimbhoy and Gurucharan Das. People like GV. Desani, Lakhan Dev, Manjeri Isvaran, and Prithvi Nandy also contributed to theater but with own specific style and deliberate deviations.
13. Girish Karnad and Badal Sirkar was among the famous playwrights of contemporary India.
14. Indian novelists of contemporary times who are writing in English include names, such as, Shashi Deshpande, K. Nagrajan, Bhabhani Bhattacharya, Raj Kamal Jha, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee, Bharti Kirchner, Amit Chaudhuri, Vikas Swarup, Rohinton Mistry, C R. Krishnan, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghose, Manohar Malgonkar, Kamla Markandya, Vikaram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee and Arundhati Roy to name a few.

1.10 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Short-Answer Questions

1. How did the printing press in the late seventeenth century affect the Indian literary scenario?
2. Write a short note on *Babu English* as the midpoint between the language of the colonizers and the natives.
3. Write a brief note on the contribution of Rabindranath Tagore to Indian English.
4. Write a short note on Indian English novel with special emphasis on any one writer.
5. In theatre, what were the thematic preoccupations of the post-Independence era?
6. How was the British East India Company instrumental in bringing the English language to India?
7. What was Gandhi's contribution towards Indian English literature?

Long-Answer Questions

1. Trace the growth of Indian English prose and poetry?
2. Who were the pioneers of Indian English novels? You may refer to Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* for its unique style in theme and writing.
3. Indian English drama registered a marked change in its aesthetics post-Independence. Explain.
4. Give a critical overview of the theatre of the contemporary period.
5. The casual treatment of English was instrumental in the rise of Indian writing in English. Discuss.
6. In its initial days, Indo-Anglian literature was dominated by male authority only. Comment.
7. What are the reasons to consider Gandhi's South African period (1893-1915) as intellectually

productive?

1.11 FURTHER READING

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UNIT II NISSIM EZEKIEL

2.0 NISSIM EZEKIEL: A BRIEF SKETCH

Nissim Ezekiel is considered to be one of most well known names among Indian poets writing in English. His Jewish Parsi that background allowed him to emerge as a personality could not be subjected to simple analysis. His poetry reflects a kind of deep rumination of predicaments that are central to an Indian sensibility.

Ezekiel can be compared to the likes of Ramanujan and Parthasarathy. On a professional level he served as a Professor of English in Bombay University and proved himself to be a man of great intellect. He was a philosopher as well as a poet. Given his Jewish-Parsi upbringing and cultural roots, his affinity for writing in English as an Indian, was truly remarkable. His association with Indian beliefs and worldview paved the way for him to express his complex notion regarding the predicaments of those writing in a foreign language. Ezekiel had his initial schooling in Bombay and after that he joined Wilson College (Bombay). But after bis college he flew to Birkbeck College (London) to pursue higher education. His sojourn to England was undertaken so that he could study philosophy under the guidance of C.E.M. Joad. But once there, Ezekiel displayed equal interest in other creative fields such as visual arts, theatre and poetry. While studying he had taken up the position of a clerk at the high commissioner's office in London. But his professional life had not marred his interest either for his intellectual pursuits or for his creative acumen.

Ezekiel being a man of versatile talent, held many significant positions besides being a professor in Bombay. Ezekiel was appointed as the editor of *Quest, Imprint* as well as the poetry section of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. He was also a visiting professor to several universities (in India as well as in the US and Australia). Ezekiel also worked as director of a theatre unit in Bombay. The synthesis of poetic aesthetics with philosophical inclinations can be seen clearly in Ezekiel's poetry.

Nissim Ezekiel received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his work, *Latter-Day Psalms*. The book is a collection of his poetical works. His poetry compilation includes *Time to Change* (1952), *Sixty Poems* (1953), *The Discovery of India* (1956), *The Third*(1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965), *Snakeskin and Other Poems* (translations of the Marathi poet Indira Sant, 1974), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982) and *Collected Poems 1952-88* (1989). His plays are collected in the book *The Three Plays* (1969). Some of Ezekiel's popular poems include

Night of the Scorpion, Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher, The Railway Clerk, Latter-day Psalms, In the Theatre, Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S., and The Professor. His compositions concentrated on issues such as love, death, parting, sex, solitude and prayer to identify a few. These works highlight the fact that Ezekiel was constantly engrossed with the complexities of life.

The poems confirmed his belief in the religion of the 'self'. He highlights the efficacy of prayer and makes repeated attempts to connect with his own being. Parthasarathy comments on Ezekiel as a poet whose 'poetry is both the instrument and the outcome of his attempt as a man to come to terms with himself. One finds in his poems the imprint of a keen, analytical mind trying to explore and communicate on a personal level, feelings of loss and deprivation'.

Short Bibliography

Poetry

1952: *Time to Change*

1953: *Sixty Poems*

1956: *The Discovery of India*

1959: *The Third*

1960: *The Unfinished Man*

1965: *The Exact Name*

191 A: *Snakeskin and Other Poems, translations of the Marathi poet Indira Sant*

1976: *Hymns in Darkness*

1982: *Latter-Day Psalms*

1989: *Collected Poems 1952-88*

Plays

1969: *The Three Plays* **Editor**

1965: *An Emerson Reader*

1969: *A Joseph King Reader*

1990: *Another India, Anthology of Fiction and Poetry*

Poems

Night of the Scorpion

The Doctor

Case Study

Poster Prayers

The Traitor

Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher

Latter-day Psalms

The Railway Clerk

Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.

Enterprise

In India

In the Theatre

The Couple

A Time to Change

Island

ForElkana

The Professor

Urban

If we consider Nissim Ezekiel as a poet of the tradition of Indian English writing, we would realize he has made significant contribution to this body of work. One of the notable features of his poetry is the '*Indianness*'. The Indian flavour is reminiscent of Ezekiel's engagement with his country and its countrymen. He used fun and wit to bring about the fallacies of local folks; and sincerely expected to bring about improvement in the situation of the country and his fellow compatriots through his creativity. Ezekiel used his poetry as a vehicle to highlight the deplorable condition that people of India lived in. In the world literature, W. B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot are representatives of the Irish sensibility and the modernways of life. Ezekiel's poetry reflects his quintessentially Indian qualities. Ezekiel has beautifully used Indian experiences as expressions of what we call Indianness. Ezekiel hailed from an immigrant Jewish family though he himself was born and

brought up in Mumbai. Besides undertaking trips to various foreign countries, he has lived, worked and earned his livelihood in Mumbai.

As a man of deep knowledge and a poet with gifted observational skills, Ezekiel understood the Indian way of life from close quarters. He has used his creativity to represent the long history of quintessential Indian identity through the socio-cultural representation expressed in a variety of ways.

In Indian writing in English, usually the term 'Indianness', refers to the collage of cultural patterns that reflect Indian society and other socio-political dimensions of Indian life. Ezekiel interweaves most of these elements of Indian life and culture into his poetical works. As a poet who preferred realism, Ezekiel displays an inclination towards seeing his

country adopting better living conditions. His works reiterates his love for the nation that eventually became his home. Ezekiel's poems reflect various elements of Indian identity. The concept of Indianness occupies a vital place in Ezekiel's mind which is expressed through his symbolism and imagery. The theme of Indianness is of primary significance to Ezekiel and his poetry that is both: intense and personal. His thoughts and feelings surface through the ambience that is created in the poem and the characters who appear in the poems. The poems of Ezekiel undoubtedly are soaked in Indian flavour as they invariably follow the Indian way of life.

Some Major Works by Ezekiel

One of the most famous poems of Ezekiel is *Night of the Scorpion*. In this poem Ezekiel tells readers about an incident that took place in an Indian village where a woman was stung by a scorpion on a rainy night. The speaker of poem is the lady's son. Ezekiel, through his beautiful composition foregrounds the superstitions prevalent in the village and the love and sympathy that a mother nurtures for her child. Through that unnamed village of India, the poet sheds light on the gullible nature of the rural folk who say that:

*May he sit still, they said
May the sins of your previous
birth be burned away tonight, they said.
May the
poison purify your flesh of desire and your spirit of
ambition.*

But the most amazing response comes from the mother. She sighs with relief and says:

*Thank God the scorpion picked on me

and spared my children.*

The lines highlight the quintessential Indian mother figure who is constantly worried about the welfare and safety of her children. The general folks of the village keep repeating the name of God so as to ward off the ill effects of the bite. Soaked in superstition they believe that recalling God was the only means to find a solution. The victim's husband is shown as a representative of the educated class who are enslaved by reason and skepticism. Ezekiel through this poem conveys the general mentality of the Indian rural population who are still untouched by modern learning.

Another mother figure who is engrossed with her family even in the worst moment of crisis appears in *The Truth about the Floods*. We see the speaker pleading:

*I have not eaten for three days My husband has been
washed away My parents have abandoned me My son
is dying I cannot find my daughter.*

The bonds of family and at large the bonds of humanity that find a voice in Ezekiel's works. He appears to be in charge of representing the woes of humanity in general.

Nissim Ezekiel dealt with the interiors of the home, i.e. the domestic space in order to explore different relationships and bonds. In an interesting poem revolving around the age old rivalry of the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, *Edinburgh Interlude-lightly* Ezekiel depicts the perils of a newlywed bride. In a matter of fact way the mother-in-law tells her new daughter-in-law:

*Don't worry, dear,
I need no help in the kitchen.
Leave it to me, please.*

The daughter-in-law, not sensing anything harmful, innocently leaves the hearth and the kitchen to her mother-in-law. But soon afterwards the father-in-law tells the new bride in the family:

*You must try to understand
your mother-in-law.
She's a very kind woman, you know.
There aren 't many who do
all the work in the kitchen.*

Much to the daughter-in-law's distress even her husband informs her, *If you quarrel with
my mother, you quarrel with me.*

Ezekiel's alarming familiarity with the concerns of the domestic as well as the public sphere makes him a popular poet and a poet of the masses.

Despite being a land of plentitude, poverty was and to some extent remains synonymous with India. In *The Railway Clerk* Nissim Ezekiel focuses on urban India. He speaks about the poverty and ugliness that shrouds the big cities. As the title suggests *The Railway Clerk* is about a poor railway clerk. He struggles to survive in a wretched condition. Hailing from the middle class he says

It isn't my fault

I do what I'm told

but still I am blamed.

This year, my leave application

was twice refused.

His being obedient does not earn him any laurels. In fact, he is criticized severely for trivial issues. But this is not his only complaint; he mentions how his leave application had already been rejected twice in the same the year. To make matters worse, he says

My wife is always asking for more money.

Money, Money where to get Money!

This tug of war between desire and dissatisfaction leads to corruption, which is one of the major troubles in India. The clerk reflects upon his state and laments his lack of a proper education which is why perhaps he is not getting any recognition.

*/ am living far off in Borivali, My children are neglecting
studies, How long this can go on?*

The railway clerk was seen an emblem of poverty and strife that continue to be two integral parts of Indian politics and its challenges. The clerk is the symbolic rendition of the disillusioned youth who has lost faith in life. The insistence of the clerk's wife on arranging extra money to meet basic household expenses is not unjustified but even the clerk finds himself at a loss trying to figure out how to arrange additional income. Moreover, he is presented as one who does not accept bribes. Ezekiel tidily incorporates the problem of corruption that haunts government offices in India. Ezekiel's poems are marked with an extraordinary sense of realism which indeed was different from the idealism and romanticism that his literary predecessors had.

Ezekiel's works reflect India in all its varied reflection. Having dealt with rural, urban, private and public lives; he next focused on linguistic peculiarities of India, especially the way English language is used. In his poem *A Very Indian Poem in Indian English*, Ezekiel incorporates the progressive tense, to reproduce a variety that is popular in Indian English:

/ am standing for peace and non-violence.

Why world is fighting fighting

Why all people of world

Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,

I am simply not understanding.

Ancient Indian Wisdom is 100% correct.

I should say even 200% correct.

There is a glaring difference between the content and the words. While the content without any doubt highlights the significance of Gandhian ethos in political consciousness and intellect, the language that is used to engage in this invokes humor and parody, especially if we take into account the English words and odd syntactical constructions that are typical of Indian English. Ezekiel was poet of India who portrayed India in its multifarious vivacity with zest, humour and concern.

2.5.1 Ezekiel's *Night of the Scorpion*: Text and Summary

I remember the night my mother was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours of steady rain had driven him to crawl beneath a sack of rice.

Parting with his poison - flash of diabolic tail in the dark room -he risked the rain again.

The peasants came like swarms of flies
and buzzed the name of God a hundred times
to paralyse the Evil One,
With candles and with lanterns
throwing giant scorpion shadows
on the mud-baked walls
they searched for him: he was not found.

They clicked their tongues.

With every movement that the scorpion made his poison moved in
Mother's blood, they said.

May he sit still, they said

May the sins of your previous birth
be burned away tonight, they said.

May your suffering decrease

the misfortunes of your next birth, they said.

May the sum of all evil

balanced in this unreal world

against the sum of good become diminished by your
pain. May the poison purify your flesh

of desire, and your spirit of ambition,

they said, and they sat around

on the floor with my mother in the centre,

the peace of understanding on each face.

More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,

more insects, and the endless rain.

My mother twisted through and through,

groaning on a mat.

My father, sceptic, rationalist,

trying every curse and blessing,

powder, mixture, herb and hybrid.

He even poured a little paraffin

upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.

I watched the flame feeding on my mother.

I watched the holy man perform his rites to tame the poison with an

incantation.

After twenty hours

it lost its sting.

My mother only said

Thank God the scorpion picked on me

And spared my children.

SUMMARY

Ezekiel's best known poem, *Night of the Scorpion*, deals with an accident where a scorpion has stung a woman and the public gathered takes remedial measures to save the victim. The narrator in this monologue is the son of the woman.

The poem originates from the speaker's emotions, recollected at leisure in a tranquil state of mind. He recalls that unfortunate incident that took place one night. His mother was stung by a scorpion that had hidden beneath a sack of rice on a rainy night.

As the news of the scorpion bite spread, villagers started assembling in the speaker's house, chanting the name of God; their chanting sounded like the buzzing of bees. People searched for the scorpion in every corner of the house, but in vain. They believed that as the scorpion moved its poison spread in the woman's body. The villagers wished that the lady's sins of her former lives be burnt away by the poisonous venom. They believed she must have committed some sin in her previous life for which she had to pay in this life. The villagers also believed that the punishment will reduce the misfortune of her next life. (She will have to suffer less in her next birth as she had undergone some part of the punishment already.) They said that the poison of the scorpion sting would purify her flesh and diminish her desires and ambitions for material things. The implication is that joy and sorrow come to man as a consequences of the virtuous and evil deeds committed during this life or in former lives.

The peasants seated on the floor did not seem too worried or concerned. Each and every face there gave an impression that it was fully aware of the metaphysical facts. The speaker's mother cried, twisting and writhing in pain.

The speaker's father was known to be a skeptic and a rationalist. He did not believe in the villagers' words but he was trying every curse and blessing and every therapeutic measure he was aware of. He applied powder mixed with herbs. He even poured a little paraffin oil on the toe of his wife where the scorpion had stung and lit a match to it. A holy man was also summoned to rid the lady of the misery. She finally got relief in about twenty hours.

Despite the twenty-hour long ordeal, the victim was relieved that her children were safe and that the scorpion had chosen her and not them. This indicates that she would have suffered a lot more if any of her children had been the victim. It also signifies the lady's selfless nature and that she cared for the well-being of her children more than for her own.

The poet in this incident records four kinds of responses—the religious mystical response of the villagers; the rational response of the speaker's father; the ritualistic response of the holy man and; the self-sacrificial response of the mother.

The buzz *'the name of God a hundred times/to paralyze the Evil One.'*

This approach is based on the metaphysics that there exist in the universe two kinds of forces—the force of goodness headed by God and the force of evil headed by Satan. In order to counter the forces of evil we need the help of God and His goodness. The peasants' wishing that the lady's sins of the previous life be burnt away, that her present suffering may decrease her suffering of the next life, that the sum of evil may be diminished by her pain, and the poison may purify her flesh of desire, signifies that according to them the lady had been punished for some misdeed in the present life or in some former life. The father trying various remedies signifies his faith in allopathy. The holy incantation and performance of rites is a ritualistic approach in which one resorts to praying to God to realize the desired end. The mother thanking God for the scorpion picking her and sparing her children is an instinctive self-sacrificial approach as for her it is the welfare of her children that is more important than her own welfare.

This episode proves that all actions, whether taken by religious minded people or by the rationalist father or by the holy man, were exercises in vain as it takes twenty hours for the pain to subside. Twenty hours is a long time for the body to counterbalance the poison injected into it by the scorpion. If any of the measures had been effective, the pain would not have taken such a long time to subside. The persona ridicules even the rationalists, as the father, who is a sceptic and a rationalist, as the poet describes him, tries 'every curse and blessing'. If he is a rationalist, he should not believe that blessings and curses can bring any relief to a patient stung by a scorpion.

He also laughs at the superstitious belief that the poison spreads in the victim's blood with every movement of the scorpion:

*With every movement that the scorpion made his poison moved
in Mother's blood, they said. May he sit still, they said.*

The mocking tone in the poem has lightly been resented by TV. Reddy who says in his article *Nissim Ezekiel: Dissociation of Sensibility*

The situation is cleverly presented, but at the same time more intelligently the writer has levelled his pungent attack on the illiterate rural folk. The attack is all the more vicious because it is at once contemptuous and brutal without any remote suggestion of sympathy or empathy to the unlettered poor folk. The ignorant ideas and superstitious speculations of the villagers are cleverly but callously transformed into mathematical equations. While the sting of the scorpion loses its power after twenty hours, the sting of the poet's vitriolic pen gains its savage power.

(T.R. Sharma (ed.), *Essays on Nissim Ezekiel*, Meerut: Shalabh, 1994, pp. 143-44)

The poet does not find anything positive in any of the approaches as far as the problem of scorpion-sting is concerned. This may suggest that the poet rejects every alternative explored in the poem without giving his own preference.

The poem has been written in free verse and the lines do not rhyme. However, a large number of lines are octosyllabic interspersed with hexasyllabic lines. For instance, the lines, 'was stung by a

scorpion. Ten hours .. 'and 'to crawl beneath a sack of rice' are octosyllabic, while the lines 'he risked the rain again. And 'may the sum of evil...' are hexasyllabic.

2.6 GOODBYE PARTY FOR MISS PUSHPA T. S.:

TEXT AND SUMMARY

Friends,

our dear sister

is departing for foreign

in two three days,

and

we are meeting today

to wish her bon voyage.

You are all knowing, friends,

what sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.

I don't mean only external sweetness

but internal sweetness.

Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling

even for no reason

but simply because she is feeling.

Miss Pushpa is coming

from very high family.

Her father was renowned advocate

in Bular or Surat,

I am not remembering now which place.

Surat? Ah, yes,

Once only I stayed in Surat
with family members
of my uncle's very old friend,
his wife was cooking nicely...
that was long time ago.
Coming back to Miss Pushpa
she is most popular lady
with men also and ladies also.
Whenever I asked her to do anything,
she was saying, 'Just now only
I will do it.' That is showing
good spirit. I am always
appreciating the good spirit.
Pushpa Miss is never saying no.
Whatever I or anybody is asking
she is always saying yes,
and today she is going
to improve her prospect
and we are wishing her bon voyage.
Now I ask other speakers to speak
and afterwards Miss Pushp
will do summing up.

SUMMARY

The poem, *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.* is collected in Nissim Ezekiel's sixth volume of poems titled *Hymns in Darkness*. In the poem, Ezekiel unleashed humour and ridicules the

erroneous yet funny ways in which grammar, syntax and idioms are used by many Indians, while they make an attempt to speak or write in English. In the most amusing fashion he mimics the Indian style of English speaking.

At the outset of the poem we are told that it is a farewell speech. A get-together party has been arranged and a number of acquaintance and friends have been invited so that they may formally say 'goodbye' to Miss Pushpa who is on the verge of 'departing for foreign' in 'two or three days' to improve her prospects. The speaker conveys her to have a blissful voyage and extends words of eloquence in favour of her 'good qualities'. In an incoherent manner, after initiating the topic, the speaker moves on to elaborate on how Miss Pushpa has always been amicable. She is, according to the speaker, a lady of sweet disposition that reflects 'externally and internally'. The speaker points out that Miss Pushpa smiles perpetually even when there is no any particular reason to be happy. The speaker's memory deceives him and he cannot remember whether Miss Pushpa hails from Bulsar or Surat, yet he does remember that she comes from a respectable family.

I am not remembering now which place.

Surat? Ah, yes,

Once only I stayed in Surat

With family members

Of my uncle's very old friend

His wife is cooking nicely....

That was long time ago.

The intentional touch of drama is apparent when someone reminds the speaker that she hails from Surat, to which the speaker gets engrossed in his own memories of Surat while coming back to the topic of Miss Pushpa just in time so that he can recount the many virtues that Miss Pushpa has. The speaker seems to be a poor conveyer of words and definitely not a right person to address a goodbye speech as he gets carried away and refers to irrelevant facts, like the time when he once stayed at his uncle's very old friend's place where, as the speaker recounted, his 'wife was cooking nicely.'

The speaker tells that Miss Pushpa is extremely popular among both men and women. The speaker claims that whenever he had asked Miss Pushpa to help him out, she would promptly reply 'Just now only I will do it.' Definitely the speaker intends to highlight Miss Pushpa's willingness to help in any work but the unnecessary addition of 'just' and 'only' marks the speaker's Indianness and brings to light his ignorance of the usage of certain English words.

Moreover the speaker's repeated use of the present continuous tense instead of the simple present tense is demonstrated throughout the poem. While appreciating

Miss Pushpa for her good nature the speaker mentions that 'she is always saying yes' whenever he or anyone else 'is asking' for any help. The speaker brings a closure to his amusing speech by conveying that they all wish Miss Pushpa bon voyage. He even clarifies that Miss Pushpa 'will do the summing up', after the other speakers have concluded their talk. This indirectly implies that Miss Pushpa will enthusiastically and positively respond to the words of praise. Nissim Ezekiel, in this poem, composes the odd ways in which Indians use English especially while speaking.

Notes

Line 2: 'dear sister' - Addressing the guest of honour of a certain programme as 'dear' or 'beloved' followed by some relational term such as sister, brother and professor is a common practice in India.

Line 3: 'departing for foreign' - Here the word 'foreign' is used as a noun and the word departing is used in the sense of leaving or going.

Line 4: 'two three days' - Within a few days (word to word translation of a parallel regional expression).

Line 6: 'we are meeting today'- This is one of the numerous instances when the simple present tense is sacrificed in the poem.

Line 7: 'Bon voyage' -An expression of French origin used to convey good wishes to a traveler for his/her impending journey.

Line 10: 'External' B Anything to do with or Connected with the exterior or outside or outer section.

Line 10-11: An interesting way to express that Pushpa is not just a woman with graceful exterior, but also possess many beautiful qualities of mind and heart.

Line 12-13: The lines convey that Pushpa is always smiling, which signifies that she is either extremely courteous or perhaps a little dim-witted or both.

Line 15-19: These lines are spoken to convey the social status of Miss Pushpa, yet they appear to be vague as the speaker has trouble providing specific information about the guest of honour (Miss Pushpa). One is not sure how Miss Pushpa herself reacted to such a scenario. In phrases, such as, 'very high family', 'renowned advocate' the use of indefinite article is missing.

Line 20: 'Surat? Ah yes' - The line implies that someone has helped the speaker remember that the place in context is Surat.

Line 22: 'family members' - Is a common Indian phrase to identify people of the same family.

Line 22-25: Earlier, in India people did not shy away from being a guest to someone else even if they were remotely acquainted!

Line 24-25: The words 'that was long time ago' instills in a sense of ambiguity as well as irony.

Line 27-28: 'Popular lady with men also, and ladies also' - an unexpected use of the words 'men and ladies', these terms are usually not put together, the correct usage is, men and women, ladies and gentlemen.

Line 30: 'Just now only I will do it' - This is another example of a typical Indian-English expression, which probably is a direct translation of an Indian phrase.

Line 34: 'Pushpa Miss': This distortion of the word order is not unusual. It is common in Indian way of speaking English.

Line 40-42: It means Miss Pushpa will generously reply to all words spoken in her favour.

2.6.1 Elements of 'Indianness' in *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.*

Nissim Ezekiel's association with Bombay (now Mumbai) is well established. Bombay for him was not just a geographic location which extended to him a home and an identity as well as a means for expressing dilemma and other imbalances. For Ezekiel, Bombay turns out to be a place that acts at numerous levels of understanding. On the one hand, it is representative of everyday aspects of life representing modern India in all its mundane vibrancy and on the other; it also tries to uphold the intellectual and philosophical existence. But the matter of mind and existence are not segregated into watertight compartments. Ezekiel through his poetry knits the mundane with the intellect in a most fascinating manner.

Goodbye party for Miss Pushpa T. S. is an Indian poem by all means. In this beautiful lyric, Ezekiel has managed to capture the real essence of Indian English. While reading this poem for the first time, one will probably end up laughing. The poem written in English sheds light on Indian qualities while making fun of Pidgin English that many Indians use.

Also termed as *Babu English*, such English is essentially parodied by the poet. This kind of English makes fun of the obsession for the 'foreign' language. This poem is one of those compositions of Nissim Ezekiel which demonstrates one of his seminal characteristics, which went on to become his hallmark feature as far as his poetic career is concerned.

Ezekiel through this poem has successfully managed to reproduce the way in which Indians make use of incorrect English and grammar. The laughter of the situation emerges from a peculiar problem; since English is a foreign language many people tend to first recall their thoughts in their own mother tongue and then translate it (in their mind, of course) word by word and phrase by phrase as they continue to speak or write. The result at times is as funny and is disastrous.

Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling' is an example of how a language such as English is highly nuanced. Further, the poem makes fun of fashionable girls of high society who lack intellectual prowess. It is a poem which takes on the mood of social satire where the poet has brought out ironical implications of using pretentious as well as improper English the Indian *sahibs* and *memsahibs* took recourse to. Moreover, it is common to the Indian scenario where people in general prefer to use the present continuous tense instead of simple present tense. This erroneous use of grammar has been made fun of in the entire poem (Ezekiel writes: 'we are meeting' instead of we have met; 'you are all knowing' instead of you all know; 'I am not remembering' instead of 'do not remember').

As you proceed with the poem you will come across some phrases which are specifically Indian. For example: 'departing to foreign', 'two three days', 'cooking nicely', 'not remembering now' and many others.

Another remarkable element is the fact that Pushpa is unfailingly addressed as 'Miss Pushpa' and as 'dear sister'. Yet, she is never addressed by her first name.

Interestingly Miss Pushpa's association with grace and manners (she is both 'internally' and 'externally' 'sweet'), has a direct correlation to her very 'high family' connection. After all her father happens to be a 'renowned advocate'; thus highlighting how family background and professional achievements is of utmost importance to an Indian sensibility. It is perhaps not a coincidence that these facts are recollected during her farewell party.

Well of course, Ezekiel must be credited for crafting such an amazing poem out of an ostensibly mundane situation such as a farewell party. Moreover, he not only successfully manages to hold our attention but also provide us with hearty laughter without compromising on the aesthetic or on the literary quality. Even if we analyze the poem from a post-colonial perspective, we realize his empathy with the native speakers for molding the foreign language to their convenience (which was far removed from the original standards).

Goodbye party for Miss Pushpa T. S. is often identified as a parody on Indian English. It must be kept in mind that each part of India demonstrates a specific style of speaking English in terms of the nuances, diction and usage. This humorous reconstruction of a specific use of English based on topography acts as a process of self-revelation (as far as the nature of the speaker is concerned). Language, after all, unleashes the unconscious traits of the speaker's mind. The language of Indian English speakers also reveals the socio-cultural context that is specific to their geographic condition. In fact, it is interesting to note that the words, 'goodbye party' has a striking resemblance to the term 'birthday party'.

2.6.2 The Use of Language in *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.*

The language of *Goodbye party for Miss Pushpa T.S.* is interesting. The poet takes readers to the party where along with other guests; readers also become part of the farewell party organized for Miss Pushpa T.S. The party hosted to bid farewell to a lady leaving for overseas underlines the fact that the incident takes place within a specific socio-cultural context as the idea itself, of organizing a gathering to celebrate someone's foreign tour is taken from the West. Thus, someone who has been mildly acquainted with English culture would hold such a gathering and the guests in all respect would identify with such an idea. Being in a party like this, one is expected to come across people of repute conversing with each other in English (as a mark of high standard). Ezekiel takes the readers on a tour to a party brimming with ideas communicated in English. The poem brings out several fallacies that are associated with the notion of a 'goodbye party', the language in which people converse and its significance.

The poem starts off as a rollercoaster ride taking readers through all the aspects of Indian English language. From the very beginning, the poet remains focused on the language of Indians. Interestingly, Miss Pushpa is never addressed without the prefix -Miss. She is referred as 'dear sister'; addressing a lady who hails from a good family as calling someone 'sister' is a common practice in India and is considered to be a polite and civilized mode of addressing another. In the first stanza the speaker specifies the reason for the gathering by saying that Miss Pushpa will leave for foreign shores in 'two three days' (instead of the correct phrase - two or three days). In his attempt to reinforce Miss Pushpa as a woman who is kind and gentle, the speaker says she possess 'external sweetness' and

'internal sweetness'. This appears comical because it gives the impression that the speaker has directly translated the common

regional phrase to express the same in English. Again, Miss Pushpa is suggested to be 'smiling and smiling even for no reason'; given the assumption that this was intended as a compliment, the speaker probably wanted to say that Miss Pushpa was a lady of a pleasant temperament.

While introducing her family background to the audience. The speaker mentions that Miss Pushpa hails from a 'high family'. What he intended to say was that she came from a family which was well educated and affluent and well-respected. Once again the language used to identify the family background of the guest of honour, suggests the Indianness of the speaker. Ezekiel employs the language of fun and sarcasm to convey how the respectability factor of a lady in India rests not on her own achievement(s) but on her family. Moreover, the speaker's use of 'just now only I will do' probably meant to indicate that Miss Pushpa was more than ready to appear agreeable and willing.

Since it is an informal party the language used has a conversational tone. Such conversational language is a perfect backdrop for a party. Repetitive use of the present continuous tense ('departing', 'meeting', 'knowing', 'smiling and smiling', 'cooking nicely', 'appreciating the good spirit') not only suggests the misuse of grammar and the Indianization of the Queen's language but also indicates the continuous progression of the party. One can recall another 'very Indian poem in Indian English' where a similar order of grammar is used:

Other day I am reading in newspaper

(Everyday I'm reading Times of India

To improve my English language)

How one goonda fellow

Throw stone at Indirabehn.

Apart from the grammar, the tone employed in the poem is that of sarcasm. Through sarcasm, the poet tries to highlight a typically Indian obsession with the language of the British. Furthermore, it is implied that the poet's use of incorrect English is deliberate as it is meant to parody the notion of it being associated to progress and culture. Ezekiel, through the use of the language and setting, was pointing at the shallow imitation of English culture that lingered on in Indian society. Needless to say, through the language used in *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.*, Ezekiel effectively communicates the hallmark features of the post-colonial world.

One significant aspect of Ezekiel's writing is the use of simple language and diction. The poet conveys the most intricate ideas through the simplest of language. His philosophically intense poems also reflect a similar concern. Being an author whose subject matter centered on India he adopted an idiom that reflected and resonated with India and a quintessential Indian consciousness. One just needs a basic functional knowledge of English language to read and understand the poem. Though probably, a deeper understanding of literature and maturity would be required to understand the way people are projected and through them a nation is constructed in the poem.

Ezekiel never fell prey to the archaic or grand vocabulary that would have acted as an obstacle in appreciating the essence of the poem. Yet, despite being home to the most simple language, his poetry is always laced with music and rhythm. Even when one reads this poem, one realizes that the flow is never once compromised. Moreover, the use of Indian English in the poem gives the poem a realistic appearance which makes the experience of reading all the more enjoyable.

Numerous poets from India have taken recourse to the English language as a medium of creativity. Yet, Ezekiel earns the distinction of representing the national aspirations and culture in the most authentic manner. Most critics unanimously agree to this achievement of his whereby he was able to successfully voice his nationalist concerns.

The syntactical uniqueness that *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.* reflects makes it clear (even if not in the first reading) that Ezekiel's sensibility was deeply rooted in Indian consciousness.

Being able to create a distinct Indian flavour, Ezekiel's contribution to the body of Indian writing in English is remarkable. Three of his poems *A Very Indian Poem in Indian English*, *A Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.* and *The Professor* all deal with the quintessential Indian attitude that is expressed in so-called *Babu English* or *Bazar English* or *Swadeshi Angrezi*. All the three poems rely on the syntactical oddities and lexical weirdness as well as word by word translation of phrases and idioms that denote Indianness.

2.6.3 The Speaker in Poem

The context of the poem *A Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.* is explained to the readers through the speaker who addresses the gathering. The speaker seems enthusiastic to express his good wishes to Miss Pushpa. Although the party was an informal one, they require some degree of formality. The speaker seems to be devoid of any. In fact, as the poem progresses, one wonders in earnest if the speaker had given any thought to this party before giving the speech. Before we delve further into the character of the speaker, we must bear in mind that Nissim Ezekiel has not made it clear whether the speaker is male or female. By keeping the identity of the speaker a mystery the poet withholds a gendered representation of the speaker and posits the possibility of making him/her just a voice representative of India.

The speech of the speaker meanders on its own pace. There is no scope for structure or logic. The speaker himself moulds his own speech into an unintentional parody. The speaker rambles

Miss Pushpa is coming
from very high family.
Her father was renowned advocate
in Bulsar or Surat,
I am not remembering now which place.
Surat? Ah, yes,
once only I stayed in Surat

with family members
of my uncle's very old friend-
his wife was cooking nicely...
that was long time ago.

The ambiguity regarding the posting of Miss Pushpa's father highlights the superficial attempts made by the speaker to show his/her acquaintance with Miss Pushpa. The speaker might have a covert motive behind praising Miss Pushpa; given that she comes from a well connected family where the possibility of earning her grace may translate into future benefits for the speaker.

The speaker, in trying to be more generous with his compliments, ushers Miss Pushpa unintentionally with further nonsensical words of hilarity:

You are all knowing, friends,
What sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.
I don't mean only external sweetness
but internal sweetness
Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling
even for no reason but simply because
she is feeling.

The speaker is represented as a typical Indian who adheres to a grammatical structure that is Indian in tone. The shallowness that the speaker reflects in describing Miss Pushpa makes him/her a satirical representation of the people of India and underscores their odd behaviour and the ways in which they react under special circumstances. It might also seem probable that the other guests along with the speaker and Miss Pushpa might never be able to identify the gaps as they are not in a position to identify grammatical incoherency or fallacy of this speech. The simple, yet ignorant speaker is definitely unaware as to whether a genuine praise or insult had been delivered to Miss Pushpa. This is where the beauty of the poem lies and also highlights Ezekiel's originality.

2.6.4 Poetic Devices Used in *A Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.*

A Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S. is a lyric poem which expresses the writer's feelings in organized stanzas.

One can identify the use of dramatic monologue in the poem. Dramatic monologue is 'a poem written in the voice of a character, set in a specific situation, and spoken to someone.' (as per the College English Glossary). This form of writing was used by Robert Browning in his poem: *My Last Duchess* (1842).

Friends,
our dear sister
is departing for foreign
Now I ask other speakers to speak
and afterwards Miss Pushpa
will do summing up.

This poem by Ezekiel can be said to have elements of an ode. An ode is written in admiration of or celebration of a person, object or incident. Odes can be composed on any subject, ranging from battles to lofty emotions even pets or household objects. Some popular odes in English literature include Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* and *Ode to a Grecian Urn* by John Keats. In this poem one can see that the poem is addressed to Miss Pushpa T. S. and the speaker eulogizes before she embarks on her journey:

What sweetness is in Miss Pushpa.

I don't mean only external sweetness

but internal sweetness.

Miss Pushpa is smiling and smiling

even for no reason but simply because

she is feeling.

The other poetic device that one can see being used in the poem is eulogy. Eulogy can be described as a tribute as or praise for someone who has either accomplished a great feat or is dead. The speaker showers Miss Pushpa with the most gracious words and it seems in synchronization with her high birth and her progression to 'improve her prospect' along with her being the 'most popular lady O with men also and ladies also' qualifies as the ground for her praise.

Friends,

our dear sister

is departing for foreign

in two three days,

and

we are meeting today

to wish her bon voyage.

The other poetic device that one can identify in the poem is the inclusion of a speaker/ persona. The speaker is the one who gives voice to the work of verse. It must be kept in mind that s/he is not the

poet himself/herself. Even if a poem may sound biographical one should not forget that the poem is a fictional creation and hence the voice of the speaker:

Whenever I asked her to do anything,
she was saying, 'Just now only
I will do it.' That is showing
good spirit. I am always
appreciating the good spirit.

The use of T in the stanza does not imply to Nissim Ezekiel, but the speaker who is at the helm of the farewell party organization.

While extending his farewell speech the speaker gets lost in his days at Surat. He recalls his past where he had enjoyed various homemade delicacies and met good people once only I stayed in Surat

with family members
of my uncle's very old friend-
his wife was cooking nicely...
that was long time ago.

The use of enjambement is apparent in the following lines:

Whatever I or anybody is asking
she is always saying yes,
and today she is going
to improve her prospect
and we are wishing her bon voyage.

Enjambement by definition is the use of a line that runs on to the next line, without a pause, to complete its grammatical sense (compare end stop).

2.6.5 Modern Life in Ezekiel's Poems

Modern man seems to be laced with unforeseen troubles and tribulations which test his very justification for survival. From the beginning Ezekiel showed great inclination towards the life of the common man and never got self-involved with the theoretical perception of living. His poet persona says:

Give me touch of men and give me smell of
Fornication, pregnancy and spices.
But spare me words as cold as print, insidious
Words, dressed in evening clothes for drawing rooms.

The modern existence struggles at times cannot come up with anything simple. The poet announces his dislike for 'devious routes' that one has to undertake to arrive at the destination. In the poem *The Worm*, the poet-persona is highly motivated by the way a tiny creature lives his life and ponders:

It moved so straight! Oh God! To think that I
By such absurd and devious routes should reach
My destination.

But somewhere in the middle of the need to survive in the complex settings of the modern world the poet has a difficult time identifying and following that path to the destination. He agonizes in the following way:

Then, in bitterness, I crushed the worm,
Sadly determined not to honor more
It's easy mocking victory. So now
It's dead. Pretty worm, where is your strength?
The god who made you to be wiser than
The cunning subtleties within my brain
Shall know by this the anger of man.
Only in anger can I emulate
The worm's directness. I've killed the worm

Ezekiel had a curious association with city life. Being born and brought up in a city and having exposed to the Western life, he experienced the kind of impact a city setting has on a common man. Author Shaila Mahan in her book *The Poetry of Nissim Ezekiel* points out that in Ezekiel's work, 'The modern city has its dehumanizing effect. The place is not necessarily Bombay, but any place where man loses identity. The bleak picture of the city deprived of human sensitivity, seething with poverty, dirt, squalor and noise comes vividly before our eyes by the use of concrete imagery.' Mahan continues suggesting that, '... the images -'slums', 'seasons', 'rains', 'hawkers', 'beggars', 'processions', 'drums', 'purgatorial lanes' are seen allied to the image of city. The use of 'purgatorial lanes' takes us to the great Italian poet Dante. The notions of suffering, doom, punishment signified by 'purgatorial' adds to the horror of the city.' City becomes synonymous with inferno and turns out to be a place where anyone who endures the city for survival is meant to suffer for the sake of existence.

According to Shirish Chindhade, author of *Five English Poetry*, in Ezekiel's poems one can see, '... that the mood is permanently one of self-absorption, inwardness, introspection: all roads lead to the city within, the city of the soul. There is a consistent

attempt at self-search and self-definition. The holy grail of the search is hidden within the soul and poetry offers consolation in such a state of mind. It also helps 'to shape one's inner image silently.'

The narration of urban world is a common theme that frequently appears in the poetry of many poets who belonged to the modern era. Names such as Eliot and Auden come up among many others. Ezekiel centers his works on people who live in the metropolis and undergo similar predicaments and agony. Like the urban dwellers, Ezekiel too represents the rootlessness that is characteristic of a typical urban world. Moreover, the pain and agonies that are experienced by the modern urban civilization are also similar to a large extent. But there is a marked difference in the way Ezekiel perceives the city than his Western counterparts. Ezekiel is more absorbed with the setting that is strictly Indian and is far removed from the continental space. The ambivalent relationship that Ezekiel shares with the city generates reactions that oscillates between love and hate and builds a sense of unease in his writing that is again vastly different from the other modern Indian English poets. Ezekiel, despite being popularly referred to as a 'Bombay poet', longs for an escape from the city. It is so because he feels the city, 'like a passion, burns':

The city like a passion burns.

He dreams of morning walks, alone,

And floating on a wave of sand.

But still his mind its traffic turns

Away from beach and tree and stone

To kindred clamor close at hand.

Note, that the poet is troubled by the dilemma of survival. Furthermore, he cannot stop himself from wondering where his abode is and does he belong to the right place:

Do I belong, I wonder,

To the common plain? A bitter thought.

I know that I would rather

Suffer somewhere else

Than be at home

Among the accepted style.

Talking about his urban association Shaila Mahan suggests that, 'Ezekiel has endeavoured to explore the chasm between the city dwellers quest for the cherished ideal of an unfettered and oppression - less existence and his failure to achieve even a partial realization of it. In this poem the dilemma of the modern man who desperately tries to shun and run away from urban life is expressed forcefully and touchingly.' Further discussing about Ezekiel and his city observations critic John Thieme opines that, 'His passion is invariably that of an urban Bombayite, but it is a condition from which he frequently seeks release. In 'Urban'... the city becomes an interior landscape, invading his mind with its traffic, while he longs for a view from the hills and seeks respite from a location where 'The city like a passion burns.'

Despite his gruesome condition, the poet makes it amply clear that he is far removed from the world of artificiality:

That I must wait and train myself

To recognize the real thing

And in the verse and friends I make

To have no truck with what is false.

In the poem *Theological* the poet says, 'Lord, I am tired of being wrong.' The poor narrator appears to be exhausted of pretense and how he wishes to be freed.

Even as myself, my very own

Incontrovertible, unexceptional

Self, I feel I am disguised.

The speaker continues with his dilemmas, and says:

I am tired

Of irony and paradox

Of the bird in the hand

And the two in the bush

Of poetry direct and oblique

Of statement plain or symbolic

Of doctrine and dogma

Chindhade observes that, 'Although the modes of traditions and beliefs of old have not been totally rejected by Ezekiel, he can identify himself with modern India with greater authenticity. Most of the poems in *Hymns in Darkness* bear out this observation. The journey is not down the memory lane, though the philosophical reflections of the earlier poetry are no doubt seen in some of the poems in *Hymns in Darkness*.'

The poem, *A Morning Walk* unfolds images of a barbaric city which the poet cannot get away from:

Barbaric city sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggars, iron-lunged,
Processions led by frantic drums,
A million purgatorial lanes,
And child-like masses, many-tongued,
Whose wages are in words in crumbs.

Bombay, in this poem, takes on the shape of a 'barbaric city sick with slums'. But surprisingly it still remains the inescapable center that dominates the poet's physical experience as well as his creative world. Mahan suggests that, 'As an urban poet, Ezekiel has delved into the heart of Bombay in this poem. 'The city like a passion burns', while the helpless citizen gets conditioned to its vulgar noises. Ezekiel creates a picture of the modern man who desperately tries to shun and run away from the city's turmoil but finds himself in a dilemma.' Mahan suggests that, '... the urban man yearns for a quiet habitation away from the turmoil and chaos of the wild city. But his desire to withdraw remains a daydream against the forceful pull of 'kindred clamor close at hand.' Urban reality therefore becomes a crucial part of Ezekiel's poetic consciousness.

2.6.6 Pursuit of the Self in Nissim Ezekiel's Poems

Nissim Ezekiel was a representative poet of the modern era. He spoke about the troubles and dilemmas associated with the existence of modern man. The source of

his poetry could be found within the self-questioning soul. Ezekiel was a poet who lived by the thought that, 'A writer must make life difficult for himself.' He understood life 'as a journey where poetry is the source through which he could discover himself. The developing body of his poems expresses his personal quest for a satisfactory way of living in the modern world.'

The pursuit of the self that Nissim Ezekiel can be best exemplified by referring to his poem *Transparently*, where:

All I want now
Is the recognition
Of dilemma
And the quickest means
Of resolving it
Within my limits.

This verse segment is an acknowledgement of his dilemma as well as the confession of the means through which he is looking to solve it. Ezekiel's early tryst with the hunt for the real self reflected in his writings dating back to the 1950s when he wrote a letter from London to his sister Asha Bhende. Ezekiel wrote in his letter:

There was no alternative if I am to live a creative life. There is no other life for me. In a sense, of course, I am beaten, since I cannot organize my life as a whole. Nevertheless, fidelity to the poetry of it is a great saving factor. I do not wish to make excuses nor draw attention to the lives of the poets and their characteristic shortcomings. I want to be practical too and to stand on my own feet.

Ezekiel in the poem *Subconscious* reflects about his divided self:

Consciously, I ask my sub-conscious
To supply me with a poem.
It sends up this harsh message:
You have not turned to me so long,
I shall not speak now.

Paris-base Indian scholar, Geetha Ganapathy-Dore, analyzes this poem and suggests the poet is analyzing the self thorough psychoanalysis. She says 'The self of which Ezekiel here refers to as a

modernist is not the old unitary self of psychology but the divided self of psychoanalysis. Naturally he pokes fun at Freud by transposing the id and ego as a married couple living in a two-storied house.'

Especially, explored in the poem, *Family*, from *Songs for Nandu Bhende*:

Should we take to meditation,

Transcendental, any other?

Should we take to Zen?

We cannot find our roots here,

Don't know where to go, sir,

Don't know what to do, sir,

Need a Guru, need a God.

All of us are sick, sir.

As if the dilemmas of survival were not sufficient for a modern man, s/he seems to be haunted by the mechanical existence as expressed in the poem *Encounter*.

The city pressed upon me; shops, cinemas and

Business houses

Spoke in unambiguous accents. Only the people said

Nothing.

They bought the evening papers, hurried to a tube

Station,

Ceasing to exist.

Ezekiel's intentions were simple. He did not intend to head for trans-human possibilities. He did not ponder or erode his energy over things that he could not achieve. Continuing this discussion, Indu Saraiya suggests that for Nissim Ezekiel, 'a "longing" to live life on many frontiers on his own terms with the courage of his own convictions rather than on received wisdom had surfaced quite early in... life.'

Though some of Nissim Ezekiel's poetry suggests a kind of desperation, the poet seems unable to hide it. Language, for him, is the best medium to convey a message yet at times the poet cannot but wonder if that is the right approach at all. If we consider his poem, *Speech and Silence*, we realize he is vexed by this conundrum:

Man is alone and can not tell

The simplest thing to any friend.
All speech is to himself, others
Overhear and miss the meaning.
And yet to speak is good, a man
Is purified through speech alone,
Asserting his identity
In all that people say and do.

The poet seeks freedom from the already set pattern of life that seems to be pre-determined by the mind and beliefs (which is conditioned by the society and its structures). He realizes that it is impossible for him to get out of its effects. Without trying to behave like a moralist, he confesses that he is indeed affected by (various forms of) corruption around him. And since there is no concept of surviving alone or in isolation he finds the whole process excruciating, a problem that he announces in the poem *Double Horror*.

I am corrupted by the world, continually
Reduced to something less than human by the crowd,
Newspapers, cinemas, radio features, speeches
Demanding peace by men with grim warlike faces,
Posters selling health and happiness in bottles,
Large returns for small investments, in football pools
Or self control, six easy lessons for a pound,
Holidays in Rome for writing praise for toothpastes.

As if the process of corruption was a chain reaction, the poet goes on to confess in the same poem:

Corrupted by the world I must infect the world
With my corruption. This double horror holds me
Like a nightmare from which I cannot wake, denounced

Only by myself, to others harmless, hero,
Sage, poet, conversationalist, connoisseur
Of coffee, guide to modern Indian Art
Or Greek antiquities.

Ezekiel's pursuit of the self involved a larger analysis of the self in all its varied forms. According to poet and writer Keki N. Daruwalla, 'The contribution of Ezekiel becomes all the more stark in comparison to the ruthless analysis of one's own motives and passions, the reflection on inner turbulence in poetry, doubt and self doubt and the questioning of the scriptures, all this was new.'

Activity 2

Read other poems by Nissim Ezekiel and write an essay critiquing the perpetual presence of the metropolis. You may refer to the example and arguments given in this unit.

Did You Know

Majeed Amjad (1914 -1974) was one of the greatest of modern Urdu poets of the Indian subcontinent. Although, he is not well known or widely read as Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Noon Meem Rashid, Nasir Kazmi or Meeraji but amongst critics he is widely regarded as a philosophical poet of great depth and sensitivity. His refined poetic mind was not widely recognized in his lifetime as he lived a life of bureaucratic obscurity in a small town in west Punjab.

SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- The poetry of A. K. Ramanujan is one of the finest contributions to the genre of Indo-Anglian poetry.
- Nissim Ezekiel (14 December 1924 - 9 January 2004) was a renowned Indian poet of Jewish origin.
- Nissim Ezekiel received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his work, *Latter-Day Psalms*.
- Ramanujan's poetry reflects his Indian experiences, recognizes his Hindu beliefs and ridicules Hindu superstitions.
- In the poem *A River*, the poet brings our attention the river Vaigai which dries up in the heat of the summer and fails to attract the attention of poets.

- The poet talks about the dirt hidden beneath the water bed. Now when the summer heat has reduced the river to a trickle, all the dirt lying underneath gets exposed which shows how the river has been neglected and misused by villagers.
 - The poet goes on to say that the wet stones lying in the river bed look like crocodiles which are sleeping and the dry stones appear to be buffaloes.
 - Ramanujan satirizes the poets who sing 'only' about the river during indicating their indifference to the loss and suffering caused by the flooding river.
 - Ramanujan writes the poem *Obituary* as a creative response to the death of his father.
-
- After describing the house as a metaphor for their deteriorating quality of life, the poet brings our attention to his father, but he does that in an ironic manner. He says that the father was the 'burning type'.
 - The poet, who performs the last rites, comments on the various rituals and ceremonies associated with the dead in the poem.
 - Ezekiel's best known poem, *Night of the Scorpion* deals with an accident where a scorpion has stung a woman and the public gathered takes remedial measures to decrease the pain caused by the bite.
 - The poem has been written in free verse and the lines do not rhyme. However, a large number of lines are octosyllabic interspersed with hexasyllabic lines.
 - The poem, *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.* is collected in Nissim Ezekiel's sixth volume of poems titled *Hymns in Darkness*.
 - Nissim Ezekiel unleashed humour and ridicules the erroneous yet funny ways in which grammar, syntax and idioms are used by many Indians while they make an attempt to speak or write in the English language.
 - Though some of Ezekiel's poetry suggests a kind of desperation, the poet persona seems unable to hide it.

2.8 KEY TERMS

- **Irony:** Irony refers to a caustic remark or witty use of language in order to convey the opposite of what might be expected. It leads to incongruity by saying one thing and implying the opposite
- **Satire:** Satire refers to a medium through which the vices, shortcomings or follies are ridiculed using witty language
- **Alliteration:** Alliteration refers to a decorative device used by the poet in order to emphasize his point of view. It is the use of the same consonant at the beginning of each stressed syllable in a line of verse
- **Anglo-Indian poetry:** Anglo-Indian poetry refers to the body of work by the members of the Indian diaspora who write in the English language and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India

2.9 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

1. Madurai is a historic city famous for its rich cultural and literary heritage. It is located on the banks of the river Vaigai and is known for its old temples, which also include the very famous Meenakshi temple. The poet refers to the river Vaigai in this poem. He reveals two different pictures of the river in two different seasons - a river reduced to a thin trickle in summer and a river in flood in the rainy season.
2. Attipate Krishnaswamy Ramanujan was one of the finest Indo-American writers who wrote poems in English, Tamil and Kannada. He was a professor of Dravidian studies and Linguistics at the University of Chicago.
3. The significance of the names given to a couple of cows is to enhance the tragic drowning of a pregnant woman. It is an ironic situation in which the cows have been named Gopi and Brinda, but the woman who drowned is only referred to

as the 'pregnant woman'. Possibly there could be a religious significance to the names given to the cows as Hindus worship cows as symbolic of maternal qualities such as selflessness and sacrifice.

4. The closing passage is tragic in a sense that it emphasizes the tragic drowning of a pregnant woman. The last passage is a mere repetition of the second stanza which was a description of the destruction caused by the floods. The repetition of the destruction in the last stanza is meant to highlight the fact that people have become used to such tragedies as the river floods every year. It further enhances the tragedy of a pregnant woman who died with perhaps twins in her womb.
5. The poet uses irony to describe the attitude of other poets. He says that though the poets have written poetry about the flooded river, they never referred to the havoc which the annual floods create. There is more irony in the lines 'The river has water enough to be poetic about only once a year....' It satirizes the poets who get inspiration to write the poetry only once a year when the river is in flood.
6. The poet makes use of striking similes to describe the beauty usually ignored by old and new poets. The poet says that the wet stones shine and resemble crocodiles lying in the water, with only with their back showing. Another image is that of water buffaloes resting in the sun. The dry stones look like water buffaloes lounging in the sun.
7. The irony is that the poets 'only' write about floods. When the river is almost empty, no one bothers to notice and write a poem; but in rainy season, the poets write about the vitality of the same river in flood and at the same time they ignore the sufferings of people caused by the floods.
8. The expression 'as usual' highlights the cold and callous attitude of the people to the suffering and sorrow caused by the floods. People casually talk about how the river in flood destroyed the 'three village houses', drowned 'one pregnant woman' and 'a couple of cows', 'as usual'. It shows that people are used to the annual floods now.
9. In dealing with the rituals and ceremonies associated with the dead, Ramanujan displays his awareness of Hindu tradition. The reference to a point 'where three rivers meet' and 'more

than one annual ritual' reveals that his Indian upbringing and an exposure to Hindu customs is well blended with his awareness and recognition of the flaws and faults of the ancient religion.

10. The father has left behind a dusty table full of papers, some unpaid debts, daughters to be married, a house that is in a decaying condition, a changed mother and more than one annual ritual.
11. The poet refers to his father as someone who has always struggled in life to meet the family obligations. He was an ordinary man who was struggling (burning) throughout his life and finally succumbed to death. Therefore, the poet says that he burnt throughout his life and finally burnt well at the cremation.
12. According to the poet, the mother has changed due to pain and agony that the death of his father has caused.
13. The priest directs the sons to carefully pick the ashes and bones and facing eastwards immerse them at a point where the three rivers meet.

UNIT 4 A. K. RAMANUJAN

4.0 INTRODUCTION

The poetry of A. K. Ramanujan is one of the finest contributions to the genre of Indo-Anglian poetry. We can assume that Indo-Anglian poetry began in the 1960s and the poets who have developed it to its status of 'serious' poetry include figures, such as, Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Jayanta Mahapatra and Keki N. Daruwalla. The characteristic feature of Indo-Anglian poets is that they choose their themes from a wide range of Indian legends and Indian folklore that reflect the poet's views on Indian contemporary scenario. For instance, Ramanujan's poetry reveals his awareness of his Hindu heritage, successfully blending with modernity. Ramanujan is certainly one of the greatest poets of English language among the Indo-Anglian poets.

Nissim Ezekiel (14 December 1924 - 9 January 2004), on the other hand, was a renowned Indian poet of Jewish origin. He was also a prolific playwright, broadcaster, social commentator and art-critic. He had the distinction of being an editor of repute. Ezekiel was one of the prominent figures writing in English. He had made several contributions towards post-colonial literature of India as well as literary history.

2.1 UNIT OBJECTIVES

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

- Discuss important aspects of A. K. Ramanujan and Ezekiel's biography
- Explain passages from Ramanujan and Ezekiel's poetry

2.2 A. K. RAMANUJAN: A BRIEF SKETCH

Born in Mysore on 16 March 1929, Attipate Krishnaswamy Ramanujan was one of the finest Indo-American writers who wrote poems not only in English but also in Tamil and Kannada. He was a professor of Dravidian studies and Linguistics at the University of Chicago.

Ramanujan's poetry reflects his Indian experiences, recognizes his Hindu beliefs and ridicules Hindu superstitions. In 1969, he was awarded the gold medal of the Tamil Writer's Association for *The Interior Landscape*. In 1976, he was awarded the Padma Shree.

A. K. Ramanujan's major works of poetry include *Of Mother s Among Other Things*, *A River*, *Looking For A Cousin On A Swing* and *Obituary*. He died on 13 July 1993 in Chicago.

Ramanujan's poetry is deeply rooted in India and his poems represent him both as a propagator of Hinduism and a poet of Indian identity. His poem, *A River*, brings out the cultural and literary

stagnation of the old and new poets in a ponderous and sedate manner. *A River* begins with a reference of Madurai, a historic city, famous for its temples and literary culture. One of the oldest inhabited cities of the world, Madurai, is located on the banks of the river Vaigai, which has a religious significance for Tamils. Ramanujan's deft use of irony in the poem successfully exposes poets who are not aware of their social responsibilities.

2.3 RAMANUJAN'S *A RIVER*: TEXT AND SUMMARY

A River

In Madurai,
city of temples and poets,
who sang of cities and temples,
every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand,
baring the sand ribs,
straw and women's hair
clogging the watergates
at the rusty bars
under the bridges with patches
of repair all over them

the wet stones glistening like sleepy
crocodiles, the dry ones
shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun

The poets only sang of the floods.
He was there for a day

when they had the floods.
People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda as usual.
The new poets still quoted
the old poets, but no one spoke
inverse
of the pregnant woman
drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
kicking at blank walls
even before birth.
He said:
the river has water enough
to be poetic
about only once a year
and then
it carries away
in the first half-hour
three village houses,

a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda
and one pregnant woman
expecting identical twins
with no moles on their bodies,
with different coloured diapers
to tell them apart.

SUMMARY

Madurai is a holy city famous for its cultural and spiritual heritage as well as a traditional centre of learning. The poet says that the river Vaigai, which has been sung about and celebrated by many old and new poets, is reduced to a thin stream of water in the summers. It is all dried up and has little force. It seems, that the summer has made the river arid and lifeless due to which its ribs are exposed. As the river becomes almost dry, the otherwise hidden sandis now revealed and it looks like the ribs of an emaciated being. The pieces of straw and women's hair, which the river carries with it, are also left behind when the water dries up. These things not only make the river dirty but also lead to blockage at the gates of the dam. The iron bars of the gates have become rusty and the bridges seem to have 'patches of repair' on them, suggesting that the dam has previously suffered damages as well. The river carries with it wet as well as dry stones. The wet stones lying still in the river bed look like crocodiles. It appears that the crocodiles are floating in the water with only their back visible from outside. However, the dry stones look like water buffaloes lounging comfortably in the sun. The buffaloes' skin looks dry from the outside even if it has enjoyed the water for long. Similarly, the stones which were earlier submerged in the river bed, now partially visible, look like the dry back of buffalo skin.

In the second stanza, the poet looks at Vaigai through a different lense and in a different season. The poet has observed that the other poets, new as well as old, have only written poetry describing the river during floods in the monsoon. Every year, when it rains, the river gets flooded, which gives an opportunity to poets to visualize the vitality and vigour of the flooded river. The poet says that 'he' (probably Ramanujan himself), visits Madurai for a day when the river Vaigai is flooding. He is taken aback by the apathy of the poets to human suffering and loss. He observes people talking in mathematical terms, measuring the rise in the level of water as per inches and the precision with which they are documenting the rise and fall. This demonstrates a kind of hostility towards human loss. Equally indifferent to the suffering and sorrow, people casually talk about how the river destroyed the 'three village houses', drowned 'one pregnant woman' and 'a couple of cows', 'as usual'. The poet highlights that people are used to the annual floods now. They are callous towards human suffering and loss but very particular about statistical data and the accuracy of reporting loss. They know the exact number of how many inches the water level raised, how many houses and people drowned, even the death record of the livestock is accurately maintained. However, the irony is heightened by the fact that the cows are named Gopi and Brinda, but the pregnant woman who drowned is

completely unknown. These Unes represent a sense of being jaded with the overall devastation that has come about as a result of the deluge.

The poet says that both the old as well as new poets wrote verses about floods in the river Vaigai. The poet is shocked and shaken because of the insensitivity of these poets, who appear unconcerned with the destruction that has been caused by the floods. The new poets only follow the footsteps of the old and carry forward the tradition of composing verse. But ironically, no one bothers to ponder over the condition of those who have succumbed to the destruction. The pregnant lady, may have been expecting twins and perhaps two more lives have been claimed by the floods. Perhaps, those unborn twins were kicking her belly when she drowned making it all the more painful for her to die. While the poets are busy singing about the creative force of the river during floods, they are completely oblivious to the pregnant woman who drowned with the twins who could have lived.

According to Ramanujan, poets, both old as well as new, consider the river during floods to be a source of inspiration. The destruction that became synonymous with the flood appeared to have become an annual occurrence making the people indifferent towards the pain that was felt by the victims. It is acknowledged 'as usual' that the flooded river always washes away three village houses, a couple of cows (Gopi and Brinda) and an anonymous pregnant lady. It is true that the events are not always repeated in exactly the same manner, but people have become so accustomed to the repeated destruction by the annual floods that they consider it all the same every year. The pregnant woman may have been expecting the 'identical' twins. This assumption emphasizes the identical and repetitive nature of the crisis caused each year. Everything appears so much alike that even the twins could not have been identified unless they would be wearing diapers of different colours.

2.3.1 Important Passages for Explanation

1. *'Every summer... in the sand.'*

Reference to Context

These lines have been taken from the poem *A River*, written by A. K. Ramanujan. In these lines, the poet brings to our attention the river Vaigai which dries up in the heat of the summer and therefore fails to attract the attention of poets.

Explanation

In these lines, the poet says that every year in the summer season, a river gets dried up due to the excessive heat. This is the same river which holds a special place in the lives and culture of Tamil people as the holy city Madurai stands on the bank of the river Vaikai. However, the river is reduced to a thin and narrow stream of water due to the excessive heat of the summer and flows very slowly in the sand.

2. *'Baring the sand ribs ... all over them.'*

Reference to Context

In these lines the poet brings to our attention the dirt hidden beneath the water bed. Now when the summer heat has reduced the river to a trickle, all the dirt lying underneath gets exposed which shows how the river has been neglected and misused by the people of nearby villages. It also describes the ways in which the river acts as a signifier of nature and its dwindling beauty in the face of destruction.

Explanation

In these lines the poet says that when the river is reduced to a narrow stream trickling without any force, it exposes the otherwise hidden elements of human dispose underneath the water bed. It slowly moves through the mounds of sand which look like the ribs of an emaciated being. It immediately draws a picture of a sick river in the same manner as it draws the imagery of death and starvation through exposed ribs. The water gates get clogged due to the bits of straw and women's hair. The poet succeeds in drawing a picture of morbid humour for the reader, despite the seriousness of the theme. For instance, the reader may laugh at the thought of a choked Watergate. The rusty bars of the gates and the bridge over the river reveal the patch work of having been repaired. It is evident that the river is not looked after and maintained properly.

3. *'The wet stones... lounging in the sun.'*

Reference to Context

In these lines the poet presents two striking similies which enhance the tableau-like effect created by the images.

Explanation

River Vaigai dries up in summer and is reduced to a dry trickle, yet there is some beauty is left in it. The poet makes use of the vivid similes to describe the beauty that is usually ignored by poets. The poet goes on to say that the wet stones lying in the river bed look like sleeping crocodiles. The wet stones shine and resemble crocodiles lying in the water, with only their back showing out of water. Another image is that of water buffaloes resting in the sun. Whereas the wet stones resemble crocodiles, the dry stones appear to be buffaloes. Though the buffaloes lie in water for a long time, their skin remains dry, in this manner the dry stones resemble water buffaloes lying in the sun.

4. *'The poets sang only... had the floods.'*

Reference to Context

Here the poet brings to our attention the cold and callous attitude of old as well as new poets. The poet satirizes those who sing 'only' about the river in the flood and show indifference to the loss and suffering caused by it.

Explanation

The poet says 'only' floods invoke poetry in old as well as new poets. The irony is highlighted by writing an isolated line in order to emphasize that the poets write 'only' about floods. When the

river has almost dried up, no one bothers to notice and write a poem, but the same river inspires poetry during monsoon. The tone here is clearly sarcastic and ironic.

5. *'People everywhere talked... the bathing places.'*

Reference to Context

The poet comments upon the people who are insensitive to the loss and suffering of their fellow human beings. Such people are only concerned with figures and data.

Explanation

The poet says that when there are floods, people get an interesting topic to talk about. Everywhere people discuss the rise in the level of water. These people are very particular about the exact inches by which the water level rises. This kind of excessive attention to detail serves the purpose of conveying a rather jaded sense of loss. They even remember how the stone steps of the bathing place are submerged one by one.

6. *'And the way it carried... Gopi and Brinda, as usual.'*

Reference to Context

Here the poet draws a picture of destruction caused by the river during flood. Through these lines the poet presents the irony of the situation.

Explanation

In these lines the poet says that the people observe the river during the monsoon and discuss the rising levels of water. These people have also seen how three village houses were destroyed and carried away by the force of the flood. They report of seeing a pregnant woman drowning. They have also witnessed livestock, two cows named Gopi and Brinda, being carried away by the overflowing river. The poet laments the accuracy and precision with which people discuss unnecessary details of the devastation: 'three' village houses, 'one' pregnant 'woman and 'two' cows. However, these tragedies do not come as a shock for people because as this has become an expected annual statistic for them. The poet brings out the irony of the situation by calling it 'as usual'.

7. *"The new poets still... even before birth."*

Reference to Context

Here the poet laments the callous and cold attitude of the new as well as old poets who remain indifferent towards the suffering of human beings.

Explanation

Ramanujan says the new poets have little to originality to offer as they have merely replicated the style and strategies of their predecessor. In other words, they have only quoted what has been said before. Both generations of poets sang about the floods caused by the overflowing river Vaigai in their poems. They have equally been insensitive towards the tragedy caused by the floods. Little time

and creative energy has been spent lamenting and understating the loss of the unnamed pregnant woman who could perhaps have been carrying twins. For Ramanujan, the hypothetical death of three, is a highly sensitive topic that demands its own unique pattern of grief. The poet imagines that the twins in her belly could still be alive as she herself was succumbing to death, kicking desperately while struggling to live. Perhaps they were kicking the 'blank wall', the womb of their mother who was already dead. This tragedy has been completely ignored and overlooked by the old as well as the new poets.

8. *'He said: The river has... only once a year.'*

Reference to Context

In these lines the poet satirizes the poets who are inspired to write poetry only once a year when the river is flooding.

Explanation

In these lines the poet says that when the river is flooding, the poets get inspiration to write poetry describing the fullness and vitality of the river. But it happens only once a year during the rainy season. As a result, old and new poets come out with their poetic sensibilities only once a year. Ramanujan is being sarcastic towards the old and new poets whose poetry depends upon the rise and fall in the level of water of the river.

9. *'And then it carries ... named Gopi and Brinda.'*

Reference to Context

The poet has emphasized the destruction caused by the floods. These lines are a mere repetition of the second stanza, but powerful due to the satire. It is the indifference that the poet tries to capture.

Explanation

In these lines the poet says that every year during the monsoon, there are floods. However, people have become so used to the devastation that they are already in a position to anticipate the destruction: three village houses, two cows and one pregnant woman. It is ironic that the cows have names, Gopi and Brinda, whereas the pregnant woman has no identify.

10. *'And one pregnant woman... to tell them apart.'*

Reference to Context

The poet comes to a conclusion that every year the river gets flooded and people have now become desensitized to these calamities. They are no longer disturbed by the sorrow of loss. Instead, they appear to be consumed by the unnecessary excess of recording the rise and fall in the water level and other trifles.

Explanation

The poet concludes by saying that though both the old as well as new poets have described floods in their poetry, attitude towards the victims of the devastation is ;What~»sets <the idne of poetry apart from rest. In an elaborate attempt to record unnecessary details, the real subject of the devastation has been neglected. The pregnant woman' goes unnamed and whereas livestock that has also been lost merits an accurate mention/This inversion of thematic preoccupation causes the poet to reflect on the nature of loss and the attitude that one observes in a case where loss can be anticipated, even chronicled. By giving examples of nebulous recordings that people appear to be discussing in detail, Ramanujan explores a peculiar reaction to loss.. Perhaps, the pregnant woman was expecting twins who had no different identification marks on their bodies that would differentiate one from the other. By lingering on the hypothetical life and death of the twins, the poet brings out the pathos of the victims. The unspeakable tragedy of the drowned woman and the subsequent and rather vivid death of the imagined twins in her womb resonates the sense of loss.

2.3.2 Irony in A River

A River describes two different images of the river Vaigai - one in summer and the other in during monsoon. Whereas in summer the river is reduced to a dry trickle, in "the rainy season, the river tends to flood. But the irony of the situation is that 'the poets sang only of flood'. Another example of irony is found in the poem when the poet becomes a mere observer and maintains an attitude of complete detachment in order to arouse the pity in readers. He simply describes the situation that though many poets, old and new, have written poetry about the flooding river, they never referred to the aftermath of the destruction. New poets only quote the old and keep themselves at a distance from chronicling the details and effects of destruction. There is more irony in the lines 'the river has enough water to be poetic about only once a year....'. It satirizes the poets who get inspiration to write poetry only once a year when the river floods. It also highlights the fact that only a casual treatment has been given to the damage caused by the flood.

2.3.3 Theme of A River

The theme of the poem *A River* is to bring out the indifferent and the cold attitude of the old as well as new poets towards the loss and suffering of human beings. The poem unfolds many layers of meanings and comments on the different generations of poets who completely ignore the misery around them and romanticize the river during the monsoon. The poem also reveals a dual picture of the river - one in summer and the other in the rainy season. In summer it dries up because of the excessive heat and resembles a thin narrow stream which doesn't attract any poetic flourishes.. However, in monsoon, the river exhibits its vigour and vitality and becomes a source of inspiration for all the poets - old as well as new. As the poet ironically says:

'the river has water enough

to be poetic about only once a year...'

Though the poets sing about the river in flood, their cold and insensitive attitude towards the destruction and the resultant tragedy is a matter of concern. It is certainly very disappointing that 'they sang only of the floods', when they should have displayed sensitivity towards the sorrow and suffering of the people. The poem rightfully raises the question of the social role and responsibility of a poet towards society.

2.3.4 Structure of *A River*

The poem displays the characteristic feature of Indo-Anglian poetry in creating lines that have been written in an inconsistent and irregular manner. The structure of the poem is not coherent in the sense that there are four paragraphs of uneven length. The initial paragraph is even shorter than the rest of the arrangements. However, two isolated lines stand apart in the poem but they play a significant role in consolidating the entire poem. Another feature that can be discussed under structure is that the poem has no rhyme scheme at all.

The first paragraph, which is very short, introduces the reader to the concept that would be elaborated gradually in subsequent paragraphs. It talks about Madurai as the city of temples and poets, further emphasizing what we will be discussing in the rest of the poem - the poets who sing of cities and temples.

The second paragraph describes how the much celebrated river is reduced to a thin stream of water during summers. However, the single line brings to focus that the old as well as new poets 'only' sing about the flooded river.

The next paragraph brings to our attention the destruction caused by the annual floods. This picture of destruction and sadness is re-emphasized in the last paragraph with its repetition. The poem ends with another single line which becomes the part of the explanation of the whole poem. Perhaps, the pregnant woman was expecting identical twins who had no marks of identification on their bodies. The mother would have made them wear the diapers of different colours in order to be able to distinguish one from the other. But the grim reality of all three lives perishing makes the irony even more hard-hitting.

2.4 RAMANUJAN'S *OBITUARY*: TEXT AND SUMMARY

Obituary

Father, when he passed on,
left dust
on a table of papers,
left debts and daughters,
a bedwetting grandson
named by the toss
of a coin after him,

a house that leaned
slowly through our growing
years on a bent coconut
tree in the yard.
Being the burning type,
he burned properly
at the cremation
as before, easily
and at both ends,
left his eye coins
in the ashes that didn't
look one bit different,
several spinal discs, rough,
some burned to coal, for sons
to pick gingerly
and throw as the priest
said, facing east
where three rivers met
near the railway station;
no longstanding headstone
with his full name and two dates
to holdin their parentheses
everything he didn't quite

manage to do himself,
like his caesarian birth
in a brahmin ghetto
and his death by heart
failure in the fruit market.

But someone told me

he got two lines

in an inside column

of a Madras newspaper

sold by the kilo

exactly four weeks later

to streethawkers

who sell it in turn

to the small groceries

where I buy salt,

coriander,

andjaggery

in newspaper cones

that I usually read

for fun, and lately

in the hope of finding

these obituary lines.

And he left us

a changed mother

and more than
one annual ritual.

SUMMARY

As the title of the poem suggests, *Obituary* is written as a creative response to the tragic event of the death of his father. The narrator says that when his father died, he left behind him a dusty table full of papers, some unpaid debts and daughters to be married. We do not perceive any great affection on the part of the narrator for his father. It appears that the narrator is not as much aggrieved by his father's death as he feels burdened with the liabilities his father has left him. The narrator then mentions a bed wetting grandson that reveals that there is an infant in the house. The infant was named after his grandfather (as is the custom in many places in India). It shows that the naming of the grandson was just a formality, and the name was decided by the toss of a coin. The introductory paragraph is informative with regard to the narrator's relation to his father and his financial condition. Though there is no clear contextual demarcation within the poem, the spaces denote the structural division of the poem into separate paragraphs.

The second paragraph continues further information about their house, to give which appears to be slowly and gradually leaning over an old coconut tree in then-yard. He says that all of them have witnessed this gradual inclination of the house through their growing years as they have always lived in that house. The coconut tree itself seems to be bending in the yard and not growing straight upwards. It may be recognized as their general household condition which is decaying gradually and now with the death of the father, the responsibility of household directly shifts to the son(s).

After describing the house as a metaphor for their deteriorating quality of life, the poet brings our attention to his father, but he does that in an ironic manner. He says that the father was the 'burning type'. It could be suggestive of the father's fiery temper or a reference to the father's physicality of being dried and parched that he burnt well in the cremation. He concludes the lines by saying that his father's cremation took place in accordance with the Hindu customs as the father disappeared effortlessly from this world. In order to gain strength and accept the tragedy of his father's death, the poet finds respite in irony, through which, he tries to detach himself from his father. He goes on to say that the cremation of his father took place as per the Hindu tradition and he 'burned properly' 'as before easily at both ends', signifying that he had lived a fulfilling life and died a contended death. When his father got cremated, there was another ceremony according to Hindu customs according to which, the sons of the deceased pick the ashes and bones and immerse them in the holy river. Thus, the narrator says that he picked his father's ashes and found the 'eye coins' 'that didn't look one bit different'. The image describes the nature of his father, probably when he was alive; there was the 'same' cold look in his eyes. He also observed that there were several bits of spinal discs, some of those were half-burnt and had become rough and some had turned to coal having completely burnt. The narrator struggles hard to convey the pain that a son feels while performing the last rites of his father.

The narrator ironically comments on the various rituals and ceremonies associated with the dead. The priest who performed the last rites of the narrator's father directs the sons to carefully pick the ashes and bones and immerse them into the holy water at the meeting point of three rivers near the railway station. The reference to the three rivers brings out the analogy of the three sacred rivers—the Ganga, the Yamuna and the Saraswati that meet at Triveni Sangam in Allahabad. As per Hindu mythology, it is believed that the deceased attains salvation if the sons perform the last rites by the banks of this holy confluence. The priest also directs the sons to do the needful while facing towards the east. The narrator further tells us that he did not erect any monument in the memory of his father. 'No longstanding headstone' was intended to commemorate the name of the father as well as the two important dates within the brackets, i.e., the day when he was born, and the day he died.

The narrator says he was unable to parenthesize the two important events of his father's life - the day he was born and the day he died as he himself did not exercise any control over these events. The father could not manage to be born naturally, as a caesarian operation was performed to bring him to this world. The narrator discloses the fact that the father was brought to the world with the intervention of doctors. This was to emphasize that the father could exercise no control over the events of his life from the time that he was born. Similarly his death was also a sudden event over which father had no control. He died due to heart failure in a local fruit market.

The narrator comes to know that his father's obituary appeared in some local newspaper. He was told by someone that his father had got an obituary notice published to inform people about his death. He looks for scraps of the newspaper so that he may come across those 'two lines in an inside column' that his father got published for himself. He expects to find that obituary notice after four weeks as the newspaper would first be 'sold by the kilo' to the street vendors, who would then sell it to small grocery shopkeepers, where the newspaper would be folded in cones in order to wrap up salt, coriander and jaggery. If, by chance, the narrator would come across that particular newspaper cone in which his father's obituary appeared, he would be able to read it. He says usually he reads the newspaper wrappers just to have fun, but this time it would be for a different reason. He hopes to find his father's obituary notice in one such newspaper wrapper.

The narrator, however, goes back to the point where he started. The concluding lines are very tragic and painful as they convey the sadness and pain of the family of the deceased. The narrator continues to describe what his father has left for him. As in the opening lines he had listed the liabilities in the form of 'debts and daughters', now he informs us that the father has also left behind him their mother. The mother has completely changed after his father's death. These lines reveal the intensity of pain that the mother has suffered as a result of her husband's death. For the narrator, now she is a 'changed mother', a mother who has undergone trauma and has transformed as a result of it. However, this is not all. There is much more to what the father has left behind. The legacy also includes 'more than one annual ritual'. It refers to the various rituals that the sons and the other family members would be required to perform in the memory of the father. This is a reference to another Hindu custom of having some rituals performed every year for the salvation of the soul of the deceased person.

2.4.1 Historical Context of the Poem

Ramanujan's poetry is deeply rooted in India and his poems richly present him 'both as a propagator of Hinduism and a poet of Indian identity.' (Nayak, Bhagat 'The Axis of Hindu Consciousness in A. K. Ramanujan's poetry'). His poem *Obituary* deals with the memory of the father who recently passed away. In dealing with the rituals and ceremonies associated with the dead, Ramanujan displays his awareness of Hindu tradition. The reference to a point 'where three rivers meet' and 'more than one annual ritual' reveals that his Indian upbringing and exposure to Hindu customs is well blended with his awareness and recognition of the flaws and faults of ancient orthodox Hinduism. It is a typical feature of Ramanujan's poetry that he constantly looks to the past, recalling the behaviour, actions and temperaments of his relatives.

In *Obituary*, Ramanujan's deft use of irony brings out his creative tension in dealing with his father's death. 'Ramanujan's poetry derives its complexity from western modernity and oriental orthodoxy' (Sivaramkrishna).

2.4.2 Important Passages for Explanation

1. *'Father when he passed... a coin after him''*

Reference to Context

These are the opening lines of A. K. Ramanujan's poem *Obituary*. In these lines the poet introduces us to the legacy that his father has left behind. As expected from the title of the poem, it is meant to be an obituary of the poet's father in which he should ideally be talking about the fond memories of his father and the pain that his death has caused to the family. However, the poet uses an ironical tone throughout the poem.

Explanation

The narrator says that his father has passed away and what he left behind for the family was a table full of papers on which dust had gathered. The father also left the family some unpaid debts and unmarried daughters. The alliteration in 'debts and daughters' highlight the daughters as liabilities because they are unmarried. In the absence of the father, the responsibility of their marriage falls onto the sons. The father has also left behind an infant grandson, who still wets the bed. The infant was named after his grandfather. The above lines do not convey the father's death as an event of sorrow. Rather the narrator reveals that he was burdened with the unpaid debts and other liabilities, which his father could not carry out in his lifetime.

2. *'A house that leaned... tree in the yard''*

Reference to Context

In these lines the poet points out the impoverished condition of the family. He brings to focus the general household condition which has deteriorated over time.

Explanation

The narrator says that the father has not just left behind 'debts and daughters' but also a house. The irony is that the house is in a state of gradual decay. The tone of the narrator is somewhat cynical in listing the liabilities left behind as legacy by his father. He says that he has grown up in the same house and has observed the slow and gradual inclination of the house on a coconut tree in their yard. The house becomes the metaphor for the deteriorating quality of their life. The coconut tree against which the house is leaning is itself bent and this suggests a mutual state of dilapidation, enhancing the irony of the father's legacy.

3. *'Being the burning type... and at both ends.'*

Reference to Context

Here, the narrator reveals his anxiety and regrets the death of his father. He tries to understand the life of his father, now when he is responsible for the father's unaccomplished tasks. However, he uses an ironical tone to detach himself so that he can prepare himself to fulfil the leftover responsibilities.

Explanation

The narrator says that the father was 'the burning type' and therefore he 'burned properly' at the cremation. Here, the narrator refers to his father who always struggled in his life in order to meet the family obligations. He was an ordinary man who was struggling (burning) throughout his life and finally succumbed to death. Therefore, the narrator says that he burnt throughout his life and finally burnt well at the cremation. The narrator feels concerned for the poor father's constant 'burning' when he was alive and finally, 'burning properly' at the cremation. These lines are beset with irony as the narrator chooses a tone of detachment in order to gain strength so that he can come to terms with the loss of his father. The metaphor of burning is used to bring out the morbid spillover of a life that was full of rage and anguish as it was subjected to endless strife, which even after death appears to consume the flesh in a rapid fury.

4. *'Left his eye coins... some burned to coal.'*

Reference to Context

The narrator brings to focus the last rites performed in accordance to the Hindu tradition. These last rituals are very painful for the family members of the deceased, especially the sons. According to the Hindu belief, the last rites performed by the sons lead to the salvation of the soul.

Explanation

The narrator does not break the continuity of the list of the things as per the legacy of his father. However, here the listing becomes very tragic as the narrator talks about the 'eye coins' that he found in his father's ashes. He stresses the fact that they looked very similar and the likeness could be linked to his eyes when he was alive. It is quite obvious that it would have been a very painful moment for the son when he went to the funeral pyre and saw his father reduced to ashes. There he found the 'eye coins' that further enhances the tragedy.

5. *'For sons to pick... near the railway station'*

Reference to Context

The narrator ironically comments on the rituals and ceremonies associated with the dead. The reference to the meeting point of the three rivers introduces the image of the sacred Hindu legacy of Triveni Sangam in Allahabad.

Explanation

The narrator says the priest performing the last rites of his dead father directs the sons to carefully pick the ashes and bones that are left of him to be immersed in the holy water of the three sacred rivers that meet at a particular point. According to the Hindu belief, the sons face eastward and immerse the ashes of the father in Triveni in Allahabad and this ritual is significant for the salvation of the soul. Incidentally, the three rivers happen to meet near the railway station. So they go to that place and perform the sacred ceremony.

6. *Wo longstanding headstone... manage to do himself*

Reference to Context

Here the narrator reveals his father's lack of control over his life. He brings to our attention the inability of the father to manage his life according to his will.

Explanation

The narrator says that he has not erected any monument in the memory of his father. Had he erected 'a longstanding headstone' dedicated to his father, it would require the name of his father to be inscribed on it along with the inscription of two important dates - the day his father was born and another significant day when he died. However, the narrator amuses us by saying that the father lacked any control over his life, so he doesn't want to put the two significant dates in brackets. He says that his father was not even born as a result of his own efforts.

7. *'like his caesarian birth... in the fruit market'*

Reference to Context

The narrator describes his father as an inefficient person, who died without completing his worldly duties and had no control over the events of his life.

Explanation

In these lines the narrator refers to his father's caesarian birth and says that he did not ever manage to get his own way in life and it was a regular feature with him ever since he was born. He was born after a caesarian operation, which was performed implying that he was born with a reluctant disposition. Even at the time of his birth, he did not manage to come and face the world on his own. Thus, his birth in a congested Brahmin neighbourhood was an insignificant matter as was his death. He died as a result of heart failure in a local fruit market.

8. *'But someone told me... of a Madras newspaper'*

Reference to Context

In these lines the narrator is told by someone about his father's obituary notice in a local newspaper, so he gets restless in finding out the last traces of his father in the scraps of newspaper.

Explanation

The narrator says that a person known to him told him that his father had managed somehow to get an obituary notice published in an inside column of a Madras newspaper. It shows that though the narrator is trying hard to develop detachment from his father, but in his heart he grieves for his father who is no more.

9. *'Sold by the kilos... coriander and jaggery'* **Reference to**

Context

Here the narrator longs to read the obituary notice of his father. In describing the long process of how that bit of information would reach him, he shows his keenness in reading the obituary notice.

Explanation

The narrator says that the newspaper is sold in the kilos exactly four weeks after its publication. He knows that the newspaper will follow its own course in reaching him. First, the vendors will buy the newspaper in bulk. They will then sell it to the small grocery shopkeepers who will make newspaper cones in order to wrap the groceries like salt, jaggery and coriander. The narrator personalizes this process by including him in the process. He says that he also buys the groceries in the newspaper cones. So, he expects to come across the obituary notice in one of those newspaper wraps.

10. *'In newspaper cones... these obituary lines'*

Reference to Context

In these lines the narrator reveals his helplessness at the loss of his father and also shows that despite the estrangement that he shared with his father, he desperately searches for the last lines of obituary published by his father.

Explanation

The narrator says earlier he used to buy groceries in newspaper cones and would read the news for fun, but now his purpose is completely different. Now, he helplessly waits to read the obituary notice. He buys the groceries and hopes to find out the 'two lines', which have appeared in the newspaper in his father's memory.

11. *'And he left us... one annual ritual'*

Reference to Context

These are the concluding lines of Ramanujan's poem. Here the narrator conveys the intensity of the tragic event and recapitulates the sense of loss.

Explanation

The narrator goes back to the beginning where he started listing what his father has left behind. He counted the debts and analyzed the liabilities. But in the end, he brings out the tragic legacy where he mentions that his father has left behind a 'changed mother'. No words can express the grief of his mother who has completely changed after the death of her husband. He further says that the father has also left them with various ceremonies and rituals to be performed every year in his memory. Here, once again there's a reference to the Hindu ritual of performing various rites every year in the name of the deceased by his family members, especially sons.

2.4.3 Irony in *Obituary*

As the title of the poem suggests, obituary relates to a death and is written in a tone of grief. However, there is more irony and wit in the poem than grief. Ramanujan treats

the death of his father in a light-hearted tone. For instance, when the narrator talks about the legacy that the father has left behind, the alliteration created by the juxtaposition of 'debts and daughters', is rather ironic in treatment and style. Therefore, the legacy is more of a liability. There are many more instances of irony, as the father is called 'the burning type' and he 'burned properly at the cremation'. The father's birth through a caesarian operation in a congested Brahmin neighbourhood is as ironic as the insignificance of his death due to heart failure in a local fruit market. Even the concluding lines of the poem have a touch of irony, when the narrator continues with the list of legacy, wherein he says the father also left them 'a changed mother'. We can call the poem as wholly ironical in its treatment of the subject as well as the tone.

2.4.4 Theme of *Obituary*

The theme of the poem is the death of the father and its effect on family members including the narrator and his mother. The poem is written as a remembrance of the father who succumbed to heart failure. Therefore, the title of the poem prepares us for a mournful poem with a tone of grief. However, the narrator has treated the serious theme in a light-hearted and ironical, yet amusing manner. The narrator has cynically described his relation to his father as a strenuous one. He does not invoke a feeling of tragedy in his father's death. Rather, he becomes ironical and comical at several points in the poem. However, we find two obituaries in the poem - one that appear in an inside column of a local newspaper and the other, in the form of a creative response of a son on his father's death.

2.4.5 Structure of *Obituary*

The structure of the poem is quite irregular. However, if we look at the poem without reading it, it appears to have a coherent structure. Its outward appearance has a well defined structure with eight paragraphs of similar length: seven lines each. However, when we read the poem, we find it cannot be divided into different paragraphs. It is a regular and continuous piece of writing, which is thematically connected with the subsequent paragraphs. The paragraphs are linked to one another either with commas or in continuity of expression. However, each line within a paragraph is of a different length - ranging from seven words to one word. The narrator has used alliteration in order to emphasize his point of view, for instance, 'debts and daughters', 'being the burning type to point out two prominent instances.

The first paragraph begins with listing the legacy of the father and the rest of the poem is connected with the same theme throughout, differing here and there, in explaining more about father's nature and the varied rituals and ceremonies associated with the dead. Nevertheless, the concluding lines again connect with the opening lines and continue the listing further. Thus, we can say that despite its irregular structure, the poem is connected from beginning to end.

Activity 1

Read other poems by Ramanujan and write an essay describing his rendition of rural life. You may also comment on how it may have led to the creation of a specific type of Indo-Anglian poetry.

2.7 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- The poetry of A. K. Ramanujan is one of the finest contributions to the genre of Indo-Anglian poetry.
- Nissim Ezekiel (14 December 1924 - 9 January 2004) was a renowned Indian poet of Jewish origin.
- Nissim Ezekiel received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his work, *Latter-Day Psalms*.
- Ramanujan's poetry reflects his Indian experiences, recognizes his Hindu beliefs and ridicules Hindu superstitions.
- In the poem *A River*, the poet brings our attention the river Vaigai which dries up in the heat of the summer and fails to attract the attention of poets.
- The poet talks about the dirt hidden beneath the water bed. Now when the summer heat has reduced the river to a trickle, all the dirt lying underneath gets exposed which shows how the river has been neglected and misused by villagers.
- The poet goes on to say that the wet stones lying in the river bed look like crocodiles which are sleeping and the dry stones appear to be buffaloes.
- Ramanujan satirizes the poets who sing 'only' about the river during indicating their indifference to the loss and suffering caused by the flooding river.
- Ramanujan writes the poem *Obituary* as a creative response to the death of his father.

- After describing the house as a metaphor for their deteriorating quality of life, the poet brings our attention to his father, but he does that in an ironic manner. He says that the father was the 'burning type'.
- The poet, who performs the last rites, comments on the various rituals and ceremonies associated with the dead in the poem.
- Ezekiel's best known poem, *Night of the Scorpion* deals with an accident where a scorpion has stung a woman and the public gathered takes remedial measures to decrease the pain caused by the bite.
- The poem has been written in free verse and the lines do not rhyme. However, a large number of lines are octosyllabic interspersed with hexasyllabic lines.
- The poem, *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.* is collected in Nissim Ezekiel's sixth volume of poems titled *Hymns in Darkness*.
- Nissim Ezekiel unleashed humour and ridicules the erroneous yet funny ways in which grammar, syntax and idioms are used by many Indians while they make an attempt to speak or write in the English language.
- Though some of Ezekiel's poetry suggests a kind of desperation, the poet persona seems unable to hide it.

2.8 KEY TERMS

- **Irony:** Irony refers to a caustic remark or witty use of language in order to convey the opposite of what might be expected. It leads to incongruity by saying one thing and implying the opposite
- **Satire:** Satire refers to a medium through which the vices, shortcomings or follies are ridiculed using witty language
- **Alliteration:** Alliteration refers to a decorative device used by the poet in order to emphasize his point of view. It is the use of the same consonant at the beginning of each stressed syllable in a line of verse
- **Anglo-Indian poetry:** Anglo-Indian poetry refers to the body of work by the members of the Indian diaspora who write in the English language and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India

2.9 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

4. Madurai is a historic city famous for its rich cultural and literary heritage. It is located on the banks of the river Vaigai and is known for its old temples, which also include the very famous Meenakshi temple. The poet refers to the river Vaigai in this poem. He reveals two different pictures of the river in two different seasons - a river reduced to a thin trickle in summer and a river in flood in the rainy season.
5. Attipate Krishnaswamy Ramanujan was one of the finest Indo-American writers who wrote poems in English, Tamil and Kannada. He was a professor of Dravidian studies and Linguistics at the University of Chicago.

6. The significance of the names given to a couple of cows is to enhance the tragic drowning of a pregnant woman. It is an ironic situation in which the cows have been named Gopi and Brinda, but the woman who drowned is only referred to as the 'pregnant woman'. Possibly there could be a religious significance to the names given to the cows as Hindus worship cows as symbolic of maternal qualities such as selflessness and sacrifice.
10. The closing passage is tragic in a sense that it emphasizes the tragic drowning of a pregnant woman. The last passage is a mere repetition of the second stanza which was a description of the destruction caused by the floods. The repetition of the destruction in the last stanza is meant to highlight the fact that people have become used to such tragedies as the river floods every year. It further enhances the tragedy of a pregnant woman who died with perhaps twins in her womb.
11. The poet uses irony to describe the attitude of other poets. He says that though the poets have written poetry about the flooded river, they never referred to the havoc which the annual floods create. There is more irony in the lines 'The river has water enough to be poetic about only once a year....' It satirizes the poets who get inspiration to write the poetry only once a year when the river is in flood.
12. The poet makes use of striking similes to describe the beauty usually ignored by old and new poets. The poet says that the wet stones shine and resemble crocodiles lying in the water, with only their back showing. Another image is that of water buffaloes resting in the sun. The dry stones look like water buffaloes lounging in the sun.
13. The irony is that the poets 'only' write about floods. When the river is almost empty, no one bothers to notice and write a poem; but in rainy season, the poets write about the vitality of the same river in flood and at the same time they ignore the sufferings of people caused by the floods.
14. The expression 'as usual' highlights the cold and callous attitude of the people to the suffering and sorrow caused by the floods. People casually talk about how the river in flood destroyed the 'three village houses', drowned 'one pregnant woman' and 'a couple of cows', 'as usual'. It shows that people are used to the annual floods now.
15. In dealing with the rituals and ceremonies associated with the dead, Ramanujan displays his awareness of Hindu tradition. The reference to a point 'where three rivers meet' and 'more than one annual ritual' reveals that his Indian upbringing and an exposure to Hindu customs is well blended with his awareness and recognition of the flaws and faults of the ancient religion.
14. The father has left behind a dusty table full of papers, some unpaid debts, daughters to be married, a house that is in a decaying condition, a changed mother and more than one annual ritual.
15. The poet refers to his father as someone who has always struggled in life to meet the family obligations. He was an ordinary man who was struggling (burning) throughout his life and finally succumbed to death. Therefore, the poet says that he burnt throughout his life and finally burnt well at the cremation.
16. According to the poet, the mother has changed due to pain and agony that the death of his father has caused.
17. The priest directs the sons to carefully pick the ashes and bones and facing eastwards immerse them at a point where the three rivers meet.

14. The caesarian birth of the father is suggestive of the inability of the father to manage his worldly affairs. The poet implies that his father was not even born as a result of his own efforts in the sense that medical intervention was required.
15. The small groceries use the old newspaper cones to wrap salt, jaggery and coriander. The poet expects to find the two lines of obituary, published in a newspaper, which will soon reach a grocery shop.
16. The poet makes use of several alliterations, for instance, 'debts and daughters', 'being the burning type' and 'several spinal discs'.
17. When the poet talks about the legacy that the father has left behind, the list includes 'debts and daughters', which is rather ironic.
18. The theme of the poem is the death of the father and its effect on the family members including the poet and his mother. The poem is written memory of the father, who recently passed away.
19. The poet, in this incident, records four kinds of responses—the religious mystical response of the villagers; the rational response of the speaker's father; the ritualistic response of the holy man and; the self-sacrificial response of the mother.
20. The closing lines where the mother thanks God that the scorpion had picked her instead of her children stresses the innate Indianness of the poem where the mother is considered to be the central figure of selflessness and sacrifice. While the poem tries to establish multiple responses to the sting, it ends with a strong emotional resonance embedded in the mother's word of thanks to God. This intensifies the poem's complexity as it positions Ezekiel as a writer who is intimately familiar with Indian culture replete with superstition and prescribed feminine qualities of self-sacrifice and altruism.
21. The language of *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.* is interesting. Since it is an informal party the language used has a conversational tone. Such conversational language is a perfect backdrop for a party. Repetitive use of the present continues tense ('departing', 'meeting', 'knowing', 'smiling and smiling', 'cooking nicely', 'appreciating the good spirit') not only suggests the misuse of grammar and the Indianization of the Queen's language but also indicates the continuous progression of the party.
22. The speaker introduces the readers to the farewell party, the central character at the part, Miss Pushpa T. S. and the guests. The speaker tells the readers about Miss Pushpa, her family and her characteristics. The readers get to know that Miss Pushpa would be leaving the country soon for better career opportunity and that she lived in Surat, Gujarat.

2.10 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Short-Answer Questions

1. In the poem *A River*, what similarities can be found between the old and new poets?
2. What is the theme of the poem *A River!*
3. Why did Ramanujan think that poets talked more about the river during floods?

4. What were the incomplete tasks of the father in the poem *Obituary*?
5. Why was Ramanujan keen to look for the obituary in the newspapers?
6. Write a note on the works of Nissim Ezekiel.
7. Give a summary of the poem *Night of the Scorpion*.
8. What was the element of Indianess in the poem *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.I*
9. Write about the structure of the poems by Ramanujan.
10. What are the structural differences in Ezekiel's poems?
11. What was the significance of the coconut tree in the yard in the poem *Obituary*!

Long-Answer Questions

1. Write a critical appreciation of A. K. Ramanujan's poem *A River*.
2. Justify the use of irony in the poem *A River*.
3. Write a critical appreciation of A. K. Ramanujan's poem 'Obituary'.
4. Discuss the structure of the poem *Obituary*.
5. Comment on the four voices that have been given in the poem *Night of the Scorpion*.

2.11 FURTHER READING

Naik, M.K., *A History of Indian English Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1982.

Iyengar, K.R.S., *Indian Writing in English*, Sterling Publication, New Delhi, 1962.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi, *The Twice Born Fiction*, Arnold Heinemann, Delhi, 1971.

23. The caesarian birth of the father is suggestive of the inability of the father to manage his worldly affairs. The poet implies that his father was not even born as a result of his own efforts in the sense that medical intervention was required.
24. The small groceries use the old newspaper cones to wrap salt, jaggery and coriander. The poet expects to find the two lines of obituary, published in a newspaper, which will soon reach a grocery shop.
25. The poet makes use of several alliterations, for instance, 'debts and daughters', 'being the burning type' and 'several spinal discs'.
26. When the poet talks about the legacy that the father has left behind, the list includes 'debts and daughters', which is rather ironic.
27. The theme of the poem is the death of the father and its effect on the family members including the poet and his mother. The poem is written in memory of the father, who recently passed away.
28. The poet, in this incident, records four kinds of responses—the religious mystical response of the villagers; the rational response of the speaker's father; the ritualistic response of the holy man and; the self-sacrificial response of the mother.

29. The closing lines where the mother thanks God that the scorpion had picked her instead of her children stresses the innate Indianness of the poem where the mother is considered to be the central figure of selflessness and sacrifice. While the poem tries to establish multiple responses to the sting, it ends with a strong emotional resonance embedded in the mother's word of thanks to God. This intensifies the poem's complexity as it positions Ezekiel as a writer who is intimately familiar with Indian culture replete with superstition and prescribed feminine qualities of self-sacrifice and altruism.
30. The language of *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.* is interesting. Since it is an informal party the language used has a conversational tone. Such conversational language is a perfect backdrop for a party. Repetitive use of the present continues tense ('departing', 'meeting', 'knowing', 'smiling and smiling', 'cooking nicely', 'appreciating the good spirit') not only suggests the misuse of grammar and the Indianization of the Queen's language but also indicates the continuous progression of the party.
31. The speaker introduces the readers to the farewell party, the central character at the part, Miss Pushpa T. S. and the guests. The speaker tells the readers about Miss Pushpa, her family and her characteristics. The readers get to know that Miss Pushpa would be leaving the country soon for better career opportunity and that she lived in Surat, Gujarat.

2.10 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Short-Answer Questions

4. In the poem *A River*, what similarities can be found between the old and new poets?
 5. What is the theme of the poem *A River!*
 6. Why did Ramanujan think that poets talked more about the river during floods?
 10. What were the incomplete tasks of the father in the poem *Obituary*?
 11. Why was Ramanujan keen to look for the obituary in the newspapers?
 12. Write a note on the works of Nissim Ezekiel.
 13. Give a summary of the poem *Night of the Scorpion*.
 14. What was the element of Indianess in the poem *Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.I*
 15. Write about the structure of the poems by Ramanujan.
12. What are the structural differences in Ezekiel's poems?
 13. What was the significance of the coconut tree in the yard in the poem *Obituary*!

Long-Answer Questions

6. Write a critical appreciation of A. K. Ramanujan's poem *A River*.
7. Justify the use of irony in the poem *A River*.
8. Write a critical appreciation of A. K. Ramanujan's poem 'Obituary'.
9. Discuss the structure of the poem *Obituary*.

10. Comment on the four voices that have been given in the poem *Night of the Scorpion*.

2.11 FURTHER READING

Naik, M.K., *A History of Indian English Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1982.

Iyengar, K.R.S., *Indian Writing in English*, Sterling Publication, New Delhi, 1962.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi, *The Twice Born Fiction*, Arnold Heinemann, Delhi, 1971.

UNIT 5 JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

3.0 INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra is one of the finest contributions to the genre of Indo-Anglian poetry, which is undoubtedly a significant part of Indian literature. The sensibility, themes and ideas are Indian; only the medium of expression is English. We can assume that Indo-Anglian poetry began in the 1960s and the poets who have developed it include Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, A. K. Ramanujan and Keki N. Daruwalla. The characteristic feature of Indo-Anglian poets is that they choose their themes from a wide range of Indian legends and Indian folklore and express their views with reference to the contemporary situation in India. Poverty and hunger have been two staple themes as well as challenges that continue to influence poetry and intellectual thought. The poem *Hunger* deals with two kinds of hunger - one is sexual desire and the other is starvation due to poverty. Jayanta Mahapatra is certainly among those Indo-Anglian poets who have the ability to condense vast themes into short poems.

3.1 UNIT OBJECTIVES

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

- Discuss Jayanta Mahapatra as an Indian poet writing in English
- Critically assess the poems: *Hunger* and *Whorehouse In A Calcutta Street*

3.2 JAYANTA MAHAPATRA: A BRIEF SKETCH

A physicist by training and a poet by compulsion, Jayanta Mahapatra was born on 22 October 1928 in Cuttack, Odisha, to a lower middle class family. He started his career in 1949 as a physics teacher in different colleges of Odisha. However, he started writing poetry at the age of 38 and his first collection of poems, *'Swayamvara and Other Poems'* was published in 1971.

Mahapatra is known for his originality and variety of themes. Poverty, hunger, starvation and sexuality constitute some of the dominant themes in his poetry. His style of writing, use of the English language as well as the choice and the treatment of various themes is remarkable. The depth and subtlety of Mahapatra's poetry has enriched the genre of Indo-Anglian poetry. His most famous works of poetry include *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*, *Hunger*, *The Exile*, *The Moon Moments*, *Dawn At Puri* and *Total Solar Eclipse*, to name a few.

Mahapatra became the first Indian English poet to win the Sahitya Akademy award in 1981. He was awarded the Padmashree degree in 2009. He was also awarded Litt. D. by Utkal University in 2006. On 2 May 2009, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Ravenshaw University.

3.3 HUNGER: TEXT AND SUMMARY

Hunger

It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back. The fisherman said:
Will you have her, carelessly, trailing his nets and his nerves, as though his
words sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself. I saw his white
bone thrash his eyes.

I followed him across the sprawling sands,

my mind thumping in the flesh's sling.

Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in.

Silence gripped my sleeves; his body clawed at the froth

his old nets had only dragged up from the seas.

In the flickering dark his lean to opened like a wound. The wind was I, and the
days and nights before. Palm fronds scratched my skin. Inside the shack an oil
lamp splayed the hours bunched to those walls. Over and over the sticky soot
crossed the space of my mind.

I heard him say: My daughter, she's just turned fifteen... Feel her. I'll be back
soon, your bus leaves at nine. The sky fell on me, and a father's exhausted wife.
Long and lean, her years were cold as rubber. She opened her wormy legs wide.
I felt the hunger there, the other one, the fish slithering, turning inside.

SUMMARY

The poem begins with an acceptance of an intense desire by the protagonist or the speaker, who narrates an incident. The speaker begins by admitting the urge to satisfy the pangs of sexual desire. Right at the onset of the poem, the poet introduces the two metaphors of hunger: one in the literal sense and the other as sexual urge. In the face of the metaphorical urge, the speaker finds a fisherman who can make an offer to satiate his sexual hunger. On finding this fisherman, the speaker is asked in a careless and casual manner if he would really want to have a girl? In asking him, the fisherman pretends to be indifferent to his answer as if his answer would make no difference to him. The intentional carelessness of the fisherman in asking the protagonist conveys a sense that perhaps this has become a routine feature for him, a daily struggle with poverty and hunger. 'Will you have her?', the question itself relegates the individual identity of the girl as if she were an insignificant commodity. However, the protagonist started walking behind the fisherman who was 'trailing his nets and his nerves'. The fisherman was dragging his nets behind him, which showed his anxiety in leading the protagonist towards the gratification of his hunger. Despite the fisherman's pretence of carelessness in asking the question, the protagonist could see him dragging and pulling together his nerves as well. The protagonist observed that his indifference in asking the question was an attempt to wipe out the

guilt from his purpose. The fisherman seemed to be feigning ignorance so as to validate the purpose itself. The white bone seemed to 'thrash his eyes', as though his inner being was in conflict with his physical being and wanted to obliterate his vision.

The speaker or the protagonist says that he followed the fisherman across the extreme stretches of sand on the sea beach, which had spread far and wide. While following the fisherman, the protagonist felt the violent beating in his mind. His mind was experiencing turbulence as he wanted immediate gratification for his sexual hunger. Just as the sling supports a fractured arm, similarly his flesh or body was supporting his agitation in his mind. At the same time, the protagonist was feeling a sense of guilt in following the fisherman for his intense desire. He felt that the redemption of his sin would perhaps lay only in burning the very house that he lived in. The agitation in his mind sought a way to regain peace of mind through a gesture of repentance. Silence had completely gripped him and he felt as if his tongue has been paralyzed. It seemed to him that even his sleeves had been tightly seized by silence. He also observed that the nets that the fisherman was dragging behind him, had some foam upon them as a result of his casting the nets into the sea. However, the froth on the fisherman's net could also be suggestive of the fact that wrong doings always leave some traces behind.

The protagonist reached the fisherman's hut and it was already getting dark by that time. Against the flickering light, his lean body appeared like a wound. This particular imagery reveals the rough and uneven conditions of the shelter where the fisherman lived with his daughter. It was a lean to cabin that was a clear sign of their poverty. At this moment the protagonist felt that he was as free as the wind. The leaves of the palm tree scratched his skin revealing the scars of guilt. For him, all the hours were similar as they were confined in the same shack. Hours in the shack are presented as stacks bunched up to the walls against the flickering light of the oil lamp. The smoke coming from the oil lamp burning inside the shack seemed to be penetrating the blank mind of the protagonist. This feeling of being covered in 'soot' was also an outcome of his sense of guilt and shame, as the image of 'soot' is suggestive of sin and dark deeds. Although the soot is covering the shack of the fisherman, yet it is the mind of the protagonist in which it is penetrating.

The fisherman tells the protagonist that his daughter has just turned fifteen. He asked the speaker to feel free to 'feel' his daughter and hurriedly leaves the shack saying that he would soon return. Before going out, the fisherman also reminded him that his bus would leave at nine, implying that till then he can gratify his hunger. The speaker felt as if the sky had fallen on him and he felt an inexpressible shock. Now he understood the tricks which the fisherman had been employing in order to fetch customers for her daughter so that he could make some money out of those deals. The protagonist felt that in doing so, the fisherman had already used up all sorts of tricks to different customers and his stock could well be exhausted. The fisherman's invitation seemed unabashed to him and he was stunned by it. He realized the fisherman saying that his daughter has just turned fifteen, could also be one of his tricks. However, the girl's years felt like cold rubber due to her impoverished upbringing. The fisherman's daughter was in front of him. She was tall and thin and knew the situation all too well. He uses the term 'wormy' for her legs as she opened them wide, suggesting her abject condition. The description of her legs indicates her impoverished status as a child. The girl's gesture made the protagonist realize that it was sheer poverty which had forced the father-daughter duo to resort to prostitution in order to make some money. For the first time the protagonist understood the meaning of 'hunger'. He realized that just as he was hungry, she too was hungry, but the nature of the two hungers was entirely different. While the protagonist's hunger is based on

sexual urge, the girl's hunger is an outcome of poverty. Thus, the two hungers - sexual desire and poverty are brought together casually here. The protagonist understands that she is offering her body to him because she needs money to satisfy the hunger of her belly. He has found out the feeling of an empty stomach as though a fish turned inside. The girl was as helpless as the fish caught in the net. While the fish struggles to get rid of it, the girl can do nothing except being consumed.

3.3.1 *Hunger*: Historical Context

Mahapatra's poetry is influenced by the history and culture of Odisha, which constitutes the main theme of his poetry in general. The thematic range of his poetry, is wide and he successfully deals with human relations and different social problems of varying intensity and horror. Mahapatra admits the impact of his unhappy childhood, his poetry. Of *Hunger*, he had said 'I was writing with experience'. He admitted to have had a traumatic childhood and always felt alone. However, *Hunger* is one of Mahapatra's famous poems, that shares its theme and concern with another poem: *The Whorehouse In A Calcutta Street*. In both these poems, the theme is sexuality. However, in *Hunger*, poverty and sexuality lead to a hunger of two different kinds.

3.3.2 Important Passages for Explanation

1. 'It was hard to believe... Will you have her, carelessly,'

Reference to Context

These are the opening lines of Jayanta Mahapatra's poem *Hunger*. The poet speaks through the expressions of the protagonist, who narrates his experience with a fisherman and his daughter. In these lines we find an acceptance of an intense desire felt by the protagonist.

Explanation

The protagonist says that he was feeling an incredible urge for sexual gratification. It was so intense that he could not believe himself. However, he found out that a fisherman can help him in this regard and he approached the fisherman. The fisherman asked him very carelessly if he would have the girl. The fisherman's tone was casual in asking the question.

2. 'Trailing his nets and... Thrash his eyes.'

Reference to Context

These lines have been taken from Jayanta Mahapatra's poem *Hunger*. In these lines the protagonist gives an account of his observation of the fisherman's behavior.

Explanation

The protagonist says that he was willing to go with the fisherman in order to gratify his hunger for sexual gratification. However, despite the casual tone the fisherman was nervous as he was dragging his nets. The protagonist observed that in dragging the nets, it appeared that he was dragging his nerves as well. The fisherman's indifference in asking the protagonist whether he would have the girl aroused anxiety in the protagonist. It appeared to him as though the fisherman pretended to

be indifferent to validate the very purpose of asking the question. However, despite his pretence, the protagonist could see his white bone thrashing in his vision, and by extension, his inner self was at conflict with his outward behaviour.

3. *'I followed him across... the flesh's sling.'*

Reference to Context

In these lines the protagonist gives an account of the way through which the fisherman took him to his shack. Whereas the fisherman was pretending to hide his anxiety, the protagonist was also experiencing a similar anxiety.

Explanation

The protagonist says that he followed the fisherman across the extreme stretches of sand on the sea beach, which had spread far and wide. The use of alliteration in 'sprawling sand' enhances the stretch and further elaborates it. While following the fisherman, the protagonist felt the violent beating in his mind. His mind was experiencing turbulence as he wanted immediate gratification for his sexual hunger. Just as the sling supports a fractured arm, similarly his flesh or body was supporting his agitated mind.

4. *'Hope lay perhaps in... dragged upfront the seas.'*

Reference to Context

Here the protagonist admits a sense of guilt while following the fisherman. He appears to be thinking the ways of atoning for the sins which is about to commit.

Explanation

The protagonist was feeling a sense of guilt in following the fisherman because of his apparent hunger for sexual gratification. He felt that the redemption of his sin would perhaps lay only in burning the very house that he lived in. The agitation in his mind also sought a way to regain his peace of mind through a gesture of repentance. He was completely gripped by silence and felt as if his tongue has been paralyzed. It appeared to him that even his sleeves had been tightly seized by silence. He also observed the fisherman was dragging the nets behind him which had some froth on it; a result of casting the nets into the sea time and time again. The foam on the fisherman's net could also be suggestive of the fact that wrong doings always leave some traces behind.

5. *7n the flickering dark... bunched to those walls.'*

Reference to Context

Here the protagonist presents a picture of the fisherman's poverty. His shack is barely big enough for the two of them.

Explanation

Here the protagonist has reached the shack of the fisherman and it was already getting dark by that time. Against the flickering dark, his lean body appeared like a wound. It also reveals the condition of the rough shelter where the fisherman lived with his daughter. It was a lean-to cabin (a cabin with only one slope of roof) that was a clear sign of their poverty. Though the poet has not given a detailed account of the fisherman's financial difficulty, the appearance of his shack reflects the impoverished condition in which he lives with his daughter. At this moment the protagonist feels that he was as free as the wind.

6. *' Palm fronds scratched my... bunched to those walls.'*

Reference to Context

The protagonist observes the miserable condition and poverty in which the fisherman lives with his daughter.

Explanation

When the protagonist reached the fisherman's shack, he observed the clear signs of poverty which were reflected in the one slope roof and the flickering light against perpetual darkness. The leaves of the palm tree scratched his skin revealing the scars of guilt. He was experiencing the agitation of intense desire versus guilt with which he had come to the fisherman's shack. It seemed to him as if all the hours had become similar owing to their confinement in the shack. Hours in the shack are described as stacks bunched up to the walls of the shack splayed by the burning oil lamp.

7. *"Over and over... space of my mind."*

Reference to Context

Here the protagonist describes his feeling of being saturated with smoke in his blank mind.

Explanation

The smoke coming from the oil lamp burning inside the shack seemed to be penetrating the blank mind of the protagonist. Although the soot covered the fisherman's shack, yet it was penetrating in the mind of the protagonist. This feeling of being filled up with 'soot' was an outcome of his sense of guilt and shame, as the image of 'soot' is suggestive of sin itself.

8. *'/ heard him say ... leaves at nine.'*

Reference to Context

In these lines the protagonist merely repeats the words of the fisherman as he directs him to finish what he came for before his bus leaves at nine.

Explanation

The protagonist says that the fisherman told him that his daughter had just turned fifteen. Fifteen was perhaps considered the age when a girl attains fullness and freshness of beauty. However, talking

about his own daughter, the fisherman continued in an indifferent tone. He told the protagonist to feel his daughter and that he would return soon. In offering his daughter to the protagonist, and labeling her as fresh as fifteen, the fisherman prostitutes his own daughter and exposes the disgrace to which he has had to lower himself in order to survive poverty and other trying situations. While going out, the fisherman reminds the protagonist that the bus leaves at nine and has time till then to finish his business with the girl.

9. *'Thesky fell on father's exhausted wile.'*

Reference to Context

Here the protagonist expresses a great shock in finding out the fisherman selling off his daughter to make some money.

Explanation

The protagonist says that it seemed to him like a heavy bolt and as if the sky had fallen on him, when he found out that the fisherman had brought him to his shack in order to sell off his own daughter of just fifteen years. Again, the fisherman had directed him to 'feel her' till he returns, in a very casual and careless manner. Now he understood all the tricks of the father that the fisherman was. It appeared to him as if the fisherman had already used off all his tricks and allured many more customers for his daughter.

10. *"Long and lean ... slithering, turning inside."* **Reference to**

Context

These are the concluding lines of Jayanta Mahapatra's poem *Hunger*. Here, the protagonist comes to realize the true sense of 'hunger', one that he experienced, and the other that the girl experienced. His gratification of hunger would lead to the gratification of the girl's hunger, which she experiences due to extreme poverty.

Explanation

The daughter of the fisherman appeared before the protagonist and he noticed that she was very thin. Perhaps, in saying that the girl was just fifteen, the fisherman had made an attempt to lure him as a customer. She did not say anything as she knew exactly what to do. She just spread her 'wormy legs wide'. Perhaps, her thin and emaciated appearance made the protagonist use the word 'wormy'. The protagonist realized from her gesture that she was doing all this to satisfy her 'hunger', which was very different from his 'hunger'. Her hunger was an outcome of poverty, whereas the protagonist's hunger was carnal. Through this gruesome juxtaposition, the poet

explains the nature and genesis of the two different kinds of hunger: one that is a result of poverty and the other that is a response to a bodily urge.

3.3.3 *Hunger*'. A Comment on the Social Issue of Poverty

Jayanta Mahapatra is a poet of Indian sensibility who has always shown keen interest in taking up themes that range from nature and religion to sexuality and prostitution. His deftness in presenting the realities of women's lives has always been significant to the Indian scenario. The pathetic condition of women in Indian society has always been one of the main issues that have often been addressed by Mahapatra. Mahapatra's women range from being wives, village women, city women, seductresses, adolescent girls as well as prostitutes. Prostitution is an outcome of poverty, and thus, in addressing the issue of poverty, Mahapatra has also addressed the issue of prostitution.

In the poem, the poet has dealt with two images of hunger: Hunger related to flesh and hunger related to poverty. The poem is a critique on the girl's objectification by her own father as a result of poverty. As the girl mechanically opened her legs wide, the protagonist is made to understand the hunger of an empty stomach.

3.3.4 Theme of the Poem

The theme of the poem is poverty and sexuality. *Hunger*, is a poem that refers to a strong desire for physical gratification, as well as the physiological need for food and sustenance. In both the meanings of hunger, the end result has to be gratification. The poem describes the experience of the protagonist, with a fisherman and his daughter. Although, no details are given regarding the financial condition of the fisherman, the inference that he is at the fringes of society, can be deduced from his behaviour and the condition of the place where he lives. Thus, it is evident that his impoverished condition had compelled him to use his daughter as a commodity, in order to earn a livelihood. He employs many tricks in fetching customers for his daughter, who is aware of the situation, and surrenders to her father's will. Thus, the customer goes to the fisherman's daughter, in order to gratify his sexual hunger and in turn satisfies their hunger emanating from poverty.

3.3.5 Structure of the Poem

Hunger is a short poem with a compact and concise structure fit to be adapted into a full length story. However, Mahapatra's excellence in dealing with the structure of *Hunger* is evident from his capacity to condense his material and present it within a confined space that may reflect his technique and aesthetics. The way in which he has narrated the story in the form of a short poem is remarkable. The poem doesn't only tell a story, but also portrays three characters in a simple realistic manner. The whole account is presented to us in a coherent and concise manner. Mahapatra's choice of words and his skillful arrangement is not only praiseworthy but also a reflection of his craft. The sheer brilliance of originality lies in his sentence construction and the use of metaphors. For instance: 'The flesh was heavy on my back' conveys the intense desire of the protagonist. Similarly, 'My mind thumping in the flesh's sling' conveys the violent thumping of his mind, supported by the flesh.

The structure is coherent in its appearance, theme and literary meaning. The poet assumes the role of the speaker, who is also the protagonist and the narrator. Even though words are not given as reported speech, the poem follows the thoughts

of the protagonist as he finds his way to the fisherman's shack. Similarly, the girl does not utter a single word in the poem, but we know a lot about her. Likewise, the fisherman's speech is also negligible, however, we recognize him through the poet's description.

Hunger is a comment on the broad and vivid theme of poverty and sexuality written in a compact and terse structure, possible only in Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry.

3.4 THE WHOREHOUSE IN A CALCUTTA STREET: TEXT AND SUMMARY

Walk right in. It is yours.

Where the house smiles wryly into the lighted street.

Think of the women

You wished to know and haven't.

The faces in the posters, the public hoardings.

And who are all there together,

Those who put the house there

For the startled eye to fall upon,

Where pasts join, and where they part.

The scared hollow courtyard

That harbours the promise of a great conspiracy.

Yet nothing you do

Makes a heresy of that house.

Are you ashamed to believe you're in this?

Then think of the secret moonlight of the women

Left behind, their false chatter,

Perhaps their reminding themselves of looked-after

children and home:

The shooting stars in the eager darkness of return.

Dream children, dark superfluous;

You miss them in the house's dark spaces,
How can't you?
even the women don't wear them -
Like jewels or precious stones at the throat;
The faint feeling deep at a woman's center
That brings back the discarded things:
The little turnings of blood
At the far edge of the rainbow.
You fall back against her in the dumb light,
Trying to learn something more about women
While she does what she thinks proper to please you,
The sweet, the little things, the imagined;
Until the statue of the man within
You've believed in throughout the years
Comes back to you, a disobeying toy
And the walls you wanted to pull down,
Mirror only of things mortal, and passing by:
Like a girl holding on to your wide wildness,
As though it were real, as though the recurring voice
Tore the membrane of your half-woken mind
When, like a door, her words close behind:
'Hurry, will you? Let me go,'
and her lonely breath thrash against your kind.

SUMMARY

Mahapatra's poetry often deals with the theme of prostitution and what causes this evil in society, namely, economic disparity and social injustice. Unlike other poets who make extensive use of euphemisms, Mahapatra, never shies away from 'tickling our basic instinct, nor does he indulge in sentimental whispering, raving or blathering' (T.M. Bhaskar). In his poetry, women and their predicaments are treated with care and in a manner which is restrained, unsentimental, delicate and above all realistic. *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street* begins with an invitation to enter a whorehouse and ends with the prostitute asking the protagonist to leave. The ending is as sharp as the beginning as both come across as instructions. Like his other poems, this poem also sheds light on the deplorable condition of prostitutes and explores the mundane reality of their everyday struggle against poverty, corruption and other forms of exploitation.

The poem abruptly begins by inviting a customer into a whorehouse. The poet wants the customer to assume that he owns this place. It appears that the house is smiling ironically at the arrival of another customer. The poet asks the customer to give a thought to those women whom he wanted to have in his life but could never have and perhaps never will. The poet reminds the customer of all the attractive faces he has seen in advertisements, posters and public hoardings. All these faces and images depicted on bill boards, meant to allure men with their charm and beauty are conjured as paralled images of lust and rapacity. However, the customer has never had any chance of being close to such beautiful and attractive women whose faces are depicted on banners as spectacles of beauty. The poet informs the customer that in the whorehouse, he will be able to see some faces similar to those which he had seen in posters and had always fancied. Outside the whorehouse, the customer is being lured by the commercial world by designing such advertisements whose sole motive is to appeal to customers and compel them to use their products. Sometimes, the customer may have felt the desire to have an opportunity to really have access to the women appearing in such advertisements. The customer once again finds himself lured to finding similar faces, if not exactly the same ones, in the whorehouse.

The whorehouse is ironically referred to as the 'sacred' hollow courtyard in order to further tempt the customer to leave his inhibitions and be there with a free mind. A customer may feel hesitant or ashamed in having visited a whorehouse as it has certain taboos associated with it. Also the courtyard of this place is compared to a fake promise of commercial conspiracies. Thus, the poet further reveals to the customer that at a place like this, the customer himself is the target of great conspiracies.

If the customer goes back without achieving what he had desired, the conspiracy fails. However, if the customer makes the payment of a certain amount and is satisfied with the services of the whorehouse and as he goes back with a promise to return, the conspiracy is said to have succeeded. This is the bitter truth of such a place. The poet further tells the customer that his good intentions or actions cannot alter the already widely accepted opinion of people about the whorehouse. When a house is called a whorehouse, no effort to contradict the opinion can ever be successful. If the customer still feels ashamed to have entered a whorehouse, he should think about those women whom he has left behind and come here. The poet is trying to create a parallel with those women who are childless even though they have always wished to have children. Yet they try to satisfy their longing to have children by the false imagination that they have got children.

There is a reference to dream children or imaginary children who do not exist in reality. The customer is asked to think of them and the conditions under which they are imagined. Even though the childless women who invent these dream children, do not keep thinking about them all the time. There

is a vivid use of simile and metaphor in these lines. As a symbol, a woman is usually identified with the 'discarded things'. She is portrayed as sexually oppressed by the so-called patriarchal system and poverty. The image of the women is vividly presented in the poem by merging the similes and metaphors. The dream children are depicted as a matter of destroying the emotions of human kindness.

The customer may have visited the whorehouse with an intention of trying to learn something more about women. He may not have visited the whorehouse only for physical gratification, but his purpose may have been to get to know these women in a better way and understanding their psychology. However, the woman in the whorehouse does what is required of her and tries to please the customer with sweet little things. She may also make true what the customer fancied about her. She does what she thinks proper to make her customer happy. A customer would move back a little in a dimly lit room and would most likely collide with one of the other prostitutes who may have entered the room to be looked at and surveyed by the customer.

'Dumb light' also refers to a moment when no one speaks. Suddenly he feels that his inner self has to convey something to him. However, it appears like a disobeying toy. 'A disobeying toy' is a metaphorical phrase that refers to the customer when his inner self reveals itself to him. His inner self is compared to a toy, which somehow, does not obey his command and acts in the way he wants to according to his own free will. The customer may have visited the whorehouse with the intention of not just having physical pleasures but also emotional solace, which is torn to bits with a simple command by the prostitute mechanically engaged in her business. She deals with her customers in a professional manner- as she sees herself as a commodity and the customers as buyers with limited access to her time. In this regard, to think of finding emotional comfort at such a place, is a foolish thought. When a slightly watchful and observant customer tries to study the psychology of the woman in the whorehouse, she hurriedly and mechanically gets busy in doing all sorts of things which are part of her profession and a matter of routine for her. Her only purpose is the sexual gratification of the customer. Thus, her initiative reveals to the customer his own inner being. At this point of time, he is able to discover his own identity, and he feels disabled to command his inner self because a conflict between his conscious mind and subconscious mind comes into play.

The customer finds that he has always disregarded such acts of physical pleasure. At the same time he has also felt a suppressed desire of having such an experience. While the customer is lost in his inner conflicts, he is sharply jolted back to reality. The words of the whore completely 'thrash' him when she asks him to hurry up and finish the business as soon as he can. He is shocked at the disconnected emotional response from her, as she wants to get away from him as quickly as possible and get involved with the next customer and her next payment. This is the final reality of the whorehouse which is presented in a rebuke-like phrase and reflects the poet's craft as he does not subordinate sentiment to craft. The terseness of the prostitute's tone and the command given to the customer to finish and leave so that she may move to her next appointment is the disturbing truth of the prostitute's life and by extension of the whorehouse itself.

3.4.1 Important Passages for Explanation

1. *'Walk right in... to know and haven't.'*

Reference to Context

These are the opening lines of Mahapatra's poem *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*. The poet becomes the speaker and talks to the customer who is inhibited to walk in the whorehouse. It may be possible that the poet wants us to imagine that the whorehouse is itself speaking these words or is to be imagined as having said these words to somebody who is about to enter.

Explanation

The poet assumes the role of a speaker who is asking people at random to be customers and to enter the whorehouse. He passes on the sense of belongingness to the customer as the whorehouse belongs to any visitor who may have it deliberately and intentionally in search of physical pleasures and sexual gratification. There is another image of the whorehouse smiling in the lighted street as the whorehouse is amused to find yet another customer. The speaker lures the visitor in thinking about the women he had always fancied. There must have been some women in the customer's life whom he desired but could not get. The speaker asks him to ponder over those women whom he always wished to know more closely but couldn't because of the circumstances.

2. *"The faces in the posters... the public hoardings."*

Reference to Context

In these lines, the poet reminds the customer of all the attractive faces he had seen and desired in advertisements. These lines present an ironic comment on a society that portrays women as objects of desire.

Explanation

In these lines the poet asks the customer to think about all those beautiful and attractive faces that he sees in advertisements in the form of posters or public hoardings. The irony of the situation is that even if these advertisements are meant to popularize a product to be used by men, they have a sensual picture of a woman selling that product. So, the idea behind this facade is to arouse the men and attract them to buy the product. But in all this, it is the women on the posters who become the object of desire.

3. *'And who are all... and where they part.'*

Reference to Context

Here the poet tempts the customer with the possibility of finding someone similar to the one(s) he must have fancied at some point in his life.

Explanation

The poet says to customer that all the beautiful and attractive women whom he has desired in some point in his life are there in the whorehouse, not exactly the ones he desired, but similar faces are all there together. In these lines the poet mocks the male libido which only craves physical gratification devoid of emotional involvement. Moreover, in doing so he, perhaps unknowingly[^] makes a broad generalization that all-women in advertisements and posters are the same. The element of objectification is unmistakable. The use of the word 'similar' is the clincher in this section as it reinforces

the idea of a generic statement being made to women who are available for public consumption either through billboards or in whorehouses. The poet goes further to state that the whorehouse has been put up for men like him by women who appear 'similar' to the glamorous women he sees on display.

4. *"The sacred hollow courtyard... a heresy of that house."*

Reference to Context

In these lines, the poet ironically refers to the whorehouse as sacred in order to further lure the customer to leave his inhibitions and get inside the whorehouse with a free mind.

Explanation

The speaker, whether it is the whorehouse itself or some spokesman on behalf of the whorehouse, asks the visitor to get ready to enjoy the pleasures that he is seeking. There is certainly a social stigma attached to a whorehouse and that may be the reason that the customer is being hesitant to go there without being guilty. However, the speaker compares the 'sacred hollow courtyard' to a false promise of commercial conspiracy. So, whether the customer goes there or not will not alter the already widely accepted opinion of people regarding the whorehouse. No action whatsoever can remove the stigma associated with the whorehouse. In other words, whether or not the customer enters or abstains on grounds of prudence or morality, the tarnished impression that the whorehouse carries will remain with it forever.

5. *"Are you ashamed to believe... eager darkness of return."*

Reference to Context

Here the poet tries to convince the customer that it is not a shameful act to have visited a brothel and in case he is feeling ashamed of his visit to the forbidden place, he should think about the women he has left behind.

Explanation

The poet asks the customer if it is such a shameful act to be in the brothel! He asks him if he feels embarrassed to admit that he has come to a whorehouse. He tells him to think about those women he left behind to be in the brothel. Perhaps they remind themselves of the 'looked after children' and a 'home' that they never had.

6. *'Dream children, dark, superfluous.. . edge of the rainbow.'*

Reference to Context

The poet talks about the imaginary children and refers to them as- dream children. However, the dream children are depicted as a matter of destroying the emotions of human kindness.

Explanation

The poet makes a brilliant use of metaphor in describing the imaginary children who do not exist in reality. In calling them 'dream children', the poet reminds us of a famous essay *Dream Children* by Charles Lamb, in which he imagines having a couple of children and expresses his thoughts and fancies about them. The customer is asked to think of the dream children, even though the childless women who invent them do not spend all their time thinking about them. The sense of guilt of a customer deepens when he thinks of the women whom he has left behind in order to go to a brothel, thereby, seeking new experiences of physical pleasures. There is a vivid use of simile and metaphor in these lines. As a symbol, a woman is usually identified with the 'discarded things'. She is portrayed as sexually oppressed by the so-called patriarchal system and poverty.

7. *'You fallback against her... little things, the imagined.'*

Reference to Context

In these lines the poet presents the whore as a mechanical tool who performs her task as a professional and shows no emotional attachments.

Explanation

The customer moves back a little bit and brushes against another prostitute who must have entered the room to display herself as variety for the customer's preference. These lines are also suggestive of the sexual encounter between the customer and the prostitute. While still engaged in their business, the customer tries to probe further into the psychology of the prostitute in an attempt to have a better understanding of the women whom he is with. However, as a thorough professional, she performs the task emotionlessly and gives the customer maximum satisfaction with the aim of securing his patronage. In doing so, she also pleases him with the sweet little things that the customer may have fancied.

8. *'Until the statue of the man... A disobeying toy.'*

Reference to Context

This refers to the customer's inner conflict when suddenly his innermost feeling reveals itself to him.

Explanation

The customer suddenly feels an urge to listen to his inner self. It seems to him as if his inner self has something to convey to him. However, it appears to him like a disobeying toy. 'A disobeying toy' is a metaphorical phrase that refers to the customer when his inner self reveals itself to him. His inner self is compared to a toy, which somehow, does not obey his command and appears to be guided by its own free will.

9. *'And the walls you wanted. . . your half- woken mind.'*

Reference to Context

Here the poet struggles with his subconscious in the 'wild wilderness' of his 'half-woken mind'.

Explanation

The customer feels disabled to command his own inner self because a conflict between his conscious and subconscious mind comes into play. The customer finds that he has always disregarded such acts of physical pleasure, and sometimes he had even wished to dismantle these brothel houses. However, at the same time, he has also felt a suppressed desire of having such an experience. While the customer is lost in his inner conflicts, he is suddenly jolted back to his senses.

10. 'When, like a door... thrashed against your kind.'

Reference to Context

These are the concluding lines of *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*. In these lines the poet experiences a sudden shock to hear the 'thrashing' words of the woman who was in a hurry to finish the business.

Explanation

The poet is stunned at the remark made by the whore. This rebuke comes at a time when he was thinking of ways to seek emotional solace in her company. This is when she suddenly asks him to hurry up and leave. Her words had a great force in them as she asks him to be quick, so that she can move on to her next appointment. He is shocked at her urgency to leave quickly in order to carry on business with a new customer for a payment. Her words appear to carry the intensity of a whip and he understands that the whorehouse is not a place for people like him who have mixed feelings and wish to seek emotional and psychological companionship.

3.4.2 *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*: A Comment on the Social Issue of Prostitution

Mahapatra's deftness in presenting the realities of women's life has always been significant to the Indian scenario. The poor and pathetic condition of women has always been one of his main concerns. Mahapatra's women range from being wives, village women, city women, seductresses, adolescent girls as well as prostitutes.

Indian society has always ostracized prostitutes and prohibited them to be a part of cultured society. Mahapatra deals with the misery of the lives of prostitutes in *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*. He presents a meaningless and futile life of prostitutes struggling for their own identity and sustenance. They have nothing but darkness all around them and are condemned to survive amidst sorrow and difficulty. He represents their lives by showing a kind of emotional detachment that they seem to possess and the routine aspect gets reinforced by the monotonous and strenuous sexual encounters they experience. The matter of fact tone of the prostitute is suggestive of her superficial involvement as seductresses and highlights her emotional distance from any real bonding that some of her customers may want. In other words, the flesh and the mind are at odds with each other and no attempt has been made to reconcile the conflict.

3.4.3 Theme of the Poem

Mahapatra's thematic concerns are many and he deals with a variety of themes, with deftness. Sexuality and prostitution are the theme of *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*. While the customer visits a whorehouse with an urge to indulge his fancies, he is finally rebuked by the prostitute to finish the business quickly, so that she can attend to her next customer. Though, there is an initial inhibition in the customer because he is ashamed in entering a house of ill repute, yet he is happy to think that he will soon be able to satisfy himself. He also has an urge to learn more about the women he is with. Therefore, the poem combines the psychological interest with an interest that such a theme inherently possesses.

Mahapatra's treatment of the theme of prostitution is remarkable as are his social implications. Prostitution is an outcome of poverty and in addressing the issue. Mahapatra has addressed the issue of poverty. He has also commented on the mechanical nature of a prostitute's job which leaves her least interested in her customers as individuals. This can be seen in the ending where she abruptly tells the customer to get dressed and leave without any further ado.

3.4.5 Structure of the Poem

The structure of the poem is irregular in the sense that there are four paragraphs, each of different length. The incoherent structure also implies the incoherent nature of prostitution. All the four paragraphs share a similar appearance but there is no rhyme scheme at all. Whereas the poem begins by asking the customer to walk right in the whorehouse, it ends with an indication to the customer to leave as quickly as the business is over. The theme is connected from beginning to end and has the sharpness of tone in revealing the initial inhibitions and intentions of the customer.

The first paragraph invites the customer to a whorehouse and lures him with a promise of fulfillment. However, the second paragraph labels that promise as a 'promise of great conspiracy' and his initial hesitation and shame in having visited a whorehouse diminishes. The third and the fourth paragraph involve him into a psychological analysis where his physical pleasures are taken care of. A sudden shock comes to the customer when he is asked to quickly finish his business and leave.

A comment on a broad and vivid theme of sexuality and prostitution presented in a compact and terse structure such as this is possible only in Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry.

Activity

Read other poems by Jayanta Mahapatra and make a list of themes that keep coming up such as: poverty, prostitution and loneliness. You may compare your observations with your colleagues.

Did You Know

Mahapatra was awarded the Sahitya Akademi award in 1981 for his poem *Relationship*. He is the first Indian English poet to receive the honour.

3.5 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- The poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra, is one of the finest contributions to the genre of Indo-Anglian poetry, which is undoubtedly a significant part of Indian literature. The sensibility, themes and ideas are Indian; only the medium to express them is English.
- We can assume that Indo- Anglian poetry began in the 1960s and the poets who have developed it include Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, A. K. Ramanujan and Keki N. Daruwalla, to name a few.
- The main characteristic feature of Indo-Anglian poets is that they choose their themes from a wide range of Indian legends and Indian folklore and express their views with reference to the contemporary situation in India.
- Poverty and hunger have been two staple themes, as well as challenges that continue to influence poetry and intellectual thought and these are the themes that dominate Mahapatra's poetry as well.
- *Hunger* is a poem, that refers to a strong desire for physical gratification as well as the physiological need for food and sustenance. In both the meanings of hunger, the end result has to be gratification. The poem describes the experience of the protagonist with a fisherman and his daughter. Although, no details are given regarding the financial condition of the fisherman, the inference that he is at the fringes of society can be deduced from his behaviour and the condition of the place where he lives.
- Mahapatra's poetry often deals with the theme of prostitution and what causes this evil in society. Unlike other poets, who make extensive use of euphemisms, Mahapatra, never subordinates the seriousness of the issue, at hand to maintain bourgeois prudence.
- In his poetry, women and their predicaments are treated with care and in a manner which is restrained, un sentimental, delicate and above all realistic.
- *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*, begins with an invitation to enter a whorehouse and ends with the prostitute asking the protagonist to leave. The ending is as sharp as the beginning, as both come across as instructions. Like his other poems, this poem also sheds light on the deplorable condition of prostitutes and explores the mundane reality of their everyday struggle against poverty, corruption and other forms of exploitation.

3.6 KEY TERMS

- **Metaphor:** A metaphor is a figure of speech in which, two unrelated things are compared in an implicit manner. Unlike simile, a metaphor does not make use of the words 'like' and 'as'. For instance: 'the flesh's sling', 'her wormy legs'
- **Alliteration:** Alliteration refers to a decorative device, used by the poet in order to emphasize his point of view. It is the use of the same consonant at the beginning of each stressed syllable in a line of verse. For instance: 'sticky soot crossed the space', 'his nets and his nerves', 'sprawling sand'

- Simile: Simile refers to a figure of speech, that establishes a similarity and resemblance between different kinds of things. The words 'like' and 'as', are used to bring out the similarity of the things of different kind

7 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

1. Jayanta Mahapatra's poem *Hunger*, is based on his personal experience of growing up in a poor district of Gdisha. He has witnessed his own grandfather almost perishing in the famine of 1866 in Odisha. He admitted that he had a troubled relation with his mother and an unhappy childhood. The experiences of his unhappy childhood can be seen in his poetic works.
2. The fisherman adopted a careless tone in order to hide his guilt. He was trying to be casual as if the protagonist's answer would not matter to him. But it was one of his tricks to secure a customer for his daughter in order to get some money. However, as a father, he was trying to hide his anxiety of selling off his own daughter.
3. The fisherman told the protagonist that his daughter had just turned fifteen, assuming that fifteen was the right age for a girl to lure a customer. He asked the protagonist to feel her till he comes back. He becomes a flesh-monger of sorts to escape succumbing to poverty.
4. The protagonist realizes that the girl was doing everything under the compulsion of poverty. Her gesture of spreading her 'wormy legs wide' at once made him understand that she too had experienced 'hunger' but of a different nature; her hunger was an outcome of poverty.
5. The protagonist felt a sense of guilt in following the fisherman to his shack. He was aware of his intense sexual hunger, but he wanted to seek redemption after committing the sin. He wished to burn the very house that he lived in.
6. The smoke coming 'from the oil lamp burning inside the shack seemed to penetrate the blank mind of the protagonist. Although the shock was covered with soot, yet it was the mind of the protagonist which it was penetrating. This feeling of being filled up with 'soot' was also an outcome of his sense of guilt and shame.
7. The girl was a victim of extreme poverty and was also aware of the situation. She did not speak anything, but 'opened her wormy legs wide'. She knew that she was just a commodity for the customer, similar to the fish caught by the fisherman in his nets. While the fish struggles hard to get out of the net, the girl silently allows herself to be consumed. It was not her urge like the protagonist, but real hunger and the possibility of starvation, that compels her to be ravished.
8. The poet has drawn out two images of hunger. Hunger related to flesh and hunger related to poverty. The former is experienced by the protagonist while the latter is experienced by the girl and the fisherman also her father and broker. In this poem, the juxtaposition allows for us to see how the gratification of one hunger will lead to the gratification of another hunger.
9. The poem *Hunger* has all the elements of a full length story. There is a sequence of events in a proper order, from the beginning when the protagonist admits to have an urge for sex, to the end, where he realizes that his urge is not the only

hunger to be satisfied. Poverty emanates the worst kind of hunger. Like a story, the poem also has three different characters, even though two of them remain silent throughout.

10. The theme of the poem is poverty and sexuality. The poet has drawn two vivid pictures of hunger - one emanating from sexual urge and the other emanating from extreme poverty. A father sells his daughter to a person who himself is in the throes of carnal hunger. However, his gratification leads to the gratification of the father, as well as the daughter.
11. Mahapatra's thematic concerns are many and he deals with a variety of them like poverty, hunger, starvation, prostitution, sexuality, nature and religion.
12. The speaker reminds the customer of the 'faces in the posters' in order to lure him to visit the whorehouse where he says 'are all there together'. He tempts him with an assumption that he will find similar women in the whorehouse just like the ones he had longed for all his life.
13. The speaker compares the 'sacred hollow courtyard' to a false promise of commercial conspiracy. So, whether the customer goes there or not will not alter the already widely accepted opinion of people about the whorehouse.
14. 'A disobeying toy' is a metaphorical phrase that refers to the customer when his inner self reveals itself to him. His inner self is compared to a toy, which somehow, does not obey his command.
15. The speaker tells the customer that his good intentions or actions cannot alter the already widely accepted opinion of people about the whorehouse. When a house is called a whorehouse, no effort to contradict the opinion can ever be successful. Society has always ostracized prostitutes and prohibited them to be a part of its mainstream functions and culture, so whether the customer visits the brothel or not will not affect the profession of prostitution in any manner.
16. The customer feels disabled to command his own inner self because a conflict between his conscious mind and subconscious mind comes into play. The customer finds that he has always disregarded such acts of physical pleasure and sometimes he had even wished to dismantle these houses of ill repute. However, at the same time, he has also felt a desire of experiencing gratification in a brothel.
17. The customer is shocked, at the prostitute's urgency to leave quickly, in order to carry on with new business with a new customer, for a fresh payment. The words of the whore completely 'thrash 'him' when she asks him to hurry up and finish the business as soon as he can. He is shocked at her detached response.
18. Social issues such as prostitution, sexuality and poverty are addressed in the poem, *The Whorehouse In A Calcutta Street*.
19. Sexuality and prostitution are the themes of *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*.
20. Mahapatra's treatment of the theme is brilliant which also has social implications. Prostitution is an outcome of poverty and in addressing the issue of prostitution Mahapatra has also addressed the issue of poverty. He has also commented upon the mechanical nature of a prostitute's job who is least interested in entertaining customer's as individuals with emotional needs.

3.8 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Short-Answer Questions

1. Why was the fisherman 'trailing his nets and his nerves'?
2. Bring out the similes and the metaphors in the poem 'Hunger'.
3. Write a note on the two kinds of hungers described in the poem 'Hunger'.
4. What is the significance of the women the speaker sees on billboards and advertisements in the poem, *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta street*.
5. What was the reaction of the protagonist on seeing the fisherman's daughter?
6. What does Mahapatra try to tell through his poems?
7. What does dream children refer to?

Long-Answer Questions

1. Comment on the figure of the fisherman, the protagonist and the girl.
2. Discuss *Hunger* as a comment on the social issue of poverty.
3. Write a critical appreciation of Jayanta Mahapatra's poem *The Whorehouse In A Calcutta Street*.
4. Discuss the theme of the poem *The Whorehouse in Calcutta*.
5. Comment on the 'false chatter' of the women left behind in the poem, *The Whorehouse in Calcutta*.
6. Write an essay highlighting the importance of the ending of the poem, *The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street*.

3.9 FURTHER READING

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