VIII

Indian English Poets

### Block 8

**INDIAN ENGLISH POETS**

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INTRODUCTION TO BLOCK 8
A BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY OF MODERN INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH

Just as Urdu came into being because of the Turko-Afghan and Mughal rule over India for more than five hundred years, owing to British rule for about two centuries English became one of the languages of India. Not surprisingly, the first poet of English in India was Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809 – 31) son of an Indo-Portuguese father and English mother. Before becoming lecturer at Hindu College he had worked as a clerk in Kolkata and on an indigo plantation at Bhagalpur. For sometime Derozio also tried his hand at journalism. At Hindu College he founded a debating club called the Academic Association and, The Parthenon, a magazine. Derozio profoundly influenced his students and their criticism of Hindu practices were disliked by the people. This compelled the college authorities to dismiss Derozio from service in 1831. Soon Derozio died of cholera.

Derozio had a poetic career of no more than five or six years in which he published Poems (1827) and The Fakeer of Jungheera: A Metrical Tale and other Poems (1828). Surprisingly, for a Eurasian, Derozio was a great patriot as reflected in his poems: ‘To India - My Native Land’, ‘The Harp of India’ and, ‘To the Pupils of Hindu College’. The Fakeer of Jungheera recounts the story of Nuleeni a caste Hindu widow rescued from the funeral pyre of her husband by a robber-chief.

Kashiprasad Ghose (1809-73) contributed to Indian English poetry with his The Shair or Minstrel and other Poems (1803). Ghose had mastered English prosody. He also wrote on Indian themes such as ‘The Boatman’s Song to Ganga’ but he did not have genuine poetic talent. Later in the day came Rajnarian Dutt (1824-89) with his Osmyn: An Arabian Tale (1841) in heroic couplet; Shoshee Chunder Dutt (1815-65), author of Miscellaneous Poems (1848) and Hur Chunder Dutt (1831-1901) whose Fugitive Pieces was published in 1851.

Another poet of this period was Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73) better known for his writings in Bengali who nonetheless began his career as a poet in English. Apart from a few lyrics in English he wrote two long poems The Captive Ladie (1848) on the theme of abduction of Samyukta by Prithviraj Chouhan (1149 – 92) and the Visions of the Past (1848) on the Christian theme of the temptations of Adam and Eve by Satan. Dutt’s works lack originality. While in the former Sir Walter Scott was Dutt’s model; it was Milton in the latter. Dutt rightly abandoned English as a medium for his literary works and turned to Bengali in which he made a name for himself. The early period of Indian English poetry was marked by an appreciation of British rule but the Seapore Mutiny or the First War of Indian Independence in 1857 marked the end of the bonhomie between Indian intelligentsia and the British rulers.

‘Indian English Literature’ wrote M.K. Naik, ‘really came of age after 1857, when India’s rediscovery of her identity became a vigorous, all-absorbing quest and when she had learnt enough from the West to progress from imitations and assimilation to creation.’ However, The Dutt Family Album (1870), the only
example of an anthology of poems of members of a family is devoid of originality. It is a collection of 187 poems of three Dutt brothers, namely Govin Chunder, Hur Chunder, and Greece (sic) Chunder and their cousin Omesh Chander. The Dutts were descendants of Rasmoy Dutt, a follower of Raja Rammohan Roy. Rasmoy had abjured Hinduism and become a Christian.

We begin to see originality in the poetry of Ram Sarma, pseudonym of Nobo Kissen Ghose (1837-1918). Ram Sarma was a Yogi who sometimes described his yogic experiences in his poems such as ‘Music and Vision of the Anahat Chakram’ but he also wrote occasional verse such as ‘Ode in Commemorations of the Visit of Prince Albert to India in 1857’ which has verve and authenticity. His major works are: Willow Drops (1873-74), A Poem (1886) and Shiva Ratri, Bhagboti Gita and Miscellaneous Poems (1903).

The most important Indian English poet after Henry Derozio was Tarulata Dutt (1857 – 77) better known as Toru Dutt, daughter of Govin Dutt, who converted along with his family to Christianity in 1862. In 1869 the family sailed to England. Toru and her sister Aru spent a year in France. They wrote English versions of 165 French poems by some 100 French poets as A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields (1876). Published posthumously Ancients Ballads and Legends of Hindustan (1882) draws on Indian mythology: Sita and Savitri, Dhruv and Prahlad, Lakshman and Bharat. Toru Dutt also wrote two novels: the unfinished Bianca or the Young Spanish Maiden published in Bengal in 1878 and the completed Le Journal de Mademoiselle d’Avers published in France in 1879. Toru Dutt died of tuberculosis at the age of 21.

Toru Dutt’s cousin Romesh Chunder Dutt (1849 - 1909) was a member of the Indian Civil Service from which he took voluntary retirement at the age of 49. This was because he wanted to devote himself full time to writing. He wrote both in Bengali and English. His lasting achievement is his curtailed version of the Ramayan and the Mahabharat in English. He reduced their 48,000 and 200,000 lines respectively each to 8000. Dutt’s works were published in the Temple Classics (1889-9) and later by the Everyman’s Library (1910). They are classics of Indian Writing in English.

Rabindranath Tagore (1868 - 1941) was born only half-a-dozen years after Toru Dutt but he began writing intermittently in English when he was already 50. His translation of 103 of his poems published under the title Gitanjali (Song Offering) in 1912 earned for him world fame and admiration of the Anglo-Irish poet W.B. Yeats and the Noble prize for literature in 1913. Ezra Pound, the expatriate American poet in Europe considered Tagore’s use of prose as a medium for his poetry as his greatest single contribution to world literature.

Manmohan Ghose (1869 - 1924) is a tragic figure in Indian English poetry. His mother lost her sanity and father a stern figure, ‘so strangely unsentimental that … He would vivisect [his son] if he thought that was [his] highest good’ (Collected Poems, Vol I: Early Poems and Letters, ed. Lotika Ghose, P. 173). Ghose’s father sent him to be educated in England when he was only 10 years old with the result that he never felt at home in his native Bengal. His Songs of Love and Death (1926) published posthumously is influenced by the fin de siècle culture. Ghose’s wife died in 1918. In its wake he wrote Orphic Mysteries and Immortal Eve. They were published as late as 1974 in his Collected Works.
Ghose began writing his *Perseus, The Gorgon Slayer* in 1899 but he had to stop it under official pressure, suspected as it was, for being seditious in nature.

Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) better known as Sri Aurobindo, younger brother of Mammon Ghose, was an Indian freedom fighter, teacher, philosopher, yogi and poet. He was sent to England for his education and Western upbringing along with his elder brother but on his return in 1893 he joined Baroda State Service (1893-1906) and quickly acquired Indian culture to the extent that he is seen as a modern seer in the great tradition of Ved Vyas and Valmiki. After having worked at Baroda for 13 years he went to Bengal to take part in the freedom struggle. He was fluent in a number of European languages, both classical and modern and after coming to India learnt Sanskrit so well that he could not only read the Vedas and the Upanishads, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in the original but also use Sanskrit for his creative expressions. His early *Short Poems* (1809-1900) are like those of his elder brother, Classical in influence and fin de siècle in spirit but the call of mystic India can be heard in the ‘Envoi’ in which the poet hears Saraswati and the Ganges beckoning him. The mystic awareness becomes stronger in Aurobindo’s poetry written in India: *Short Poems* 1902-1930 and 1930-1950. In 1910 Sri Aurobindo came to Pondicherry a French colony and set up his ashram in association with his disciple Mira Richard better known as the Mother. Sri Aurobindo’s *magnum opus* is *Savitri* (first definitive edition 1954) an epic in 23,813 lines (twelve books and forty nine cantos). It is based on an episode in the Mahabharata about Satyavan and his wife Savitri who rescued him from death.

Any account of Indian Poetry in English before independence cannot be complete without a mention of Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) née Chattopadhyay and her brother Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (1898 - 1990). While the former became a leading figure during the independence movement the latter for some time dabbled in Mumbai Cinema. Sarojini Naidu went to England when she was sixteen and studied in London and Cambridge. There she met Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse.

Historians of Indian Literature in English have pointed out that Naidu came under the influence of the Rhymers Club which met since 1891 for two or three years at Cheshire Cheese, an eating house in Fleet Street, London. W.B. Yeats, Ernest Rhys, Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson, Davidson and Arthur Symons were the members. Yeats remembered it in *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922) and in a poem called ‘The Grey Rock’ in *Responsibilities* (1914):

> Poets with whom I learned my trade.  
> Companions of the Cheshire Cheese.

The club brought out two anthologies of verse in 1892 and 1894. Sarojini Naidu may have seen and read them as they were recent publications.

Symons found Naidu’s early poems too English and advised her to turn to India for inspiration. She took the advice seriously and after returning to India in 1895 began to write on Indian subjects. *The Golden Threshold* (1905) received much acclaim in England. Two more works *The Bird of Time* (1912) and *The Broken Wings* (1917) record bitterness and pain in her personal life. Sarojini Naidu was a genuine poet unlike her brother who though more prolific lacked inspiration. Some of his collections of poems are *The Feast of Youth* (1918), *Virgins and Vineyards* (1922) and *Spring in Winter* (1955).
*The Feast of Youth* was praised by Sri Aurobindo. It is pervaded by mysticism. Sri Aurobindo can be observed in the poetries of Brajendranath Seal’s *The Quest Eternal* (1936) – Nirodbaran’s –*Sun Blossoms* (1947) – and K.D. Sethan’s, *Artist Love* (1925). While on the one hand Aurobindonian mysticism influenced quite a few other poets of the pre-independence era Tagore and Sarojini Naidu found followers among poets such as G.K. Chettur, J.Vijayatunga, Amando Menezes, Manjiri Isvaran, V.N. Bhushan, Adi K. Sett, Humayun Kabir and Sabho Tagore.

World was II (1939-45) was a watershed in world history; Indian independence in 1947 in Indian history. They changed the sensibilities of people in Europe and also in India. Indian poetry in English now began to be influenced by the psychological realism of the modernist poets such as W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and, W.H. Auden as the earlier generations were influenced more generally by the Romantic poets and the Georgian Zeitgeist. Dom Moraes (1938-2004) son of the then Bombay based journalist Frank Moraes (1907-1974), a Goan Christian, used English as his mother tongue. He felt more at home in England than in India and became a British citizen in 1961. His early childhood experience of his mother’s frequent bouts of insanity stamped his personality that influenced much of his poetry in *A Beginning* (1957), *Poems* (1960) and *John Nobody* (1968). His *Collected Poems* appeared in 1969.

‘New Poetry’ that made its appearance in India in the fifties found its greatest support from P. Lal (1929 - 2010) and his Writers Workshop founded in 1958 of which he was the proprietor. The same year he brought out with K. Raghavendra Rao the first modernist anthology *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry*. They defined the credo of ‘New Poetry’ with a condemnation of sentiments of …. Sri Aurobindo’ and a declaration that ‘the Phase of Indo-Anglian romanticism ended with Sarojini Naidu.’ Writers Workshop published the early works of Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004), Pritish Nandy (b. 1951), Shiv K. Kumar (b. 1921), Adil Jussawalla Shashi Deshpande (b. 1938), Vikram Seth (b. 1952), Keki N. Daruwalla (b. – 1937), and Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001). Some other great poets of this period are, Kamala Das, (1934 - 2009), Arvind Krishn Mehrotra (b. 1947) and A. K. Ramanujan (1929 - 1993).

With this brief account we come to the point from where you can start your reading of this block on Indian English poetry. We hope you will enjoy reading the poems selected for you.

Amiya Bhushan Sharma
UNIT 36  RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND SAROJINI NAIDU

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36.1 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

• write about the life and works of Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu;
• discuss their poems prescribed for you;
• write about images, symbols and other figures of speech used in the prescribed poems.

36.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall read two poems by Rabindranath Tagore and two by Sarojini Naidu. We shall briefly introduce you to the life and works of these two great poets from Bengal who brought in philosophy and spirituality in Indian poetry in English. Their best poetry was written in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth century. Their poetry is regarded as an important landmark in the history of Indian poetry in English.
Tagore was a multi-sided writer and thinker who wrote poetry, novels, short stories, plays and essays while Sarojini Naidu was primarily a poet who later joined the Indian National Movement for Independence and followed the path shown by Mahatma Gandhi. She was also famous for her oratory.

After reading about the poets, we shall discuss the prescribed poems. We shall try to interpret these poems and also learn to identify stylistic devices used in them.

### 36.3 RABINDRANATH TAGORE (1861-1941)

Rabindranath Tagore is perhaps the most widely-known Indian writer of the twentieth century. In 1913, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature being the first Indian, and also the first Asian, to win that prize. This event was partly responsible for the kindling of a new interest in Indian literature, especially in the West. He received the Nobel Prize for his *Gitanjali* (meaning ‘song-offerings’) which is a collection of devotional songs. *Gitanjali* was written originally in Bengali and was translated into English by the poet himself.

Tagore, however, was not only a poet. He was gifted with many talents and was obviously a very hardworking man considering the amount of writing he did. Apart from writing poems and songs in their thousands, he has written novels, short stories, plays and essays on various subjects. He was a thinker and philosopher of the first order and was also a painter and musician of no inconsiderable merit. But what makes him stand out as one of the most important Indians of the twentieth century is his contribution to Indian education. He not only wrote about the kind of education our children should receive but also put them into practice by establishing an educational institution at Shantiniketan in Bengal, which is now a central university called the Vishwa Bharati University.

You have read in the introduction above that Rabindranath Tagore introduced philosophy and an element of spirituality in Indian poetry in English. His poetry is often mystical and has a very prominent spiritual element in it. He was also a great worshipper of nature. His novels and short stories are often about different kinds of human relationships and also about the struggle a person goes through in life. One of his most well-known novels is *Gora*. You can find out the names of his other novels and try to read some of them. He wrote plays also. *Red Oleanders* and *The Mother’s Prayer* are some of his best known plays. Tagore wrote a large number of plays, 53 in all, 13 of which he translated into English.

In this unit you are going to read two poems by Rabindranath Tagore. These poems are typical of his poetry. They are profoundly mystical and you have to try to understand the symbolism in them. You will also find prominent elements of spirituality and philosophy in them.

### 36.4 I CAST MY NET INTO THE SEA

#### 36.4.1 Introduction

The poem you are going to read has been taken from Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Gardener*, first published in 1913. You will notice that although it is a poem, it is not written in stanzas nor does it have any rhyming lines. It looks more like prose. Such a piece is sometimes called a prose-poem. It has all the elements of poetry—imagination, a strong appeal to emotion, sensuousness and use of metaphors and other figures of speech—but it does not have the formal structure
of a poem written in meter. When you read the poem you should pay special attention to the use of metaphors and symbols in the poem. A metaphor, as you know, is a word or phrase that we use to describe somebody or something in terms of something else in such a way that some common quality in them is highlighted. For example, when we say, ‘He was a tiger in battle’ we do not mean that he actually turned into a tiger but only that he displayed the same strength and ferocity that we associate with a tiger.

Similarly, you should see whether or not this poem has symbolism in it. A symbol can be an object or a person or even an event that stands for a more general quality or situation. For example, the Indian tricolour is an object but it stands for the very identity of India and Indians. Similarly, we can say that Nelson Mandela became a symbol of the anti-apartheid struggle everywhere in the world.

Now, read the poem.

36.4.2 The Text

I Cast My Net into The Sea

In the morning I cast my net into the sea.

I dragged up from the dark abyss things of strange aspect and strange beauty – some shone like a smile, some glistened like tears, and some were flushed like the cheeks of a bride.

When with the day’s burden I went home, my love was sitting in the garden idly tearing the leaves of a flower.

I hesitated for a moment, and then placed at her feet all that I had dragged up, and stood silent.

She glanced at them and said, “What strange things are these? I know not of what use they are!”

I bowed my head in shame and thought, “I have not fought for these, I did not buy them in the market; they are not fit gifts for her.”

Then the whole night through I flung them one by one into the street.

In the morning travellers came; they picked them up and carried them into far countries.

(From The Gardener by Rabindranath Tagore)

Glossary:

abyss : a very deep hole or wide space that seems to have no bottom.
aspect : appearance.
flushed : red with some strong emotion.
dragged up : caught.

36.4.3 Interpretation

The poem opens like a narrative in which the narrator describes an incident in his life. He says that when he cast his net into the sea he dragged up from ‘the dark abyss’ some very beautiful things. Since he considers these things beautiful and also rare he wants to share them with the person he loves. But his beloved, who was sitting in the garden ‘idly tearing the leaves of a flower’, rejects them. Dejected, he throws those things into the street. In the morning travellers from different places pass that way, pick those beautiful things up and carry them to
far-off places. As you finish reading the poem, you immediately realize that the story has another layer of meaning. Our interpretation of the poem will depend largely on what meanings we assign to the important nouns used in the poem, such as ‘the sea’, ‘abyss’, ‘things’, ‘love’ and ‘travellers’.

We can now explore the symbolism in the poem. If we take the speaker’s ‘love’ to represent his God, we can interpret the poem in terms of a contrast between this beautiful but transient world of material things and the world of spirituality. The ‘sea’ will then represent this phenomenal world of \textit{maya} that is full of beautiful things. These things are merely sense-objects that people consider important and after which they run. We cannot reach our God (that is, grow spiritually) if we give importance to material things that the speaker in the poem mentions. They may be bright and beautiful but they do not stand for the ultimate reality. They look very attractive but have no value in spiritual terms. If they are offered to God, they will be rejected. In our lives, we have to reject them at some point (‘fling’ them into the street) to grow spiritually.

In the poem, the speaker is ashamed to realize that he tried to express his devotion to his God by offering Him things that belong to the physical, transient world. He says that he did not make an effort to acquire these things (‘I have not fought for these’) nor has he renounced anything for them (‘I did not buy them in the market’). They have simply come to him as a part of being born in this physical world. Therefore they are not fit offerings to God. The implication is that what matters to God are the sentiments of true devotion and spirituality.

When the speaker discovers that what he considers beautiful are of no importance in his spiritual journey he throws them out of his window. Metaphorically, it suggests that he gave up the belief that the material world is the ultimate reality. But who are the people who pick up these things? They are those who are still caught in the web of maya, that is, in the senses and sense-objects. When you interpret the poem in this sense, you will realize that smiles, tears and passion mentioned in the first movement of the poem represent the various emotions that the physical objects and events in the physical world cause in us. One has to transcend these in order to realize God in one’s life.

### 36.4.4 A Note on Form and Style

You will see that this poem is not divided into stanzas like an ordinary poem. It has paragraphs, something you find in prose. But when you read it, it sounds like a poem. Such a poem, as you know, is sometimes called a prose-poem.

You will find that in keeping with the style of a narrative, the poem has characters, incidents and dialogue. The language used here is simple but there are some very important metaphors used in the poem. You will see that without assigning meaning to these metaphors it is difficult for us to understand what the poet is talking about. The poet is obviously not talking about fishing. In the interpretation above, you have seen how these metaphors can be interpreted.

You find that the poem opens with three similes. When you compare two things it is known as a simile. For instance when we say ‘white as snow’ we are using a simile. Consider the three similes. The poet has used verbs ‘shone’, ‘glistened’ and ‘flushed’ for smiles, tears and the cheeks of a bride respectively. All these verbs suggest brightness. You will further notice that the verb ‘glistened’ suggests the presence of water which goes with tears while ‘flushed’ suggests colour also. When a bride blushes, her face takes on a reddish hue. The brightness of these things suggests that people find them very attractive.
Another thing that you should notice about the language used in the poem is its rhythm. Rhythm is a strong, regular repeated pattern of sound or movement. Notice how the rhythm in the lines tells you that it is a poem. When you read each movement, or paragraph, in the poem, you will notice that it comprises a single sentence. Each sentence has two pauses which balances the two ends of it. For instance, in the line ‘In the morning travellers came; they picked them up and carried them into far countries’, there is pause after ‘came’ and ‘up’. You will notice the same feature in each line of the poem.

Self-check Exercise I

1) Write in your own words the meaning of the similes used in the first movement of the poem.

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2) Write briefly how the poem shows the difference between important and unimportant things.

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3) Write a short note on the rhythm of the poem.

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36.5 WHEN I GO ALONE AT NIGHT

36.5.1 The Text

When I Go Alone At Night

When I go alone at night to my love-tryst, birds do not sing, the wind does not stir, the houses on both sides of the street stand silent.

It is my own anklets that grow loud at every step and I am ashamed.
When I sit on my balcony and listen for his footsteps, leaves do not rustle on the trees, and the water is still in the river like the sword on the knees of a sentry fallen asleep.

It is my own heart that beats wildly – I do not know how to quiet it.

When my love comes and sits by my side, when my body trembles and my eyelids droop, the night darkens, the wind blows out the lamp, and the clouds draw veils over the stars.

It is the jewel at my own breast that shines and gives light. I do not know how to hide it.

Glossary:

tryst : a secret meeting between lovers.
still : not moving.
draw veils over : cover.

36.5.2 A Critical Note on the Poem

Now that you have read the poem can you say what it is about? The poem appears to be about two lovers. One of them, probably the woman, is speaking these lines and is trying to describe how she feels when she goes to meet her lover, when she waits for him, and when he comes to her. But if you have read other similar poems by Tagore you will realize that the poem is not really about two lovers but about the relationship between man and God. In a great deal of devotional literature of our country God has been represented as a lover and the devotee as His beloved. You can think of the poems of Mirabai in which she described God as her lover. We have a similar symbolism in the present poem.

The opening movement describes how the devotee feels when she thinks of God. It is like a beloved going to meet her lover. There is silence all around. She goes alone; there are no birds singing, there is no sound of wind, and the houses on the two sides of the street she walks on are silent. There is only the sound of her anklets that disturbs the silence and she is scared that someone will hear her going to meet her lover. The sound of her anklets stands for the fact that it is the beloved herself who is disturbed. She is unable to calm her mind that is necessary if the devotee wants to realize the presence of God in her life.

The next movement presents the image of the beloved waiting for the lover to come to her. Again there is total silence. There is no rustling of leaves. The river flows quietly as if it were a sentry who has fallen asleep with his sword across his knees. But again, it is the furiously beating heart of the beloved that she does not know how to quiet. When understood in terms of a devotee trying to pray to God the poem suggests that the devotee needs to quiet his heart in order to be able to experience the presence of God in his life.

The third movement presents the image of the lover coming to the beloved. When it happens, her body trembles and her eyelids droop. The night becomes dark and the wind blows out the lamp. The clouds cover the stars and there is total darkness everywhere. This darkness represents the complete surrender of the devotee to the will of God. As in the earlier movements of the poem, it is only the jewel at her breast that shines and disturbs the darkness. The beloved does not know how to hide that brightness. Again, the brightness of her jewel represents the emotional disturbance in the devotee. The poem suggests that if a devotee is unable to become one with God, it is because he fails to get rid of his
petty self and his ego. The ego is represented by the sound of the beloved’s anklets, the beating of her heart and the brightness of the jewel at her breast.

When you consider the images in the poem you will see that there is a contrast between complete silence symbolizing a total surrender to God’s will and various sounds representing the emotional disturbance in the devotee. The poem says that a devotee should pray to God in a spirit of total surrender. As long as he is aware of himself as an entity separate from God, a complete communion with the divine is not possible.

**Self-check Exercise II**

1) Describe in your own words how the beloved feels when she goes to meet her lover in the dead of the night.

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2) What happens when the beloved is waiting for her lover on her balcony?

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3) How should a devotee pray to God?

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**36.6 SAROJINI NAIDU (1879-1950)**

Sarojini Naidu was a prominent Indian freedom fighter. She was also a poet who began to write poetry at a very early age. She was born in Hyderabad. She passed her matriculation at the age of twelve. At the age of thirteen, she composed a narrative poem of about 2000 lines. She went to England on a scholarship where she studied at King’s College, London and then at Girton College, Cambridge. While in England, she came in contact with English scholars and critics like Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse. On her return from England she married Dr. Naidu and became Sarojini Naidu from Sarojini Chattopadhyaya. She joined the Indian National Congress. In 1906, she spoke at the Congress session and when
Gopal Krishna Gokhale, the political mentor of Mahatma Gandhi, heard her, he said, ‘You begin with a ripple and end in eternity’. The same thing can be said of her poetry.

Sarojini Naidu’s first collection of poems was called The Golden Threshold and was published in 1905. About her first book The Times Literary Supplement, London wrote, ‘Her poetry seems to sing itself as if her swift thoughts and strong emotions sprang into lyrics of themselves’. Her other poetic works are The Bird of Time (1912), The Broken Wing (1917), The Sceptred Flute (1946) and The Feather of the Dawn, published posthumously in 1961.

Sarojini Naidu stands in the tradition of Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore. From the very beginning she displayed in her poetry a very high level of technical excellence. Her images are very powerful and haunting and there is a spontaneous movement in her verse leading to a natural magnificence. Her poetry represents the best in Indian Renaissance. This Renaissance marked a revival of interest in the great philosophical, intellectual and literary tradition of India. She knew Bengali and Urdu and the resonance of the poetry in these two great literatures can be heard in her English poetry. The prominent elements in her poetry are spirituality, a love for nature and philosophy. Her poetry impressed poets and thinkers like Sri Aurobindo who said of her work, ‘Some of her lyrical work is likely, I think, to survive among the lasting things in English literature.’

36.7 DAMAYANTI TO NALA IN THE HOUR OF EXILE

36.7.1 Background to the Poem

This poem is based on the mythological story of Nala and Damayanti. You will find this story in the Mahabharata. It is about the love of Damayanti, the princess of Vidarbha, and King Nala. Damayanti chose Nala as her husband at her swayamvara (an ancient ceremony to which prospective bridegrooms were invited out of whom the bride chose the one she liked the most). In Damayanti’s swayamvara even gods like Indra, Varun and Agni participated but she chose Nala as her husband. After their marriage, the husband and wife face many hardships. We are told how Nala loses his kingdom in gambling, how he and Damayanti are exiled into a forest, how he abandons his sleeping wife in the forest and how, after many ups and downs, they are united. The story ends happily when Nala wins back his kingdom in gambling.

In the present poem Damayanti is trying to remind Nala of his greatness.

Now go through the poem.

36.7.2 The Text

Damayanti to Nala in the Hour of Exile

Shalt thou be conquered of a human fate
My liege, my lover, whose imperial head
Hath never bent in sorrow of defeat?
Shalt thou be vanquished, whose imperial feet
Have shattered armies and stamped empires dead?
Who shall unkings thee, husband of a queen?
Wear thou thy majesty inviolate.
Earth’s glories flee of human eyes unseen,
Earth’s kingdoms fade to a remembered dream,
But thine henceforth shall be a power supreme,

Dazzling command and rich dominion,
The winds thy heralds and thy vassals all
The silver-belted planets and the sun.
Where’er the radiance of thy coming fall,
Shall dawn for thee her saffron footcloths spread,
Sunset her purple canopies and red,
In serried splendour, and the night unfold
Her velvet darkness wrought with starry gold
For kingly raiment, soft as cygnet-down.
My hair shall braid thy temples like a crown
Of sapphires, and my kiss upon thy brows
Like çithar-music lull thee to repose,
Till the sun yield thee homage of his light.

O king, thy kingdom who from thee can wrest?
What fate shall dare uncrown thee from this breast,
O god-born lover, whom my love doth gird
And armour with impregnable delight
Of Hope’s triumphant keen flame-carven sword?

(From The Golden Threshold by Sarojini Naidu)

Glossary
liege : king or lord.
 unking : make you a commoner.
inviolate : that has been, or must be respected and cannot be attacked or destroyed.
vassals : subordinate to you.
serried : standing or arranged closely together in rows or lines.
raiment : clothing.
cygnet-down : cygnet is a young swan, ‘down’ means very fine, soft feathers.
çithar-music : music of sitar, a musical instrument.
gird : to surround something with something.
armour : protect.

36.7.3 Interpretation
As the title tells you, these words are spoken by Damayanti to her husband Nala who has lost his kingdom in gambling and the couple are now in exile in a forest. Damayanti is trying to inspire Nala who is feeling dejected. You will notice that the first three sentences in the poem are in the form of questions. But these are not real questions that need an answer; they are called rhetorical questions. In a rhetorical question the interrogative form is used to make a statement or to produce an effect rather than to get an answer. When someone says, ‘Who does not love his country?’ he is actually saying that everyone loves his country. By using rhetorical questions to open the poem the poet suggests that Damayanti is speaking with great emotion.
Damayanti says that Nala, whose ‘imperial head’ was never bent in ‘sorrow of defeat’, cannot be overcome by adversity that fate has brought for him. The adjective ‘imperial’ is repeated in the next sentence also. We are told about the prowess of Nala as a warrior. His ‘imperial’ feet have ‘shattered armies and stamped empires dead’. He is the husband of a queen and so will always remain a king. No one can ‘unking’ him.

The poem presents a contrast between the glories of this earth and the divine glory of Nala. Earth’s glories disappear and the kingdoms in this world fade away ‘to a remembered dream’. But Nala’s glory will last forever. The poet uses a hyperbole here. Damayanti says that winds, planets with rings around them and the sun, everything will obey Nala’s command. Wherever his radiance falls, it will be dawn spreading her saffron footcloth for him to walk on. Similarly, the sunset will raise her purple and red canopy for him. His kingly garment will be made of the velvet soft night wrought with ‘starry gold’. As the night sky is bright with golden stars, Nala’s garment will have designs made with golden thread. Such exaggeration as you find in this poem is quite common in poems dealing with mythological stories. In such stories the hero belongs to a world in which there is no distinction between the natural and the supernatural. These lines suggest that Nala is a very brave man who has the ability to win back his kingdom.

The image of Nala as a king continues in the next lines also. Damayanti says that her hair in braid will be like a crown of sapphire for Nala. This is the image of Damayanti kissing Nala’s face. When she does so, her braided hair will fall on his face and look like a crown. Her kisses will bring peace to him, as the music of sitar does to its listeners. Next morning, when Nala wakes up, the sun will pay homage to him with its light. These lines suggest that Damayanti will always be with Nala in the days of his adversity.

In the concluding lines of the poem you will see that rhetorical questions have been used again. They suggest that the speaker is speaking with great intensity of passion. Damayanti is certain that no one can keep Nala away from his kingdom for long. Then she uses ‘kingdom’ in a different sense. Nala has the kingdom of Damayanti’s love. This no one can take away from him. Her love protects him and arms him with the sword of hope that is always victorious. Here hope has been compared to a sharp sword on which flames have carved patterns.

**36.7.4 A note on Form and Style**

Although the poem was written only about a hundred years ago, you see that it has a kind of English that was used in much older poetry. You find expressions like ‘Shalt thou’, ‘Hath never bent’ in the poem. Why has the poet used such expressions? It is to give an old world ring to the poem.

When you read the poem you will notice it has an almost declamatory style. This is the kind of language you expect in an orator. Notice how the poem begins and ends with rhetorical questions. The words are meant to inspire Nala therefore an inspiring tone has been used.

You will also see that hyperbole (a way of saying something that makes a thing sound more exciting or more impressive than it actually is) is a characteristic figure of speech in this poem. You can find many lines in the poem where Nala has been described in cosmic terms. For instance, recall the lines which say that the winds, the planets and the sun obey his commands.
In the poem there is a frequent use of images suggesting brightness and light. You can point out words like ‘dazzling command’, ‘radiance of thy coming’, ‘dawn’, ‘sunset’, ‘the sun yield thee homage of his light’ that suggest brightness. These expressions are designed to convey to the reader the glory and grandeur of Nala.

Self-check Exercise III

1) How does Damayanti describe the glory of Nala?
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2) Pick out lines in the poem that describe Nala as someone bright and majestic.
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36.8 CRADLE SONG

36.8.1 Introduction

A cradle song is a lullaby that a person, usually the mother, sings to her child to make it go to sleep. Here in this poem it is probably a mother who is singing a cradle song to her child. She wishes her child to have beautiful dreams. She says that she has gathered many lovely things from various places so that all of them can combine into a beautiful dream for the child.

When you read the poem pay particular attention to the things mentioned in it. Ask yourself why those things are attractive. Try to imagine the kind of dream the child will have if all these lovely things are part of it.

36.8.2 The Text

Cradle Song

From groves of spice,
O’er fields of rice,
Athwart the lotus-stream,
I bring for you,
Aglint with dew
A little lovely dream.

Sweet, shut your eyes,
The wild fire-fiies
Indian English Poets

Dance through the fairy neem;
From the poppy-bole
For you I stole
A little lovely dream.

Dear eyes, good-night,
In golden light
The stars around you gleam;
On you I press
With soft caress
A little lovely dream.

36.8.3 Interpretation

This is a lullaby sung to a baby probably by its mother. She describes how she has picked up many lovely things from various places for a dream that the baby will have. She says that she has picked up from ‘groves of spice’ the fragrance that will pervade the dream world of the child. When she says that she has carried that fragrance over ‘fields of rice’ she adds the scent of rice fields and their bright green colour to the fragrance of spices like cardamom and cinnamon. She says that while bringing fragrance and colour for the dreams of her child she will cross bright streams full of lotus. From that world she will bring for her child a dream shining with dew drops. Thus you find that the poet has suggested the fragrance of spice groves, the sweet smell and bright green colour of rice fields, the sound of flowing streams and the white, red and pink colour of lotuses in the same image. This sensuous image represents the beautiful world of the child’s dreams.

The next stanza depicts another beautiful dream. It is a scene in which there stands a neem tree with fairies in it. Glow-worms flit through the leaves of the tree making it a favourite place for the fairies. Then the mother says that she has stolen a dream from a poppy plant. Poppy from which opium is derived has a sleep inducing property. Thus the stanza suggests that the baby will sleep peacefully and see a beautiful dream.

In the last stanza the baby is probably asleep. Its mother wishes good night. The night sky is full of stars. Their light is golden. The mother kisses the baby’s eyes and leaves a lovely dream there.

36.8.4 A Note on Imagery and Music

This is a poem that creates a world of fantasy. You see that when the poem opens we find many beautiful things mentioned. These are mentioned in such a way that we have the feeling of being in these places. The images of ‘Groves of spice’, ‘fields of rice’, ‘lotus-streams’ and ‘dew’ combine together to suggest beautiful nature from which the dreams of the child will be drawn. Similarly, in the next stanza, the mention of ‘fairy’ along with ‘neem’ introduces an element of magic into the scene. Thus you can say that the poem is full of images drawn from nature.

When you read the poem aloud and pay attention to the sound of words, you can experience the musical quality of the poem. The lines are very short, and follow the rhyme scheme: a a b c c b. You will also notice alliteration used in the poem. Alliteration means the use of the same letter or sound at the beginning of words that are close together. In the second stanza you find word-clusters like ‘fire-flies’
and ‘little lovely’ that are alliterative. You will also see that in lines that are close together a particular consonant is repeated. In the third stanza you find ‘good-night’, ‘golden light’, and ‘gleam’ that are also alliterative and sound pleasing together. All this gives a pleasant musical lilt to the poem.

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<th>Self-check Exercise IV</th>
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<tr>
<td>1) Describe in your own words the kind of dream the mother wants her child to see.</td>
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<td>2) How does the poet introduce a note of fantasy in the poem?</td>
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<td>3) Comment on the music of the poem.</td>
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36.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you read two poems by Rabindranath Tagore and two by Sarojini Naidu. The text of the poems was explained and their implied meaning was also discussed. You also learnt how to discuss the form and style of the prescribed poems.

36.10 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I

1) See the interpretation (36.4.3)
2) See the interpretation (36.4.3)
3) See ‘A Note on Form and Style’ (36.4.4)
Self-check Exercise II
1) See A Critical Note on the Poem (36.5.3)
2) See A Critical Note on the Poem (36.5.3)
3) See A Critical Note on the Poem (36.5.3)

Self-check Exercise III
1) See Interpretation (36.7.3)
2) See A Note on Form and Style (36.7.4)

Self-check Exercise IV
1) See Interpretation (36.8.3)
2) See Interpretation (36.8.3)
3) See A Note on Imagery and Music (36.8.4)

36.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

A.N. Dwivedi: Sarojini Naidu and Her Poetry
K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar: Indian Writing in English
M.K. Naik: Perspectives on Indian Poetry in English
R.R. Bhatnagar, Sarojini Naidu: The Poet of a Nation
S. Ayyar. Sarojini Devi
UNIT 37  NISSIM EZEKIEL AND KAMALA DAS

Structure
37.0 Objectives
37.1 Introduction
37.2 Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004)
    37.3 Ganga
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37.5 Kamala Das (March 31, 1934- May 30, 2009)
37.6 An Introduction (1965)
    37.6.1 Introduction
    37.6.2 The Text
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37.7 The Dance of the Eunuchs (1965)
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    37.7.2 The Text
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37.8 A Hot Noon in Malabar
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37.9 Let Us Sum Up
37.10 Answer to Self-check Exercises

37.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall study two poets, Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das. After reading this unit we shall be able to:

- write about lives and works of these poets;
- discuss Ezekiel’s poems (i) Ganga and (ii) A Poem of Dedication;
- discuss Kamala Das’s poems (i) An Introduction (ii) The Dance of the Eunuchs and (iii) A Hot Noon in Malabar.

37.1 INTRODUCTION

Nissim Ezekiel is one of the pioneers of Modern English poetry in India. He not only guided other poets and set new standard for them; he also made poetry central to his life. However, his significance lies more in his personal
contribution as a poet. Bruce King rightly said, “Other wrote poems, he wrote poetry”. He is a poet who is morally and spiritually concerned with living in the modern world and made poetry out of his personal experience. Such modern characteristics as irony, multiplicity of tones and artistic distancing of emotions through a persona are among his contributions to Indian English poetry. Frequent use of dramatic mode in his poetry is perhaps due to his interest in theatre.

In the present unit we are going to discuss two poems by Nissim Ezekiel and three poems by Kamala Das. The two poems by Ezekiel are different from each other in theme and technique. This will give you a glimpse of the variety of his poems.

His first poem Ganga is written in an open form with no definite pattern of line-length, rhyme and metre. The second poem A Poem of Dedication will show you how the poet has used a definite rhyming scheme and how it expresses the poet’s quest for a happy, peaceful and integrated life. There is one marked similarity in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel and in that of Kamala Das. Poetry, for both, becomes a media to come to terms with life.

Kamala Das is one of the foremost women poets of India writing in English. She was a revolutionary poet who started the trends towards frankness and candour in the treatment of a subject which was almost taboo and which women poets hesitated to deal with. Her poems are about adulterous love, loneliness and quest for fulfillment in love. Her poetry is different from those of the other Indian women poets not merely by the choice of her themes but also by her bold treatment of those themes. She used English in her poems without the concern for correctness and precision. She is an excellent poet with an excellent feeling for sound, rhythm, imagery, symbol, word-play and drama. Like Nissim Ezekiel her poetry too gradually became freer and looser in sense of form and versification. She is among the few women writers who have handled many literary genres with success in two distinct languages, English and Malayalam.

In this unit we are going to read her three poems. The first poem is An Introduction. In this poem we shall see how this poem is the poet’s self-portrait written in a condensed style.

37.2 NISSIM EZEKIEL (1924-2004)

Nissim Ezekiel belongs to a Bene-Israel family which generations ago had migrated and settled down in Bombay in India. Both of his parents were teacher. His father Moses Ezekiel was a Professor of Botany at Wilson College, Bombay and his mother principal of a school. Born a Jew and raised as a secular rationalist by his scientific father made him outsider to dominant Hindu-Muslim culture. It is his very outsidersness and marginality which made him a representative voice of the urbanized western educated India.

Nissim Ezekiel was born in 1924 in Bombay and was educated at Antonia D’Souza High school and Wilson College, Bombay. He topped the list of MA English Examination of Bombay University in 1947 and from 1947 to 48 worked as a lecturer of English at Khalsa College, Bombay. It was during this period that some of his literary articles were published in various magazines and journals.

Next stage of his life came when he departed in November 1948 to England for his higher studies where he stayed for three and half years and studied
Philosophy and Psychology at Birbeck College, London under professor C.E.M. Joad. However, he showed greater inclination towards literature. It was during his stay in London that Fortune Press, London published his first poetic collection *A Time to Change* in 1952. The year 1952 is a remarkable date for him also because the same year he returned from London and married a Jewish girl Daisy Jacob. Similarly the year 1953 too was an important year in Ezekiel’s life because the same year his second poetic collection *Sixty Poems* was published and he joined the well-known periodical *The Illustrated Weekly of India* as an assistant editor. For the next ten years, he broadcast articles on art and literature for All India Radio. From 1954 to 59 he worked as an advertising copywriter and general manager of Shilping advertising company.

His third collection of poems *The Third* was published in 1959 and the forth *The Unfinished Man*, a year after. From 1961 to 1972, he headed the department of English of Mithibai College, Bombay. During this period his sixth poetic collection *The Exact Name* was published in 1965. He also worked as an art critic of *The Times of India* from 1966 to 67. For short period he also served as visiting professor at the University of Leeds (1964) and the university of Chicago (1964).

In 1976 he wrote *Hymns of Darkness* and also translated Marathi poems into English. His *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982) was selected for the Sahitya Akademi Award of 1983. He was also awarded the Padma Shri in 1988. He edited Indian P.E.N, Quest, Imprint and Poetry India.

Ezekiel has also written plays, art criticism and reviews. His play *Don't Call it Suicide* (1993) was published more than two decades after his *Three Plays* (1969). His selected prose edited by Adil Jussawalla in 1992 shows that he was not only a poet but also one of the best literary critics India has ever produced. Ezekiel’s prose is a model of clarity and lucidity enlivened by touches of wit.

After a prolonged battle with a serious disease Alzheimer, Nissim Ezekiel finally passed away in Mumbai in January 9, 2004 at the age of seventy-nine.

Now find out for yourself how well you have read the biographical note on Nissim Ezekiel with the help of an exercise. In case you failed to locate the answers in the text read the whole text carefully again.

**Self-check Exercise I**

*Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (37.9.1) after doing the exercise.*

1) In what sense was Nissim Ezekiel an Indian English poet?

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2) Who was the Nissim Ezekiel’s father and what did he do?

3) What made the poet a representative voice of the western educated India?

4) Name the magazines and periodicals he edited?

5) Was Ezekiel only a poet?

6) Name his important Collections of Poems?

7) What was the apparent cause of his death?
37.3 GANGA

37.3.1 Introduction

*Ganga*, the poem you are going to read about, is a simple but pathetic story of a maidservant in every Indian household. The poem assumes significance also because it raises centuries old problem of master-servant relationship which has hardly been ever an issue. Through this poem, the poet tries to sensitise his readers towards this grave social problem. Through ironical mode of treatment, the poet brings to the fore the hypocrisy and indifference of the masters towards their servants. The poem shows how the trivial offerings like stale *chapati* and tea by the masters to their servants is considered by them a mark of generosity.

Though simple in theme, the poem is remarkable for its techniques. In the poem, the poet very beautifully turns the words into metaphor, images and symbols as the situation demands. The poem is satirical in tone and free from any rhyming scheme.

37.3.2 The Text

We pride ourselves on generosity to servants. The woman who washes up, suspected of prostitution, is not dismissed.

she always gets a cup of tea preserved for her from the previous evening, and a *chapati*, stale but in good condition.

Once a year, an old *Sari*, and a blouse for which we could easily exchange a plate or a cup and saucer. Besides, she borrows small coins for *paan* or a sweet for her child, she brings a smell with her and leaves it behind her, but we are used to it. These people never learn.

Glossary

**Chapati**: a type of flat round Indian bread.

**Paan**: Astringent mixture of areca-nut, lime etc. wrapped in betel leaf for chewing.

**Sari**: Traditional dress of Indian women, long cloth to be wrapped over entire body.
37.3.3 Analysis

What strikes us first in the poem is its title *Ganga*. A cursory view of the poem reveals that the poem is about insensitive master-servant relationship in Indian households illustrated with reference to a maidservant. Then the question arises in our mind as to why the poem has been titled as *Ganga*. Whether or not Ganga is a name of the maidservant is not clear. In fact the interpretation of the poem hinges on the meaning of “Ganga”. This word has a vast symbolic potential. It may refer to the timeless river Ganges which has been a symbol of purification, a source of spiritual values and regeneration which unfortunately over the years have shown a trend of degeneration. The fate of maidservants is likened to the river Ganges in which the latter serves as an objective correlative for the former. Both the maidservants and the holy river have existed from the earliest ages of our civilization and are integral to it. Both of them have ironical fate of being ill-treated by those for whose cleanliness they exist.

The poem holds a faithful mirror to India that is shameless, hypocritical and merciless in her attitude to the poor. This is vented ironically in the very opening lines of the poem:

we pride ourselves
on generosity
to servants.

The Indian masters and mistresses falsely believe themselves to be generous towards their servants. The following lines better elaborate the theme of the poem: “women suspected of prostitution is not dismissed/she always gets a cup of tea/preserved for her/ from the previous evening/ and a chapati, stale/but in good condition”. The theme is developed in a series of such phrases which go on reinforcing the meaning further and further to make the issue more intense and pronounced. The everyday words are chosen to suit the theme of the poem. Furthermore, the words like tea, *chapati*, *paan* and *sari* create visual images along with those of taste and smell. The inverted use of adjectives *chapati*, ‘stale’, *sari* ‘old’, tea, ‘from previous evening’, creates a taste image which explodes the false pride of the masters. Besides, the poet is capable of turning words into metaphors, images and symbols as the situation demands. No character is named not even the maidservant because she is nameless woman working in every Indian household.

The mood of the poem is provocative and tone satiric. The poet’s choice of open form or no definite pattern of line, length and metre is suitable for the theme of the poem. Since the life of the maidservants is very precarious and scattered therefore no hope or rhythm. Though lighter in tone, the poem is no less effective than Gieve Patel’s ‘Servants’. Ezekiel’s poems are not merely a poem of pity but of anger as well. Ezekiel’s ‘Ganga’ and ‘Servant’ are two poems expressing two versions of the same theme. The situation of the girl of fourteen in ‘servant’ is no better than that of the woman who washes up in “Ganga”:

“At twelve or fourteen, married off
to the usual brute,
she has a child,
and tells my mother everytime
her husband beats her,
for the fun of it.”
The speaker’s negative remark in the last line of the poem ‘these people new learn’ leaves a very lasting impression on the reader’s mind. You may also note that this comment which ostensibly seems to be on servant is actually on their employers. From generations to generations, the relationship between the masters and the servants has continued to be one of the exploiters and the exploited and yet immune from any sensitivity.

Self-check Exercise II

1) Comment on the symbolic significance of the title of the poem Ganga.

2) Comment on the phrase ‘these people never learn’.

37.4 A POEM OF DEDICATION

37.4.1 Introduction

A poem of dedication is from Ezekiel’s Sixty Poems. Ezekiel published this poetic collection at the age of twenty nine. What he says about this collection also holds true for the poem you are going to read. Ezekiel said, “The only reason for publishing the book was he lacked courage to destroy it”. His following explanation throws further light on each poem:

“There is in each poem a line or phrase, an idea or image which helps me to maintain some sort of continuity in my life”.

“A Poem of Dedication” is one of the finest poems written by Ezekiel. He wrote this poem when he lived with one of his friends in a basement house in London. Broadly speaking the poem represents poet’s search for the self and his struggles to come to terms with life. When for the poet, a thing becomes its symbol and ‘facts’ become suspect, this poem comes to console him: “I close my eyes to see with better sight”. The poet becomes empowered to see the purpose of life: “I want a human balance humanly/Acquired”.

Now Go through the poem
37.4.2  The Text

The view from basement rooms is rather small.
A patch or two of green, a bit of sky,
Children heard but never seen, an old wall,
Two trees, a washing line between, windows
With high curtains to block the outer eyes;
It seems that nothing changes, nothing grows,
But suddenly the mind is loosed of chains
And purifies itself before the warm
Mediterranean, which fills the veins,
To make the body beautiful and light-
Heaviness of limbs or soul can mimic calm-
I closed the eyes to see with better sight.

There is a landscape certainly, the sea
Among its broad realities, attracts,
Because it is a symbol of the free
Demiurc life within,
Hardly suggested by the surface facts,
And rivers what a man can hope to win
By simple flowing, learning how to flow,
And trees imply on obvious need of roots,
Besides that all organic growth is slow.
Both poetry and living illustrate:
Each season brings its own peculiar fruits,
A time to act, a time to contemplate.

The image is created; try to change.
Not to seek release but resolution,
Not to hanker for a wide, god-like range
Of thought, nor the matador’s dexterity.
I do not want the yogi’s concentration,
I do not want the perfect charity,
Of saints nor the tyrants endless power.
I want a human balance humanly
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour,
This Elizabeth is my creation,
Stated in the terms of poetry
I offer it to you in dedication.

Glossary

Mediterranean : short for the Mediterranean Sea.
Demiurc : suggests inner possession or inspiration: the demiurc fire of genius.
Matador : the principal bullfighter appointed to kill the bull.
Elizabeth : suggests the achievements or empire of Elizabeth I (1553 to 1603 A.D), the queen of England. Her reign was notable for commercial growth, maritime expansion and the flourishing of literature, music and architecture.
Yogi : a person who practises yoga, a process of an individual to unify itself with the ultimate.
37.4.3 Analysis

A poem of dedication has many layers of meaning. At one level it is an account of the poet’s personal experience, sort of a self-introspection while he stayed in a basement house in Landon. Thus, it is the poet’s account of his self-exploration and self-formation.

On another level, the poem may be seen as the poet’s quest for the state of harmony between his inner and outer landscapes to arrive at equanimous adjustment between life and art. The poem is a revelation of the fact that life operates on two levels. Below the surface reality of monotonous routine life lies the deep ocean of broad reality hidden in the unconscions domain of the human mind. Even a brief spell into this inner realms brings to us a soothing calm and empowers our eyes with better sight. The poet realizes that we can not afford to ignore the mundane reality. Therefore, through this poem he strives to attain a human balance between the poised duality of life.

When you look at the very first line of the poem ‘the view from basement rooms is rather small’, you will be amazed to know that this seemingly general remark is pregnant with meanings. It may refer to narrow and flawed kind of living; confined and artificial kind of living besides many other things. The basement rooms may also refer to modern time life styles which create so many walls and confinements for the human beings. The five lines that follow the opening line is written in dramatic mode and create vivid image one can have from basement rooms. The phrase ‘children heard but never seen’ instantly creates a visual image before the reader’s eyes. This also speaks of the problems of modern artificial life. The poet’s static living in apartment room attains a sudden dynamism: “But suddenly the mind is loosed of chains, and purifies itself…”

The sudden escape of mind purifies itself because it dives deep into oceanic mind. Moreover, the peace and purification our mind attains is not like a ‘mimic calm’ caused by the Mediterranean rains which brings to human limbs or soul’ just a little relief. Above all, this escape of mind empowers the human beings ‘with better sight’. This better sight makes our ability to see realities with broader perspectives.

Let us observe the second stanza:

“There is a landscape certainly, the sea
Among its broad realities, attracts
Because it is a symbol of the free
Demonic life within,
Hardly suggested by surface facts,
And rivers what a man can hope to win
By simple flowing, learning how to flow…..”

Here the image of the sea is contrasted with that of the river. The sea represents the broad realities of life and symbolizes the deep demoniac power within while the river represents the surface facts of routine daily life. In the latter realm of living, there is nothing substantive to be gained. In such a kind of living, “what a man can hope to win”. After deliberating upon both the dimensions of life, the poet strikes a balance:

“Each season brings its own peculiar fruits,
A time to act, a time to contemplate”.

Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das
In the third stanza the poem turns didactic in tone. The narrator explains that the impressions of life the human beings gather are their own construct. Therefore they should try to change them. The narrator suggests people “Not to seek release but resolution”. He instructs this because he has seen that since centuries Indian religions have taught people to seek release – freedom from the cycle of birth and death and therefore from the sufferings that the very life brings. The narrator also forbids people from taking improbable tasks and suffering on account of the same. He, therefore, wants the people to take strong resolution for: “Not to hanker for a wide, god-like range/ Of thoughts, nor the matador’s dexterity”. With triple negative lines the poet, who also seems to be the narrator, makes his message more forceful:

“I do not want yogi’s concentration,  
I do not want perfect charity  
Of saints nor the tyrants endless power”.

Similarly, by repeating again and again what the narrator does not want, the poet makes what he wants emphatic:

“I want a human balance humanly  
Acquired, fruitful in the common hour”.

The poet here in the guise of narrator wants to suggest that life lies in balance. But even this balance should also be acquired humanly i.e. with love, peace and understanding. Such a human balance will be a common property for the mutual benefits of the societies, the nations and the world. Thus the use of the phrase “common hour” is notable for its meaning. In the concluding lines the poet feels proud to dedicate this philosophy of life in terms of poetry to the readers for their benefit.

Now you may note the rhyming scheme. The poem has three stanzas of twelve lines each. The first line rhymes with the third, the second with the fifth and the fourth with the sixth and this pattern is repeated throughout the poem. The dictions chosen are simple but their usage makes them profound. The adjectives which follow the nouns make their meaning very effective. For example, when the poet talks of windows, its usual meaning should be an outlet to our eyes. But when this word is qualified by an adjective phrase “With high curtains to block the eyes,” its meaning becomes very powerful. Particularly the selection of the word ‘block’ is very effective. The ‘curtain’ too is used metaphorically as a global symbol of artificial separation. When our outward view is ‘blocked’, turning inward becomes its a natural outcome.

**Self-check Exercise III**

1) Explain how the poet illustrates ‘the view from basement rooms’.

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2) Show how the meaning of the second stanza hinges on two images ‘the sea’ and ‘river’.

3) What do the phrase ‘human balance’ mean?

4) Explain the phrases “humanly acquired” and “the common hour”.

37.5 KAMALA DAS (MARCH 31, 1934 – MAY 30, 2009)

Kamala Das (Madhavikuti) was born in Malabar in 1934. She was educated privately at home and at schools in Bengal and Kerala and belonged to a writers family. Her mother Padma bhushan Nalapat Balamani Amma was an outstanding Malayalam poet and winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Saraswati Samman and her father the editor and Managing Director of Mathrabhumi, a leading Malayalam language newspaper. She was only fifteen when she was married to K. Madhava Das, who rose to become an R.B.I. Officer.

Kamala Das began writing poetry at the age of six. She was only fourteen when P.E.N. India, edited by Sophia Wadia, published her first poem. But her poetry got recognition when she was awarded the Asian Poetry Prize instituted by P.E.N. Phillipines in 1963. From 1971 to 72 and again from 1978 to 79, she was the poetry editor of The Illustrated Weekly of India. Her poems were published in Opinion, New Writing in India (penguin Books, 1974), and Young Commonwealth Poets (Heinemann, 1965).

Kamala Das was a writer of versatile genius. She handled essays, fictions, short stories, criticism and journalistic features very successfully in both the languages, Malayalam and English. Her writings in English is as varied as in Malayalam. She published seven volumes of poetry, two novels, Manas (1975) and The
Indian English Poets

Alphabet of Lust (1976), a collection of short fictions (A Doll for the Child Prostitute) and an autobiography called *My Story*. Her well-known books included *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) and *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Stories* (1973). When the first volume of her *Collected Poems* was published in 1984, it won her Sahitya Akademi Award for 1985. Her other collection *The Soul Knows How to Sing: Selections From Kamala Das* was published in 1997.

She made a new experiment in Indian English poetry. She succeeded in exploring those labyrinths which inhibit many a brave poets even today. In her poetry she points to certain biological matters so bluntly and openly that readers frequently feel scandalized and shocked. It appears Kamala Das allowed the poetic impulse to flow into poetry before the social conventions came to arrest the flow. Rajeev S. Patke remarks:

“It would be mistake to suppose that Das is obsessed with sex and marriage and social roles. What she is intent on is honesty of impulse and a sense of direction to the flow of her wants and feelings”.

Talking about her contribution C.D. Narasimhaiah once remarked: “Kamala Das is perhaps the only Indian poet who owes little to Yeats or Eliot and trusted her own resources and culture”. She not only believed in her own personal experience in Kerala and her personality as fit resource for her poetry, what is creditworthy she very successfully transformed those personal experiences into poetic art. Often she depicts about women’s plight in a society dominated by men. Her poetry like most confessional poetry, written by Nissim Ezekiel, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath has therapeutic and cathartic effect on the poet as well as on the readers.

The poet is noted also for her direct public commitments. She involved herself in a number of public responsibilities. She was not only a great votary of vegetarianism but she also initiated the *Bodhiyatra Movement* for environmental protection. She played active roles as a Chairman in the Forestry Board of Kerala and as the President in the Film Society of Kerala besides entering into politics in order to help the poor and teaching deaf and dumb in a school. Suffering from pneumonia on 30th May, 2009 she breathed her last at Jahangir Hospital, Pune.

Now find out yourself how well you have read the biographical note on Kamala Das above with the help of same exercises. In case you fail to locate the answers in the text, read the whole text carefully again.

**Self-check Exercise IV**

1) Who were Kamala Das’s parents? What did they do?

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2) How did Kamala Das’s poetic career begin?

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3) Mention some of the important books Kamala Das wrote?

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4) On what grounds her poetry is compared with those of other poets. Also mention the names of the poets.

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5) Mention some of the public responsibilities Kamala Das assumed in her life.

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37.6 AN INTRODUCTION (1965)

37.6.1 Introduction

An Introduction is obviously an autobiographical poem written by Kamala Das which first appeared in her Summer in Calcutta (1965). The poem is a brilliant example of her confessionalism wherein she unfold her entire self with extreme frankness and candour. In this poem the poet expresses her experiences which were strictly private and personal. The poem is a revolt against conventionalism and restraints put against Indian women. In this poem the question whether or not Indians should write in English is put to rest. The poem is also remarkable for its daring innovativeness.
The poem you are going to read is written in free verse in a colloquial style which appropriately allows the free flow of writer’s thoughts and feelings. The poem is highly revealing of the poet, of her political knowledge, of her linguistic acquirements, of her physical growth, of the sad experience of her marriage and of her quest for fulfilling love. What M.K. Naik says of her poetry in general also applies for this poem: “Kamala Das’s persona is no nymphomaniac; she is simply every woman who seeks love and she is the beloved and betrayed; expressing her female hunger”.

39.6.2 The Text

I don’t know politics but I know the names
Of those in power, and can repeat them like
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with
Nehru. I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar. I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. Don’t write in English, they said,
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don’t
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and
Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech
Of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain or the
Incoherent muttering of the blazing
Funeral pyre. I was child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. When
I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank
Pitifully. Then … I wore a shirt and my
Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don’t sit
On wall or peep in through our lace-draped windows,
Be Amy, or be Kamla, or better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role. Don’t play pretending games.
Don’t play at schizpprenia or be a
Nympho. Don’t cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love… I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by any name, he is every man,
Who wants a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love. In him…the hungry taste
Of river in me… the oceans’ tireless
Waiting. Who are you, I ask each and everyone,
The answer is; it is I. Anywhere and
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself
If in this world, he is tightly-packed like the
Sword in its sheath. It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of stranger towns,
It is I who laugh; it is I who make love
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

Glossary

Know the three languages : Malayalam, Kannad and English.
Write in two : Malayalam and English.
Dream in one : Malayalam. It is the mother-tongue in which
one usually dreams.
Why not leave me alone : a glimpse of the poet’s spirit instinctively
rebelling against all forms of restraints.
It is as human as I am human : just as human is liable to make mistakes, so
Kamala’s language is not without errors.
The speech of the mind : language through which feelings such as
Joys, desires, aspirations etc. of man’s mind
is expressed.
Here and not there : to the point and not irrelevant.
Incoherent Mutterings : speech in a low voice not meant to be heard
by others.
Blazing : burning strongly.
Asked for love : expresses the biwiderment of the innocent
young girl who sought love but experienced
raw lust which left her feeling assaulted and
defiled.
A quarreler with servants : People advised Kamala to be a quarreler with
servants as otherwise the latter will get the
upper hand.
Belong : to feel comfortable and happy with the
situation one is placed in.
Categorisers : the people with traditional thinking who
consider men and women as a distinct
category having specific dress and roles.
Schizophrenia : a mental illness in which a person becomes
unable to link thought, emotion and
behaviour leading to withdrawal from reality
and relationship.
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Nympho : a woman who has sex and wants to have sex very often.

Jilted in Love : abandoned by a lover.

The hungry haste of rivers : an image through which lover’s strong sexual passion is reflected. As river rushes towards oceans for union with the latter, so the lover moves towards the beloved for the fulfillment of his sexual desires.

The Ocean’s tireless waiting : an image through which the beloved’s infinite patience for a proper sexual union with her lover is expressed. Ocean here is an objective correlative for beloved’s psychic state.

I am sinner…. I too … : the poet sums up her introduction by identifying herself with countless others around, all of whom represent a bundle of contrary features.

37.6.3 Analysis

An Introduction is a self-portrait and the anatomy of kamala Das’s mind. The poem recounts the major incidents of her life which have affected her experience. The poem is remarkable for its structure even though it encompasses a diversity of facts and circumstances. The rules of punctuation have been fully observed. The lines are almost of the same length. The words used and the use of phraseology show Das’s talent of choosing right words and putting them in the most effective order. The poem contains many felicities of word and phrase. Written in free verse the poem has neither any rhyming scheme nor any metrical arrangement. The natural speech rhythm, pauses and punctuation make the poem conversational in style.

When you read the poem the first thing that may strike your mind is the title An Introduction. Whose introduction does it talk about? A little thought reveals the poem is an introduction of the poet herself. But a deeper thought reveals that it is an introduction of ‘every woman’ The opening line of the poem ‘I don’t know politics but I know the names of those in power beginning with Nehru’ makes it obvious that she does not want to assume any political identity. She rather prefers a national identity. Mark the following line: “I am Indian, very brown in colour, born in Malabar, here the poet uses the words which are identity markers – ‘Indian’, ‘brown in colour’ and ‘born in Malabar’. The narrator boasts of her linguistic proficiency “I speak three languages, write in two, dream in one”, to prove that she is a capable writer and fully aware of her role and responsibilities as a writer. Her Indian identity and linguistic ability is emphasized to reinforce her claim of writing in English. The following illustrations advance her claim further:

“The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness, All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half, Indian. funny perhaps, but it is honest, It is as human as I am human, don’t you see?”

The narrator asserts that the language with all its distortions of grammar, structure or pronunciation belongs to the users, no matter what nationality they may
belong to. The narrator explains that the language is ‘as human (liable to error) as the narrator is human. She makes her case to use English very strong by claiming that ‘it is useful to her as cawing/Is to crows or roaring to the lions’. English comes so naturally to her that in it she can voice her ‘joys’, her longings’ and her ‘Hopes’.

The narrator is so much vexed with the suggestions that she further illustrates her point with a series of images to clarify what the writing English is not like. She says that English “is not deaf, blind speech”/ “Of trees in storms or of monsoon clouds or of rain or the/ Incoherent mutterings of the blazing funeral pyre”. The last line here may refer to the decadent legacy of the British Culture.

The poem shifts to another story which talks of the narrator’s early marriage and her consequent psychological hurt:

“He drew a youth of sixteen into the/ Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me/ But my sad woman-body felt so beaten./The weight of my breast and womb crushed me/ I shank pitifully”.

The above lines are remarkable for showing the poet’s talent in choosing and putting the best words in the most effective combinations. The whole picture of the misuse of sex becomes vivid. The last two lines create true picture of its consequence. As a mark of protest the poet takes resort to western dress:

Then… I wore a shirt and my Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored My womanliness”.

This open revolt created strong resentment amongst her relatives and well-wishers. Their sharpness of reactions is reflected very effectively by the poet through the appropriate selection and arrangement of words and the speaker’s tone:

“Fit in, oh Belong, cried the categorizers. Don’t sit/On walls or peep through our lace-draped window. Be Amy or Kamla, or better Still be Madhavikutti. It is time to Choose a name, a role”.

Can you see that the phrase ‘Fit in’ and the word ‘belong’ are simple words but their arrangement in the poetic scheme makes their meanings very expressive, deep and varied. Similarly the words like ‘cry’ and ‘categorisers’ too are equally simple but very suggestive in meanings. For example, word ‘cry’ carries with it a sense of anxiety and force and categorizer refers to people with traditional thinking who understand things in terms of category and class only. The later suggestion that the narrator must never pretend to be a split-personality suffering from psychological disorder or tend to act as a nympho shows further gripping clout on her. This was not all; the narrator is further instructed:

“Don’t cry embarrassingly loud when/jilted in love”.

The poem now moves to another story in which Kamala Das’s ideal of Man-woman relationship is indicated:

“….He is everyman/’Who wants a woman, Just
as I am every/ Woman who seeks love. In/ him… the hungry haste/ Of rivers in me… the ocean’s tirelessly/ waiting”. Here the words ‘want’ and ‘seek’ is notable. ‘Want’ refers here to every man who needs woman for his service as a subordinate. ‘Seek’ means every woman who badly miss love, so they keep on looking for what they want their whole life. The last two lines through the use of beautiful images which serve as objective correlative very successfully explain the sexual behaviours of men and women. ‘The hungry haste /of rivers and the ocean’s tirelessly/ waiting’ represent the psychological states of men and women respectively. You may note here that the word ‘I’ is repeated at a number of times to emphasize the women’s quest of identity. Explaining the nature and position of women the narrator says ‘I am sinner, /I am saint. I am the beloved and the Betrayed’. The point she is trying to make is that be it man or woman, none is wholly a sinner or wholly a saint. We all are a balance of both. In that case there is no point in viewing the women as the other. Finally, Kamala Das’s idea of fulfilled love is neatly presented in “I have no joys which are not yours, no aches which are not yours”.

**Self-check Exercise V**

1) What could be implied meaning of the opening lines of the poem: “I don’t know politics but I know the names of those in power, …beginning with Nehru.”

2) Talking about English language the narrator says, “It is as useful to me as cawing is to crows or roaring to the lions…” What is the literary device used in this line?

3) What do the images of ‘rivers’ and ‘oceans’ imply?
4) “In Kamala Das the poet is the poetry”. Comment maximum in 50 words.

5) “I have no joys which are not yours, no Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I”. In this statement who represents ‘I’? What is so special about the statement “I too call myself I”?

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### 37.7 THE DANCE OF THE EUNUCHS (1965)

#### 37.7.1 Introduction

*The Dance of the Eunuchs* is considered one of the finest poems of Kamala Das. Like the earlier one this poem too appeared in summer in Calcutta. This is the first poem of the volume and sets the tone and temper for all the poems. The poem is very powerful and very effectively expresses Kamala Das’s state of mind in well-chosen words. The repetition of words in some of the lines reinforces the intended meaning. There is abundance of imagery in the poem. The whole poem is enveloped in gloom and despondency.

The poem is a linguistic manifestation of poet’s experience. In the poem the poet sympathizes with eunuchs. The costumes, the makeup, the passion with which the eunuchs dance suggest the female delicacies. Their outward appearance is contrasted with their inner sadness which finds outlet in their ‘harsh’ songs about ‘dying lovers’ and ‘children left unborn’. There is no joy in their hearts. With their fractured personality, the eunuchs can not even dream of happiness. The background of thundering clouds, flashes of lightning and meager rainfall suggest their outward sparkle and inner vacuity. The dance of the eunuchs is an objective correlative for Kamala Das’s unfulfilled love.

#### 37.7.2 The Text

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came/ To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals/ Richly clashing and anklets Jingling, Jingling Jingling….

Beneath the fiery gulmohar, with Long breads flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and/ They danced, oh, they danced till they bled… There were green/ Tatoos on their checks, Jasmine in their hair some /Were dark and some were fair. Their voices
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Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
Lovers dying and of children left unborn…
Some beat their drums; other beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They
Were thin in limbs and dry, like half-burnt longs
From funeral pyres a drought and rottenness
Were in each of them. Even the crows were so
Silent on trees, and the children, wide eyed still;
All were watching these poor creature’s convulsions
The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning
And rain, a meagre rain that smelt of dust in
Attics and the urines of lizards and mice…

Glossary

**Eunuchs** : a section of people who belong to neither of the sexes.

**Cymbals** : a musical instrument in the shape of a round metal plate.

**Anklets** : a piece of Jewellers around the ankle usually made of silver.

**Fiery** : looking like fire, showing strong emotions.

**Gulmuhar** : a tree with orange colour bunches of flowers.

**Tatoos** : a picture, a design that is marked permanently on a person’s skin by making small holes in the skin and filling them with coloured ink.

**Wailed** : wept loudly.

**Writhed** : twisted their bodies due to unbearable pain.

**Vacant ecstasy** : the exciting movements in dance are mere steps or convulsions which express the joyless state of their hearts.

**Convulsions** : sudden uncontrollable shaking movements of a body.

**Cracked** : made short sharp sounds.

37.7.3 Analysis

In *The Dance of the Eunuchs* meaning operates at two levels. At surface level the poet appears to be sympathising with eunuchs who are forced to dance in the scorching sun. They danced till they bled… reflects their compulsion. That their voices were ‘harsh’ and songs ‘melancholy’ becomes obvious when we know the themes of the eunuchs’s song: they sang of ‘lovers dying’ and ‘of children left unborn’. By comparing eunuch’s ‘thin and dry body’ with half-burnt log from funeral pyres, the poet arouses in the readers a sense of shock and pathos. The poet, with a series of sound and sight images, creates a dramatic scene full of convulsions but devoid of inner vitality.

On another level, written in confessional style the poem symbolically portrays the poet’s melancholy in her life. The eunuchs are symbols of unproductiveness and metaphor of barrenness. The poem becomes for Kamala Das an objective correlative to represent her inner suffering within. The dance of the eunuchs with their skirts going round and round, cymbals/Richly clashing and anklets jingling, Jingling and Jingling… is contrasted with their ‘vacant ecstasy’, suggesting a gulf between externally stimulated passion and their sexual drought and
rottenness within. The contrast is sustained throughout the poem. The dance of the eunuchs is the dance of the sterile and therefore is compared with the unfulfilled love of the women in the poet.

The poem shows an admirable sense of proportion in the use of image and symbols. You may note how the poet creates the image of the summer season by using the word ‘hot’. Addition of the prefix ‘so’ before the word hot heightens the sense of weather. The use of the word ‘fiery’ before gulmohar suggests the unbearable summer. The use of colour-green, jasmine, dark and fair very effectively present colour image reflective of the external beauty of the eunuchs. This beauty is contrasted with the internal vacuity reflected by the use of images like ‘vacant ecstasy’, ‘thin and dry like half-burnt funeral pyres’ and ‘drought and rottenness’. The phrase “writhed in vacant ecstasy” is very significant as a devastating image of the barrenness of Kamala Das’ life.

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You may note that the meaning of the title of the poem is not so simple as it appears to be. The dance which is so naturally associated with the eunuchs is not a dance inspired by their internal pleasure but a source of livelihood and therefore a compulsion which is devoid of inner joy. Thus the dance becomes an antithesis because instead of happiness it reflects the dancer’s unhappiness.

Written in third person narrative through the description of eunuchs’ dress and behaviour the poet creates in the poem the atmosphere of dance. Dance is the dominant rhythm of the poem which goes on increasing as the poem progresses. “.with long breads flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced”. They danced, or they danced till they bled…” adds momentum to the dance and the following lines further intensifies it:

“Some beat their drums, others beat their sorry ‘breasts’.

But the climax is reached in the following lines:

“The sky crackled then, thunder came, and lightning and rain”. Here the word ‘then’ is so used to add momentum even to the sentence in which it is used.

After the climax there is a sudden fall in the rhythm as is reflected in the last two lines:

“And rain, meagre rain that smelt of dust in /Attics and the urins of lizards and mice”. This fall in rhythm is suggestive of the depressed and dejected mental state of the poet because these lines convey the poet’s sense of futility of her sexual experience.

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<td>1) Does the title truly represent the poem? Give reasons.</td>
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2) Pick out the words and syntaxes which create sight images.

3) What is the dominant rhythm of the poem? Does it increase as the poem progresses?

4) What does ‘Vacant ecstasy’ used in the poem imply?

5) What words used in the poem symbolize convulsion in nature?

37.8 A HOT NOON IN MALABAR

37.8.1 Introduction

In this poem the poet reminisces about the landscape, the climate and the vendors of Malabar in the summer season. In this intensely personal and emotional poem Kamala Das traces her sweet childhood memories which still remains so deeply etched in her heart. The poet chooses words carefully to create and pour out the same feelings which had made her those days memorable. A Hot Noon in Malabar celebrates and longs for the hot noon in Malabar because the poet associates it with wild men, ‘wild thoughts and wild love’. The theme of this poem is different from those of the other two poems you have read. Unlike them
the themes of this poem is the sweet memory of childhood and adolescence which refreshes all human beings especially in moments of crisis. Autobiographical in tone the poem is full of realistic imagery and marked by verbal felicities. Written in condensed and compact style, the poem shows Kamala Das’s talent in writing rhythmic lines though she does not use any rhyme.

Now go though the poem.

37.8.2 The Text

This is a noon for beggars with whining
Voices, a noon for men who come from hills
With parrots in a cage and fortune-cards, 
All stained with time, for kurava girls
With old eyes, who read palm in light singsong
Voices, for bangle-sellers who spread
On the cool black floor those red and green and blue
Bangles, all covered with dust of roads,
For all of them, whose feet devouring rough,
Miles, grow cracks on the heals, so that when they
Clambered up our porch, the noise was grating,
Strange. This is noon for strangers who part
The window-drapes and peer in, their hot eyes
Brimming with the sun, not seeing a thing in
Shadowy rooms and turn away and look
So yearningly at the brick-ledged well. This
Is a noon for strangers with mistrust in
Their eyes, dark, silent ones who rarely speak
At all, so that when they speak, their voices
Run wild, like jungle voices. Yes, this is
A noon for wild men, wild thoughts, wild love. To
Be here, far away, is torture. Wild feet
Stirring up the dust; this hot noon, at my
Home in Malabar, and I so far away…

Glossary

Whining : complaining, grumbling and long drawn-out.
Stained with time : turned yellow with dust and frequent use.
Kuruba : a tribe of bird-catchers, basket-makers and fortune tellers.
Singsong : rising and falling, monotonous.
Clambered : climbed with difficulty .
Grating : harsh, jarring.
The Window-drapers : the window curtains.
Peer : peep
Brimming with the sun: filled with the sunlight
Yearningly : with great desire, longing.
37.8.3 Critical Appreciation

‘A Hot Noon in Malabar’ is an autobiographical poem in which Kamala Das recalls some of her experiences in her home in Malabar. This is a nostalgic poem. Kamala Das seems to be fascinated by time ‘at noon’ with which the poem shows her obsession. The sun and its heat represent the glow and burning of passion for the poet and thus the external nature is brought in close association with her inner nature marked by a consuming carnal desire.

The title is not about what happens to the people, animals, plants and things inanimate during a hot summer noon in Malabar. Its meaning becomes clear only when we understand it in terms of the background of the poet’s past memories.

You make note that the word ‘noon’ is repeated six times in the poem to create the atmosphere of noon. We can also say that noon is the dominant rhythm of the poem. The memory tags associated with noon are noon for the beggars, ‘a noon for men carrying parrots in cage and fortune-cards’, ‘a noon for strangers who part the window-drapes and peer in’, ‘a noon for strangers who speak in’, wild jungle-voice and above all, it was ‘a noon for wild men, wild thought and wild love’. ‘The last use of noon is prefixed with hot and the poet regrets for its loss: “this hot noon, at my home in Malabar and I so far away…”’. You may note here the phrase “Jungle-voices” which adequately conveys the poet’s emotion, enacts a real drama and imparts to the poem its peculiar tone. Every epithet used in the poem is effective and grows with emotion. There is a perfect fusion of sound and sense. We can further illustrate this point when we observe in the poem the speech habits of characters. The use of the words “whining voice, singsong, grating noise and jungle-voices’ create beautiful sound imagery”.

You may also note that ‘A Hot Noon in Malabar’ is not about a temporary experience of an hour or a day. It refers to the whole summer season recurring year after year. The scene created of the past is realistic. The mood of the poem is sad and tone somber. The theme of the poem is the loss of the poet’s sweet experiences at Malabar home. The dominant rhythm of the poem meanders around noon.

Kamala Das successfully creates the atmosphere of her Malabar home through the imagery depicting the men and women who passed her home in the summer noon. Those men and women included men from hills with parrots in cage and fortune cards, kuuba girls who read palm in light singsong, bangle-sellers with red and green and blue bangles and strangers who part the window drapes and peer in for shelter and other things. It is to be noted that because the imagery is realistic, they impart authenticity to the poem. The realism of the imagery is enhanced by such details “as bangle-sellers’ s feet covered with dust of roads and growth of cracks on the heels and strangers deluded with the sparkle of sun not seeing a thing in shadowy rooms, turn away.

Some of the phrases including a couple of similes show the verbal felicities which Kamala Das is capable of devising in her poetry. The bangle-sellers’ feet ‘devouring rough miles’, the hot eyes of the bangle-sellers ‘brimming with the sun’ and the strangers who rarely spoke so that when they did speak, their voice ran ‘wild like jungle-voices’ are among the verbal felicities. You may note the phrase devouring rough miles. The word devour has been used metaphorically to convey the idea of the travellers covering miles and miles of dusty road. ‘Brimming with the sun’ is another expressive phrase. It means filled with sunlight. In the hot sun the eyes of the travellers seem to have been filled to the brim
with the heat of the son. Similarly the poet was the most appropriate simile like jungle-voices which means like the sounds which are heard in jungle.

Through these imagery poet creates quite a realistic scene and contrasts it with her personal experience of loneliness which give rise to wild men, wild thoughts and wild love experienced at the summer season in Malabar. The feeling of home-sickness has effectively been expressed in the words; “to be here, far away, is torture”. The effect is further enhanced by the lines which follow:

“…Wild feet
Stirring up the dust this hot noon, at my
Home in Malabar, and I so far away…”

Although this poem does not use any rhyming scheme, the poet used at places some rhythmic lines. For example, beggars with ‘whining voices’, ‘stained with time’ and ‘home in Malabar, and I so far away…’reflect some internal rhythms. Kamala Das’s poetry does not have much music or any melodic quality. This poem resembles prose more than it resembles poetry. Unlike other poems, this poem, through proper use of comma and semi-colon, adds the quality of clarity and lucidity. The language used in the poem is condensed. The poem is also marked for its maximum possible economy in the use of words.

**Self-check Exercise VII**

1) Why the poet repeats the word ‘noon’ as many as six times in the poem?

2) Name the words or phrases used in the poem which create the scene of a hot summer.

3) Give examples of verbal felicities in the poem.
4) Does the poet use any rhythmic lines in the poem? Give example.
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37.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you read about two poets Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das. First you read about their life and works and then their poems in detail.

You will note that unlike the poets you read in earlier units, these poets are modernist in approach and their modern kind of poems formed part of the trend Indian English poetry began to experiment after 1960. In them the difference between the poetry and poem collapsed.

Nissim Ezekiel’s *Ganga* is an account of the perpetual suffering of maidservant in every Indian household. His *A Poem of Dedication* is the an account of the poet’s growth of mind; his own philosophy of life. The difference in theme and technique illustrates the variety of his poems.

In this unit you read about Kamala Das’s three poems. *An Introduction* is sort of her self-portrait, *The Dance of the Eunuchs*, an objective correlative for her state of mind and the *Hot Noon in Malabar*, her childhood reminiscence. All the three poems have been dealt differently but all are intensely personal and autobiographical.

We hope after reading these poems you will be able to analyse other poems by these poets.

37.10 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I

1) Nissim Ezekiel was born in Bombay in 1924 of Jewish (Bene-Israel) parents. Because he was born Jew and was raised as a rationalist he remained an outsider to the dominant Hindu-Muslim culture which made him a representative voice of the urbanised western educated India.

2) Answer is obvious.

3) His outsidersness and marginality kept him alienated from the dominant India Hindu-Muslim Culture. Since this is the case of a typical urbanised western educated Indians, the poet became their representative voice.

4) Answer is obvious.

5) He was not only a poet but also a playwright, an art critic and a brilliant teacher.

6) Answer is obvious.

7) Though no one can explain the actual cause of birth and death of a person, surely the apparent cause of death in case of Ezekiel was Alzheimer.
Self-check Exercise II
1) See the opening para of the analysis (37.3.3.).
2) This is an ironic statement. See the last para of 37.3.3.

Self-check Exercise III
1) From within basement rooms only partial view is possible. For example, the poet sees just a patch or two of green, a bit of sky, an old wall, two trees, a washing line between windows, children heard but never seen and windows with high curtains to block the outer eyes. Symbolically the statement means that the modern kind of artificial living has narrowed our overall vision.

2) See third para of 37.4.3.

3) The phrase ‘human balance’ means that the human beings should not aim for the extremes. For example he should not aspire for good-like range of thoughts, the Yogi’s concentration, perfect sacrifice of saints or the tyrant’s endless power. He should aim at things which can make the human being fulfilled.

4) The human balance or the moderate view or approach to life should be acquired ‘humanly’. Here humanly may refer to an approach with love, understanding and compassion. ‘The common hour’ may refer to time when the human beings might be in crisis. In such a moment our values of love, compassion and understanding help stay together and overcome the crisis.

Self-check Exercise IV
1) Answer is obvious.
2) See para 2 of 37.5.
3) See para 2 of 37.5.
4) See para 2 of 37.5.
5) See the concluding para of 37.5.

Self-check Exercise V
1) See para 2 of 37.6.3.
20 The literary device used in this line is simile.

3) These two images act as objective correlatives for the psychological states of men and women respectively. In sexual desires men are in haste like rivers while women are patient like ocean.

40 Most of Kamala Das’s poems are autobiographical in tone. Since she shares much of her private experiences with readers by way of her poetry, she is also called a confessional poet. She drew the subjects of her poetry mostly from her own life, it is justified to say that in Kamala Das, the poet is the poetry.

Self-check Exercise VI
1) Yes, the title represents the poems. But it should be clear that the title itself is ironical in tone. The dance of the eunuchs is not born out of happiness but out of compulsion. Dancing is their source of livelihood. The external beauty or their convulsions are shown to contrast their inner vacuity.
2) Skirts going round and round, with long breads flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced till they bled…, tattoos on their cheeks, Jasmine in their hair, some were dark and some fair, some beat their drums, others beat their breasts are some of the examples which create sight images.

3) See last para of 37.7.3.

4) See the concluding lines of the para three of 37.7.3.

5) The crackling of the sky, the coming of thunder, lightning and rain are symbols of convulsions in nature.

Self-check Exercise VII

1) The poet repeats the word ‘noon’ in the poem to create the atmosphere of the summer noon in Malabar.

2) The words or phrases used to create the scene of hot summer are ‘hot’, ‘so hot’, ‘fiery gulmohar’, and ‘strangers’ hot eyes brimming with the sum’.

3) See para 4 of 37.8.3.

4) Whining voices, stained with time, old eyes, and my home in Malabar and I so far away…create some of internal rhymes in the poem.
UNIT 38  A.K. RAMANUJAN AND JAYANT MAHAPATRA

Structure
38.0 Objectives
38.1 Introduction
38.2 A.K. Ramanujan (March 16, 1929 – July 13, 1993)
38.3 Self-Portrait
  38.3.1 Introduction
  38.3.2 The Text
  38.3.3 Critical Appreciation
38.4 Chicago Zen
  38.4.1 Introduction
  38.4.2 The Text
  38.4.3 Analysis
38.5 On the Death of a Poem
  38.5.1 Introduction
  38.5.2 The Text
  38.5.3 Critical Appreciation
38.6 Jayant Mahapatra (Oct. 22, 1928...)
38.7 Hunger
  38.7.1 Introduction
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38.8 A Rain of Rites
  38.8.1 Introduction
  38.8.2 The Text
  38.8.3 Analysis
38.9 Let Us Sum Up
38.10 Answers to Self-check Exercises

38.0 OBJECTIVES

After having read this unit you will be able to:

- talk about life and works of A.K. Ramanujan and Jayant Mahapatra;
- analyse critically three poems of A.K. Ramanujan – Self-Portrait, Chicago Zen and On the Death of a Poem;
- examine two poems of Jayant Mahapatra – Hunger and A Rain of Rites.

38.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit you are going to read three poems of A.K. Ramanujan and two poems of Jayant Mahapatra.

Ezekiel and Parthasarthy praised A.K. Ramanujan as the best of Indian poets. Ramanujan’s poetry reflects form without having any formal structure and a
range of technique beyond those of any Indian English poets. His poetry blends Indian as well as European models into new form. Through his poetry he has shown that Indian poets can work within their own literary tradition and yet can be modern. His poetry very successfully exploited south Indian Brahmin roots and contrasted it with his modern life in America.

In the first poem of this unit entitled Self-Portrait, Ramanujan probes into the human identity. In the second poem, Chicago Zen, the persona in the poet suggests the intuitive knowledge of Zen Buddhism as the solution to the problems generated by a modern kind of life represented by American city, Chicago. In On the Death of a Poem, his third poem, Ramanujan seems to regret the loss of meaning which all poems must suffer from due to linguistic limitation in which they are compulsorily born.

Jayant Mahapatra quite like a teacher of physics did a thorough analysis as to what constituted a modern poem. Sound, image and theme, thus discovered, were the elements on which he organized his poetry. Unlike other modern poets who often used topics from urban life, Mahapatra made use of the rural landscape and local tradition. His Christian birth and the Hindu cultural background account for many of his poems expressing a sense of alienation.

In this unit Jayant Mahapatra’s poem Hunger expresses the moral paradox of the human beings whose hunger of belly overweighs the hunger of sex. Mahapatra’s another poem A Rain of Rites which you are going to read is a lyric of troubled soul and undefined unhappiness. The poet does not get the answers of many of the questions of his life like one in this poem “What holds my rain so it’s hard to overcome?” Yet the poem is an attempt to balance inner world with that of the outer.

### 38.2 A.K. RAMANUJAN (MARCH 16, 1929-JULY 13, 1993)

An Indian poet, writer, translator, philologist and playwright Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan was born in Mysore in 1929 into a Tamil Brahmin family. His father was a professor of Mathematics and mother a housewife. He was born in a multicultural background where Tamil, Kannada and English were spoken.

He was educated at Marimallapa High school and Maharaja College, Mysore. He did his masters in English from the University of Mysore and taught in various colleges in south India mostly in Belgaum. He obtained diploma in Theoretical Linguistics from Deccan College Pune in 1958. Next year he went to Indiana University on a Fulbright fellowship to do his Ph.D. in Linguistics.

In 1962 he was appointed to the University of Chicago where he remained till he died during a minor surgery in 1993. Gradually he got identified with the university’s department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations where his works as a translator and interpreter of Indian epics, oral narratives and devotional poetry won him MacArthur Prize fellowship or genius award in 1983. For his contributions to Literature, the Govt. of India awarded him Padmashri in 1976.

There were long intervals between his publications. Of his poetical works the most notable are The Striders (1966), Relations (1971), Selected Poems (1976)
and Second Sight (1986). His collected poems came out in 1995 which included The Black Hen as its fourth and last section. But it was his artfully made five volumes of Translations from Tamil, Kannada and Telugu that made him internationally known.

These are The Interior Landscape (1967), Speaking of Siva (1993), Hymns for the Drowning (1981), Poems of Love and War (1985) and When God is a Customer (1995).

Towards his latter phase of life, he turned his attention to another rich area of Indian life, culture and folklore. Together with his essays on literature and culture these have been published in Collected Essays (1999). Folktales from India (1994), a selection of oral narratives from twenty-two Indian languages, is one of his last publications. His writings in Kannada which included three collections of verse and a novella along with his translation of U.R. Anathmurthi’s novel Sanskara (1976) were some of his other contributions to literature.

Ramanujan’s poetry is largely autobiographical and reminiscences his family and Hindu heritage. Indian myth, history, culture, heritage and above all, its topography and environment form the myriad threads of his poetic fabric. His poetry often deals with a contrast between the East and the West, the anxiety of an exile and constant search for native roots.

Regarding his poetic ingredients, Ramanujan himself admitted that Linguistics, English, and Anthropology provided the outer forms of his poetry such as meter, logic and other ways of shaping experience. Similarly his long stay in India as a student and teacher, his frequent visits, field trips, personal and professional pre-occupation with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore gave him substance as well as the inner forms like images and symbols for his poetry.

Ramanujan’s poetry is image-oriented. His imagery is particular, precise, concrete, vivid and realistic and hence different from those of others. His poetry is marked for its psychological realism and masterly craftsmanship. The terseness of his diction, his consummate skillfulness in using rhymes and assonance, his sharp etching of crystalized images and his masterly control in handling English language make Ramanujan one of the most significant poets in India.

**Self-check Exercise I**

*Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.*

1) In what sense was A.K. Ramanujan an Indian English poet?

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38.3 SELF – PORTRAIT

38.3.1 Introduction

The poem *Self-Portrait* you are going to read is a highly philosophical poem. It is one of Ramanujan’s most obscure poems. Here Ramanujan himself may be the speaker who says that he resembles everyone but himself. Perhaps he means to say that though he is a man having numerous identities, none of them can be regarded as his true identity. The speaker is not able to portray himself in definite terms. The law of optics says that we see only visible reality: but the speaker observes that even so-called visible reality is so invisible. His self bears just a little stamp of his father or ancestors but the self is still a mystery.

Though written just in nine lines and one sentence the poem opens a vast speculative world. The lack of any rhyme and rhythm in the poem is quite in keeping with the indeterminate nature of the self-portrait the poet would like to paint. He dramatizes the self whose essential passivity allows it to resemble others over an indeterminate stretch of time.

Now go through the poem-
38.3.2 The Text

I resemble everyone
but myself, and sometimes see
in shop – windows
despite the well-known laws
of optics
the portrait of a stranger,
date unknown,
enough signed in a corner
by my father.

Note:
I resemble everyone/but myself: The statement seems extremely paradoxical. Here the poet perhaps means to say that a man has numerous identities none of which can be regarded his true identity.

The well-known laws of optics: This means we see only what is visible to us; if we have normal vision, we would see things as they really are.

38.3.3 Critical Appreciation

The poem “Self-Portrait” by A.K. Ramanujan is an introspective poem. By looking at window-shop, the poet looks at himself and feels the loss of identity as to who he is. It is significant to note that what this poem from the Striders (1966) conveys is the usual theme of modernist poetry in general.

The poem is not as simple and direct as its title suggests. When you read the poem the first question that will arise in your mind is as to whose self-portrait does the poem refers to. The question complicates further when we learn that the portrait is of unknown date having only its creator’s sign below in the corner. This may refer to the fact that ancestral root or biological factors are merely partial source of human identity. Similarly the self-portrait’s unknown date may refer to inexplicable nature of the human existence.

“I resemble everyone/but myself” is the thesis statement of the poem which though seems contradictory in itself is a fact of life. Before we analyse this statement, you may be curious to know as to who the speaker of the poem is.

A look into the poet’s biographical detail may give us some clue. In this context it is important to note that the poet had been living in the USA for more than five years when he wrote this poem in 1966. Since he was becoming Americanized, he perhaps felt he was no longer an Indian except his ancestral roots in India. Here taking reference from his personal experience, the poet seems to have universalized the concept of ‘Self-Portrait’. This self-portrait refers to every sensitive individual who often suffer from lack of tune within himself. Coming back to the thesis statement, you may note that it refers to universal oneness of the human beings. This means externally the human beings are one and the same; their thought-pattern, hopes, fear and anxiety shows universal oneness. But the problem is individual’s own inner contradictions. An individual is not a true reflection of his own self.

The poem, therefore, talks of personal reconciliation in this world of contradictions. The poet believes poetry has transformational power and can
change people’s day-to-day philosophy of life. If an individual would become his true-self, he would be able to live his life with better insight and fulfillment.

As discussed above, the title refers to the self-portrait of the poet and through him those of every individual. The poem is written in the first person narrative and the emphasis on the personal pronoun “I” and “my father” very appropriately refers to the speaker’s quest for identity.

The poet draws concrete image of a stranger seen in shop-windows which he wants the readers to see. This vision of a stranger cast a multiplicity of images seen in passing shop-windows. The sight-image of a dateless self-portrait signed in a corner by its creator becomes an objective correlative of the true self-portrait of the poet and through him that of all human beings.

The poem does not mention specific name of any character. It focuses on reality rather than fantasy. Like many other confessional poems, it too is written in monologue. The mood of the poem is reflective and tone serious. The poem is written in open form, with no definite line-length, rhyme and meter. This kind of form is quite in keeping with the theme of the poem which is the quest for true identity of an individual. This poem of Ramanujan like the confessional poems of Nissim Ezekiel serves for him as therapeutic balm.

**Self-check Exercise II**

*Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.*

1) What does the line “I resemble everyone/but myself” imply?

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2) Who do you think is the speaker of the poem?
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3) What does the ‘Self-Portrait’ with “date unknown” and “often signed in the corner by my father” imply?
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38.4 CHICAGO ZEN

38.4.1 Introduction

*Chicago Zen* like Ramanujan’s self-portrait is a complex poem. Chicago Zen is an incoherent poem rich in suggestion and wider in implication. This poem like self-portrait you just read is seemingly meaningless and therefore complex. The speaker of the poem passes on the listeners certain suggestions. They are asked to keep their houses neat and clean and all their children named. He also requests them to be careful while crossing the pavements lest they should stumble down. He also tells his listeners that countries can neither be reached by jet nor by boat but only by answering the questions ‘walls and small children ask’ and finally by answering ‘all calls of nature’. He also suggests them to keep a watch on their steps especially while climbing up or down on floor from a staircase. All these suggestions seem too common even trivial. You should go through the poem again and again to understand what might be the wider implications of the suggestions. You will know some of these while reading the critical appreciation of the poem.

38.4.2 The Text

The poem appears to be a monologue. The speaker may be the persona in the poet looking for his own philosophy of life while he encounters the modern ways of life in Chicago. Zen Buddhism which focuses on meditation and intuitive knowledge seems to offer him some of the solutions to his problems. The poem is written in free verse and dramatic style. With the help of images, in an ironical mode of treatment, the poet very effectively presents the dilemma of modern life and a solution thereof.

Glossary

Zen : A Buddhist sect which believes in meditation and intuitive knowledge. Indian word *Dhyana* (meditation) became *Cha’n* in China and Zen in Japan.

Tidy : arranged neatly and with everything in order.

Frothing : Full of a mass of small bubbles especially on the surface of a liquid; Foam.

Thumbnail : the nail on the thumb.

Lobster : a sea creature with a hard shell, a long body divided into eight sections, eight legs and two large claws.

Louse : a small insect that lives on the bodies of humans and animals: head louse.

Antipodes : a way of referring to Australia and Newziland, often used in a harmonious way.

Hashish : a drug made from resin of the hemp plant which gives a feeling of being relaxed when it is smoked or chewed.

Parasols : a type of umbrella that is used for example on beaches or outside restaurants to protect people from hot sun.

Threshold : the floor or ground at the bottom of a doorway, considered as the entrance to a building room.
38.4.3 Analysis

The poem *Chicago Zen* is written by A.K. Ramanujan while he lived in Chicago, one of the largest cities of America. The poem is an account of the poet’s conflict between his Indian soul and the modern American culture he encountered in Chicago and its resolution. Like Nissim Ezekiel’s *A Poem of Dedication* which you have just read, A.K. Ramanujan’s poem too narrates the progress of poet’s mind, how he comes to terms with life. Taking clue from the Zen Buddhism the poet turns to meditative and intuitive knowledge. He becomes more careful towards sanitation and caring towards “all his children”, watchful on “traffic lights” while taking steps especially “at first high threshold” and “on sudden low” and especially when he wishes to reach his country.

If you observe the poem closely you may come to the finding that the title of the poem *Chicago Zen* does not refer to a simple and direct meaning. Here Chicago may symbolically represent the modern culture of America and Zen Buddhism with its intuitive knowledge and meditation as its solution, to come to terms with life in the face of modernity.

In the poem the words ‘you’ and ‘your’ recur several times to emphasise what the speaker suggests is very important and not easy to grasp. Here the speaker or the poet knows it because he himself sat for meditation. The poem is a monologue where the speaker is persona in the poet talking to himself. You may note that the closing lines of the poem “…and watch/for the last/ step that’s never there” is very impactful in the sense it keeps the readers guessing its meaning. The poem’s written in the second person narrative. The mood of the poem is brooding and tone ironic. The theme of the poem is to give readers a lesson that they should be watchful, caring and reflective in approach when faced wish the humdrums of modern life. The rhythm of the poem is conversational like scenes from a drama. Since the poet examines the poet’s personal experience, the poem is confessional and a kind of monologue. The poet very beautifully creates concrete images and successfully blends their different types:

“The traffic light turns orange on 57th and Dorchester, and you stumble, you fall into a vision of forest fires, enter a frothing Himalayan river, rapid, silent.” Through the play of light in the city the poet waves another beautiful image:

“on the 14th floor, Lake Michigan crawls and crawls in the window”.

The poem is divided into four stanzas. Through the two instructions that the poet passes in the first stanza on “tidy your house especially living room” and “do not forget to name all your children” perhaps he means to say that in this busy life our house including all our family members should be a very important concern for us all.

The speaker continues his piece of advice even in the second stanza. The speaker wants his listeners to remain watchful of their steps because “sight may strike you blind in unexpected place”. In the second stanza itself we see another scene: “your thumbnail/cracks a lobster louse on the windowpane/ from your daughter’s hair/and you drown, eyes open/towards the Indies, the antipodes”. The cracking of lice from daughter’s hair reminds the poet of the eastern countries perhaps of India where life is so leisurely and full of concern and care.
In the third stanza the speaker explains how “country can not be reached by jet” “nor by boat on jungle river’. Neither can it be reached by “consuming hashish behind the Monkey-temple” “nor by any /other means of transport”. The series of negatives accelerate the impact of what could be the viable means of transport. The speaker emphasizes, country, (the soul of it) can be reached:

“but only be answering ordinary/black telephones, questions/ walls and small children ask, /and answering all calls of nature”

The poem is ironical in tone. The most striking example of irony in the poem is that it is not possible for a human being to reach country (to reach its soul) by jet or boat. It is possible to do so only by answering black telephone calls and answering all calls of nature. Here irony arises by play upon words “answering telephone calls and by “answering all calls of nature”.

Here black telephone perhaps refers to baseline telephones. We talk over it only when free from our work, we are comfortable at home. What do we answer to walls and children? Perhaps the questions of walls are the questions we ask ourselves usually when alone and those of the children are innocent questions like who they are, why someone is the other and why the countries are not one and the same etc.

The concluding stanza emphasizes the word ‘watch’ because what Nissim Ezekiel in his A Poem of Dedication says, it empowers us with better sight. The poet makes his reader alert about their steps:

“Watch it, I say, / especially at the first high/ threshold.” The second point is at “the sudden low/one near the end of the flight / of stairs”. The third point the poet wants people to be careful at is: “for the last/Step that’s never there”. All these steps may refer to our routine ups and downs in our life. Figuratively it may also refer to our spiritual progress in life.

**Self-check Exercise III**

*Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.*

1) What does the title Chicago Zen refers to?

2) Give examples of images the poet creates?
38.5 ON THE DEATH OF A POEM

38.5.1 Introduction

The poem *On the Death of a Poem* you are going to read is different from A.K. Ramanujan’s other poems in theme. Here the poet examines the cognitive process of mind through which a poet conceptualizes and expresses a poem in linguistic terms. The poet realizes that much of the truth that a poet experiences personally is lost in the process of its linguistic representation. This experience is not unlikely for the poet who was also a professor of Linguistics in which the limitation of language in capturing and presenting reality becomes a professional concern.

The process of conceptualizing a poem passes through three phases. Firstly, the images consult one another. These images like conscience-stricken jury, having allowed deliberation of multiple contending views, passes on value-judgment. The third phase comes when the images are expressed in linguistic terms “in a sentence”.

Now Go Through The Poem.

38.5.2 The Text

*On the Death of a Poem*

Images consult one another, a conscience-stricken Jury, and come slowly to a sentence.

**Glossary**

**Image** : a mental picture that you have of what sb/sth is like or looks like.

**Conscience-Stricken** : feeling guilty about something you have done or failed to do.

**Jury** : a group of members of the public who listen to the facts of a case in a court and divide whether or not somebody is guilty of a crime.
38.5.3 Critical Appreciation

This short poem of A.K. Ramanujan talks of the process of conceptualization and formulation of a poem. This process begins in the mind of the poet when “images consult/one/another”. This core personal experience of the poet now moves to a stage of “a conscience-stricken jury” where they have to arrive at a value-judgment. A poets creative mind acts as a jury where it undergoes a lot of aesthetic and moral conflicts. As the images arrive at value judgment and linguistic consensus, they go on narrowing down their choices. This final process results into linguistic verdict “and come/slowly to a sentence”.

The “images consult/one/another” refers to the fact that within poet’s mind various possibilities are internalized. Similarly “a conscience-stricken/Jury” refers to the poetic process in the mind of the poet in which there is give and take of views among themselves. After enough discussion and debate the “poetic jury” passes on a final judgment which in written forms appear as poems. Thus, the poet turn multiple perspectives on the birth and status of a poem. The magnitude of truth that the poet experiences before suffers acutely when reduced to sentences or a poem. This is what the poet refers to by title On the Death of a Poem.

Perhaps the poet is in search of a more judicious, secular and subtle kind of theory and practice of poetry. By referring to word “jury” the poet refers to a sense of value-judgment and also that judicial verdict has a linguistic limitation. But while decoding meaning of a poem its interpretation goes much beyond linguistic signs.

The jury may know certain facts and may have wider connotation of a case but for the practical reasons, they deliver judgments based on limited and certain verified facts. Here the poet jury too suffers the same dilemma.

The speaker in the poem is a persona in the poet. The poem is written in the third person narrative. It is written in one sentence spread over three stanzas of three lines. The gaps between the stanzas indicate the gap in processing the meaning of a poem itself. The mood of the poem is reflective and tone serious. The poem personifies the stanza one and two till the final poem is delivered. It is as if Ramanujan wants to hold and propose the view that “the poem is a process of images operating upon one another before being given a fixed order”.

Self-check Exercise IV

Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.

1) Do you agree with the title of the poem as ‘On the Death of a Poem’? Give reasons.

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2) Give examples of use of personification in the poem.

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38.6 JAYANT MAHAPATRA (OCT. 22, 1928…)

One of the best-known Indian English poets Jayant Mahapatra was born in 1928 in Cuttack in the state of Orissa. He was born in a lower middle class Christian family. His father Lemuel was an inspector of Primary schools and mother a housewife who always had disagreement with the views and beliefs of her son. Though born and brought up in Christian tradition, he dealt all his life with dominant Hindu amphitheatre outside.

He had his early education at Steward European School Cuttack, honours in Physics from Ravenshaw College and first class master’s degree in Physics from Science College, Patna. At the young age of twenty one years he became a lecturer of physics. From his school days he grew as a lover of books. He began to learn English from his school days where he had opportunity to be taught by British, Australian teachers and a few Anglo-Indian poets. But he learnt English by reading Walter Scott, Edgar Rice Burroughs, H. Rider Hoggard, Faulkner and Hemmingway.

As a poet Jayant Mahapatra as has made his indelible mark on the Indian English poetry. Although his poetic career began late around 1938, he wrote profusely which more than compensated the loss on this account. His first book of poetry Close The Sky, Ten by Ten appeared in 1971 and was followed by Svayamvara and Other Poems (1971), A Rain of Rites (1976), Waiting (1979), The false Start (1980), Life Signs (1983), Dispossessed Nests (1986), The Poems Selected (1987), Burden of Waves and fruit (1988), The Temple (1989), A Whiteness of Bone (1992), The Best of Jayant Mahapatra (1995), Shadow Space (1997), Bare Face (2000) and Random Desert. Relationship (1980) a long poem in twelve sections, was selected for Sahitya Akademi Award of 1981. This was the first honour of its kind given to a volume of Indian English poetry. Jayant Mahapatra has also written short stories and essays and his three volumes of translations from the Oriya. In 1979 he edited Chandrabhaga, a literary bi-annual for fourteen years.

The finest multicultural poet writing in India, Jayant Mahapatra lived all his life in Orissa. No wonder, therefore, that Oriya landscape especially Puri and Konark has a strong presence in his poetry. But it is not these places but the mental, moral and spiritual life depicted in them that stamps his poetry as Indian. Except English language everything in his poetry is Indian. Mahapatra insisted that he should be considered as an Oriya poet who writes in English. Once he wrote, “Orissa is my land, my roots are there and my people. But my training was in English”. His perceptions of self and the outside world is the broad theme of his poetry. His poetry also reflects the poet’s efforts to correlate his inner as well as the outer self.
We observe so many influences on his life. He said, “You can’t separate yourself from history or myth”. Division of Orissa particularly multiple distribution of its parts among other states, the second world war, and his alienation from the dominant Hindu world had deeply influenced his poetry. As a poet Jayant Mahapatra was influenced by Robert Bly and American poets of 1960s and 1970s in using the landscape as a means of expressing his subjective feelings. Like romantic poets he employed nature or external objects as a stimulus to the deep ruminations of the self echoing deeply traditions of Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. Similarly his acquaintance with the works of William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and Ezra Pound (1885-1972) helped him to build up a belief that the logic of poem was ultimately in his inner relations rather than in its being narrative or argumentative. Jayant Mahapatra also read his favourite poets Pablo Neruda, North Eastern poets like Anjum Hassan, Robin Ngangom and Desmond. He was also influenced by the field poetry of William Carlos Williams, James Wright and the surrealists.

Jayant Mahapatra’s poetry is modernist both in the sense of theme and in the use of imagery. His images are conventional and often thought-provoking. Like his other contemporary Indian English poets, he too writes in free verse, having irregular stanza and without rhyming scheme. The tone of his poetry is almost colloquial and conversational. But the dictions he uses are often difficult. Despite everything, his poetry is different from the main-stream Indian verse”.

**Self-check Exercise V**

*Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.*

1) **Who was Jayant Mahapatra’s father and what did he do?**

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2) **What was Jayant Mahapatra’s educational background?**

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3) **Mention some of his important works.**

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38.7 HUNGER

38.7.1 Introduction

Hunger, the poem you are going to read depicts a pathetic scene in which you observe how hunger of belly forces a fisherman to offer his daughter for sex. The poem very powerfully presents the dialectics of the hunger for food and the hunger for sex. According to Mahapatra, “the poem is based on a true incident; it could easily have happened to me on the poverty–ridden sands of Gopalpur-on-sea. Often have I imagined myself walking those sands, my solitude and my inherent sexuality working on me, to face the girl inside the dimly lit palm frond shack”.

The poem unfolds in four dramatic scenes and has even a snatch of conversation. The gravity of the Hunger and the simplicity of treatment has made it one of the remarkable poems of Indian poetry in English. The poem is also marked for its profoundly human document of the experience established by the words and their arrangement.

Now go through the text.

38.7.2 The Text

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 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 wile.
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.

Glossary:
- **trailing his nets**: dragging his nets behind him as he walked homewards.
- **and his nerves**: he also seemed to drag his nerves; he tries to keep his nerves or mind under control as he controlled his nets.
- **sanctified**: consecrate; give the appearance of being right or good.
- **I saw his white bone trash his eyes**: his white bone (teeth) thrashed (punished) his eyes; one bone thrash his eyes part of the body rebuking another part of it.
- **Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in**: the speaker’s sense of guilt was so intense that he thought the only way to regain his peace of mind would be to burn his house in remorse.
- **Silence gripped my sleeves**: the speaker found himself speechless.
- **Froth foam Palm frond**: the leaf of a palm.
- **shack**: a humble cottage; a roughly built cabin.
- **wile**: trick
- **slithering**: slipping; creeping.
- **sling**: a device by which a man whose hand or forearm has been injured can support the arm so that it does not have to hang.

### 38.7.3 Critical Appreciation

The poem you are going to read is a narrative poem containing outlines of a full-length story. In this poem the poet talks about two basic human urges — the hunger of the belly and the hunger of the sex. Packed in compact structure the poem shows the paradoxical situations in which the human beings are trapped. The poem also shows how poverty forces the fisherman’s daughter to prostitution.

The opening line of the poem “It is hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back”, is a topical sentence and the whole poem is its illustration. The speaker for the first time experience the overpowering urge of sex; that was why it was hard for him to believe the power of sex. The speaker finds himself before a poor fisherman who is willing to ‘compromise’ on his daughter. The fisherman offers his daughter in a very casual manner, “will you have her”. He said so while “trailing his nets and nerves” as though his words ‘sanctified’ the purpose with which he faced himself. However, the fact that he tries to control his nerves or mind speaks of his inner conflict. This is also clear form the speaker’s observation of the fisherman: “I saw his white bones trash his eyes.” Here the word “trash” is used metaphorically and the word ‘sanctified’ is ironically because the helplessness of the situation in which the fisherman and his daughter is placed makes this word meaningless.
In the second stanza the protagonist followed the fisherman “across sprawling sands”. This indicates that the protagonist had already some information of the flesh-trade there. But his movement was not very comfortable. His “mind thumping in the flesh’s sling” shows his mental agitation. He continues to think that the only hope for regaining his mental peace after his act of sexual conduct would be through “burning the house he lived in”. Here “the house” may refer to the mental state he lived in. As he proceeds towards his goal he felt as if “silence gripped my sleeves”.

The rhythm of the poem speeds up as the story moves to its climax. Already gripped with a sense of guilt, the speaker suffers with a sense of pathos when he sees “In the flickering dark his lean-to opened like a wound”. “Wind was I” and “Palm fronds scratched my skin” shown how the speaker’s sex-sick movement had turned him quicker. The concluding line of the second stanza “Over and over the sticky soot crossed the space of my mind” turns the speaker’s inner state of mind into concrete visual picture.

The fisherman’s deliberate mentioning of his daughter’s age that “she is just turned fifteen” in the opening line of the last stanza suggests that perhaps he had turned professional. The second line of the stanza is very expressive. ‘Feel her’ is too obvious a suggestion for sex. When he says he will be back soon, he means to say he is going away. This is further clarified when he informs the speaker “your bus leaves at nine”. At that moment the speaker felt as if “the sky fell on me”. This shows that the speaker was not a professional kind and therefore it was a shocking experience for him. The way the girl opened her “wormy legs wide” convinced the speaker that the girl was indulged in prostitution out of compulsion.

The poem is written in the first person narrative. The speaker is a male persona and talks directly to the fisherman, the second person. The phrases “In the flickering dark”, “an oil lamp splayed the hours bunched to those walls” and “your bus leaves at nine” suggests that it was an evening time. “The trailing of the nets”, “across the sprawling sands” and “the froth his old nets had dragged up from the sea” create an image of fishing on a shore.

The mood of the poem is brooding and tone somber. The title Hunger has been used ironically. The poet shows his remarkable capacity to condense his material in a very short space. The poem is remarkable not only for the compactness of its structure but also for the choice of befitting words and their most effective arrangements.

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Self-check Exercise VI

Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.

1) What does the last sentence of the first stanza “I saw his white bone thrash his eyes” imply?

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2) What does the speaker in the poem mean when he said, “Hope lay perhaps in burning the house I lived in”.
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3) What was the speaker’s mental state whiling going to the shack?
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38.8 A RAIN OF RITES

38.8.1 Introduction

A Rain of Rites is the title poem of Jayant Mahapatra’s collection of poems published in 1976. What the poet says about much of his poems holds true for this poem also: “Today’s poem utilizes a number of images and symbols to form a whole, leaving the reader to extricate himself with the valid meaning or argument from them.” He adds, “a seemingly obscure poem does in its content, contain the hidden voice for its ultimate understanding.” The persona in the poet regrets that his past experiences holds him back shattering all his good impulses that arise in his mind before they rain or rejuvenate.

Written in fourteen lines the poem is divided into four stanzas, first three of four lines each and the last one of two lines only. Since the poem is written in free verse it does not reflect any rhyming scheme or metrical arrangement. This pattern of poem befits the theme of the poem which ends on a note of interrogation.

38.8.2 The Text

Sometimes a rain comes
slowly across the sky, that turns
upon its grey cloud, breaking away into light
before it reaches its objective.

The rain I have known and traded all this life
is thrown like kelp on the beach.
Like some shape of conscience I can not look at,
A malignant purpose in nun’s eye.

Who was the last man on earth.
to whom the cold cloud brought the blood to his face?
Numbly I climb to the mountain – tops of ours
Where my own soul quivers on the edge of answers.
Which still, stale air sits on an angel’s wings?
What holds my rain so it’s hard to overcome?

**Glossary:**

- **kelp**: a large brown seaweed.
- **conscience**: feeling of feeling of guilt or anxiety.
- **Numbly**: deprived of feeling through cold or shock etc.

### 38.8.3 Analysis

*A Rain of Rites* is a poem written by Jayant Mahapatra who lived himself a life of alienation. The title of the poem is symbolic in meaning. In the poet’s scheme of sin and expiation, *A Rain of Rites* may refer to hoped-for expiation. It may also refer to a process of purification.

In this poem Mahapatra uses symbols from his environment to articulate an inner space of feelings. For example his symbols of ‘rain’, ‘sky’, and ‘cloud’ very articulately express the poet’s inner feelings which arise during solitude and silence. This poem suggests more than is said as it reveals areas of the mind unstructured by rational concepts and logic.

The poem reflects the poet’s question which ends in uncertainty and defeat. The poem is lyric of a troubled soul ; of a weary and undefined unhappiness. Bruce king remarks. “The monsoon season, which provides symbols for *A Rain of Rites* is both a time of grey skies, disasters and depressions and also a period of renewal, birth, regeneration, after the dry, stifling Indian summer. But the rains brings no renewal to the poet. In the poem a contrast is made between the surprising moments when the sun shines through the clouds of the grey rain and the poet’s lack of illumination and renewal:

> “Sometime a rain comes,
> Slowly across the sky, that turns upon its grey cloud, breaking
> away into light
> Before it reaches its objective”.

You may note that when the opening stanza talks symbolically of ‘rain’, the poet uses the word in two different senses: one in the sense of past experience and the other in the sense of purifying agent.

In the second stanza the speaker regrets “The Rain I have known and traded all this life/ is thrown like a kelp on the beach.” He perhaps means to say that the experiences of the past he has known proved useless ‘like a kelp on the beach.’ He adds another simile to illustrate the same subtle point. He says that since he is some shape of conscience, therefore, has a sense of right and wrong; he is not supposed to misunderstand the truth and look for right in a wrong place like looking for “a malignant purpose in a nun’s eyes”.

The stanza three asks a question as to who the last man was “to whom the cold cloud brought the blood to his face”. The poet perhaps refers to the person having right impulse whose thoughts were refined and the loss of it had saddened the man. The speaker wishes to say that it was long-long ago that loss of such human values outraged the human being. The poet examines his own inner feelings to
denote the time over which the human beings lost their innocence and were overtaken by experience. The poet devoid of any feeling approaches this question with shock:

“Numbly I climb to the mountain-tops of ours 
Where my own soul quivers on the edge of answers”.

The speaker fails to get the exact answer. Therefore, the last stanza ends on a note of interrogation. The speaker finally wants to know as to why the stale air or old memories “sits on angel’s wings” and they move with the fastest speed. He would also like to know as to what is that holds our rain or past impressions so that “it’s hard to overcome”.

The poem uses the images of ‘rain’, ‘sky’, ‘clouds’ and ‘kelp on the sea’. They are related to the rainy season which symbolizes both devastation as well as regeneration. Although the dictions chosen by the poet is simple but their arrangement into phrases, clauses and sentences makes the overall meaning of the poem complex as are the speaker’s inner feeling. The images are created with the use of similes. For example, the poet compares the uselessness of the past memories with seaweed on the beach. Similarly he compares himself with some shape of conscience. In the title ‘A Rain of Rites’ we marks some internal rhyme as we mark it in the second line of stanza three where the poet uses ‘cold cloud’. 

The theme of the poem is the loss of human innocence or rejuvenating force within because of the worldly experience we gain which keeps us going in life. 

This raises the same question which Nissim Ezekiel raises in ‘A Poem of Dedication’ wherein the speaker says:

“And rivers what a man can hope to win by simple flowing, learning how to flow”.

The poem may also be studied in terms of the poet’s own personal life. The listening, waiting, questioning solitude is a reflection of Mahapatra’s being unable to be part of the traditional Hindu Culture around him. A Rain of Rites balances his inner with outer world. The poem appears to be a reflection on relation with and alienation of the self from external realities in a world without apparent purpose. This is existentialist dilemma of most modern literature. The poem is written in the first person narrative. There is enough gap between the lines of the poem because it expresses the narrator’s inner landscape. Because the poem reflects upon intuitive knowledge, much remains unsaid which the readers are supposed to reveal. The overall mood of the poem is regretful and tone somber.

**Self-check Exercise VII**

*Answer the following questions in the space provided. Read the answers (38.9.2) after doing the exercise.*

1) **What does the title *A Rain of Rites* refers to?**

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*Note: The answers are not provided in the text.*
2) Why the speaker cannot look at a malignant purpose in a nun’s eye?

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3) Why does the poet leave the poem on a note of interrogation?

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38.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you read about the life and five poems of A.K. Ramanujan and Jayant Mahapatra. You will also have a glimpse of the kind of poetry they have written. Above all, you will be in a position to analyze the poets’ other poems.

38.10 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I

1) A.K. Ramanujan was born and educated in India. At the age of thirty he left for the USA where he studied and worked all his life as a faculty in the University of Chicago. He not only spent formative part of his life in India, he continued to visit his mother land all his life besides representing it in literature. In his writings we mark a comparison of Indian life and culture with those of America.

2) See para 2 and 3 of 38.2.

3) See para 4 of 38.2.

4) See para 5 of 38.2.

Self-check Exercise II

1) This line means that the human beings, their hopes, fears and anxiety are universally the same. The human being’s own self is contradictory and is not in harmony with itself.

2) Here the poet himself seems to be the speaker. When he universalizes this question, it becomes a question of identity of every individual.

3) The above lines suggest that the time since the human being exist is unknown. The ancestral identity of a man is merely a superficial kind of knowledge of human identity.
Self-check Exercise III

1) See para 2 of 38.4.3.

2) The poem creates the images of ‘forest fires’ and ‘the frothing Himalayan river, rapid and silent’.

3) The poem is ironical in treatment. The most striking example of irony in the poem is “country cannot be reached by jet or boat”. It is possible to reach a country (its soul) “only by answering black telephone calls” and “answering all call of nature”. We mark here the play upon words.

Self-check Exercise V

2) See para 5.

Self-check Exercise VI

1) This sentence shows although the fisherman spoke it in a spur of moment as it he was a professional but reality comes out when we observe that his white teeth did not agree with the other part of his body.

2) The speaker felt that the act he was involved in was morally degrading. He suffered from a severe sense of guilt and thought that he can purify himself only by killing himself. This may also refer to a state of mind having burning desires.

3) See para 3 of 38.7.3.

Self-check Exercise VII

1) See para 1 of 38.8.3.

2) Because it would mean looking for answer in an unexpected place or looking for right answer in a wrong place.

3) The poet leaves the poem on a note of interrogation because his quest as to why the past always prevails over our impulses of the present remains unresolved.
UNIT 39  ARUN KOLATKAR AND AGHA SHAHID ALI

Structure
39.0  Objectives
39.1  Introduction
39.2  Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004)
39.3  Suicide of Rama
   39.3.1  Introduction
   39.3.2  The Text
   39.3.3  Interpretation
   39.3.4  A Note on the Form
39.4  Chaitanya
   39.4.1  The Text
   39.4.2  Background to the Poem
   39.4.3  Interpretation
39.5  Ajamil and the Tigers
   39.5.1  Introduction
   39.5.2  The Text
   39.5.3  Interpretation
   39.5.4  Form and Style
39.6  Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001)
39.7  Postcard from Kashmir
   39.7.1  Introduction
   39.7.2  The Text
   39.7.3  Interpretation
   39.7.4  Style
39.8  Let Us Sum Up
39.9  Answers to Self-check Exercises
39.10  Suggested Readings

39.0  OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

•  write about Arun Kolatkar and Agha Shahid Ali and their poetry;
•  discuss the content of the poems prescribed for you;
•  be able to comment on the form and style of the poems discussed in this unit.

39.1  INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall take up three poems by Arun Kolatkar and one by Agha Shahid Ali. First of all, we shall briefly introduce you to these Indian poets in English who, though almost contemporaries, came from different backgrounds and have written different kinds of poetry. Kolatkar was a bilingual poet writing both in Marathi and English while Agha Shahid Ali, a Kashmiri, was a professor
of English and creative writing in the U.S.A. After that we shall take up the
discussion of the prescribed poems.

All the three prescribed poems of Kolatkar require some background knowledge.
We shall therefore try to understand the mythological and historical background
to these poems.

Many poems can be interpreted in more than one way. We shall try to find out
whether the poems prescribed for us can have more than one meaning.

You know that the study of language used in a text is extremely important but
when we are reading a poem it is essential that we are sensitive to the pictorial
quality as well as to the music of the poem. In this unit we shall also take a look
at the language used in the prescribed poems.

### 39.2 ARUN KOLATKAR (1932-2004)

Arun Balkrishna Kolatkar was born in Kolhapur in Maharashtra. He was trained
as an artist at the J. J. School of Art, Mumbai. He took his diploma in painting in
1957 and began to work as an advertiser in Mumbai. He lived in that city all his
life.

When you know more about Arun Kolatkar you will find that he is different from
most other Indian poets in English. He is different because he was a bilingual
poet who could write poetry in English as well as in his mother tongue Marathi.

Kolatkar’s early poems, both English and Marathi, were published in various
magazines. Dilip Chitre, whose poem you will read in Unit 42, included
Kolatkar’s Marathi poetry translated into English in his Anthology of Marathi
Poetry 1945-1965 published in 1967. 1976 was an important year for Kolatkar
because that year two collections of his poems, one in English and another in
Marathi, were published. The book of English poems was called Jejuri and his
Marathi poems were published under the title of Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita
(‘Arun Kolatkar’s Poetry’). The very next year he won the Commonwealth
Poetry Prize for his Jejuri. Poets and critics, including Nissim Ezekiel and
Salman Rushdie, have praised Jejuri highly and in 1977 when Prisith Nandy
published Strangertime, a major anthology of Indian poems in English, he
included Kolatkar’s poetry in it.

In 2004, the year Kolatkar died, two collections of his poems, Kala Ghoda
Poems and Sarpasatra appeared. Kolatkar also translated the poems of Marathi
saint-poet Tukaram into English. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award for his
Marathi poems entitled Bihiki Vahi (‘A Soaked Notebook’)

Kolatkar’s Jejuri is named after a place in Maharashtra. Jejuri is a temple town
near Pune in Western Maharashtra where devotees go on a pilgrimage to worship
the deity Khandoba, an incarnation of Shiva. In 1963, Kolatkar visited Jejuri with
his brother and a friend. He composed a few poems about the place immediately
after he returned from there. Before he actually saw the place he had read about it
in a book on temples and legends of Maharashtra. Kolatkar says in an interview
that he became interested in Jejuri because ‘It seemed an interesting place’.

Although Kolatkar draws many of his images from the temple town of Jejuri, we
cannot say that these poems are religious or devotional. He himself said in an
interview that he was not sure whether he believed in God. He said, ‘I leave the
question alone. I don’t think I have to take a position about God one way or the other.’ Many of the poems in Jejuri are about non-religious subjects. Some of them express the poet’s understanding of the problems of living. Many others are about contradictions in contemporary life in India.

Kolatkar’s poems are often oblique and sometimes difficult to understand. This is because his poetry is radically experimental and is influenced by the European and American modernist poets like Eliot, Auden, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams and many others like them. These qualities of obliqueness and obscurity are seen in both his English and Marathi poems. He often uses myth to comment on the contemporary reality in India. You will find that ‘Ajamil and the Tigers’, a poem you are going to read, does exactly that. There is also a touch of humour and satire in his poetry.

### 39.3 SUICIDE OF RAMA

#### 39.3.1 Introduction

This poem is about Rama, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu and the hero of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. Valmiki’s epic describes how Rama of Ayodhya defeated Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, and rescued his wife Sita who had been abducted by Ravana. After that Rama returned to Ayodhya and ruled as a model king for many years. Rama is said to have died by drowning himself in the river Saryu which flows past Ayodhya.

Now read the poem.

#### 39.3.2 The Text

*Suicide of Rama*

winding verses stir him up
the turreted epic shrugs him off
the river resumes him
from legend’s ledge the hero falls

the crescent cuts a rope of fables
we cloud the skeleton with folklore
from valmiki’s roof top rama jumps
disturbing a tile or two

his flesh of myth saponified
his arse turned up toward the moon
rama drifts like a gourd
far from sap or shore

man leaves his legend standing
one wave bears the other out
the river refers his bones
to the salt judgement of the sea

**Glossary:**

- **winding**: having a curved and twisted shape.
- **turreted**: having small towers atop a wall or building, especially a castle.
ledge : a narrow flat shelf fixed to a wall, especially one below a window.
crescent : a curved shape.
saponified : turned into soap when oil or fat reacts with alkali.
gourd : a type of large vegetable with a hard skin and soft flesh.

39.3.3 Interpretation

Arun Kolatkar, as you know, wrote poems both in English and Marathi. Sometimes he wrote a poem in Marathi and then translated it into English himself. ‘Suicide of Rama’ was first written in Marathi and then translated into English by the poet himself. It is about the death of Rama.

The opening lines refer to the ‘winding verses’ of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. The verses are compared to an ascending flight of stairs that created the hero named Rama. Then Rama commits suicide and falls from his heroic height that Valmiki gave him. It is like the epic shrugging him off. Valmiki’s epic has been called ‘turreted’ which suggests the metaphor of the epic as a grand palace. It also tells you that Rama lived in a palace and he jumped into the river from one of its windows. By juxtaposing the epic and Rama’s palace the poet suggests that it is not only the epic *Ramayana* that is grand like a palace but also that the epic has created the grand image of Rama the hero. But when Rama commits suicide he becomes a common mortal. The word ‘ledge’ in the fourth line continues the metaphor of the palace. It is the ledge, literally that of a window from which Rama jumped into the Saryu, and metaphorically that of the legend of Rama from which Rama falls when he commits suicide.

The ‘crescent’ in the next four lines makes you visualize the curved path that Rama’s body took when he jumped into the river. Fables (here meaning legendary tales) about Rama are imagined to be a rope that kept him secure at a high point as a hero. The poet tells us how heroes are created. When we turn a human being into someone divine it is like surrounding an ordinary person of flesh and blood (‘skeleton’) with the aura of a superhuman being (that is, clouding him with folklore). But when Rama committed suicide he fell from the high rooftop of Valmiki’s poetic imagination to the level of an ordinary mortal. To commit suicide is to admit defeat and the poet seems to suggest that a defeated man cannot be an epic hero. The poem presents a striking contrast between the two images of Rama: one of the hero of *Ramayana*, faultless and immortal in popular imagination, and the other of an ordinary man who commits suicide.

Rama’s image of a great hero and king in mythology is seen turning into soap, something that will eventually disappear in the river. The use of the word ‘arse’ suggests that now the great hero has been reduced to a corpse that is drifting in the river like ‘a gourd’. Thus, in death the hero is far removed from that living creeper of legend (‘sap’) that once bore him high.

The final lines express a general truth. The man leaves only his legend behind. He will die but his great deeds will be remembered even after he is gone. It is like one wave proving that there was another before it. This is the cycle of nature; death always follows life. The river symbolizing change carries his corpse to the salty sea. This is the final judgement of time (objectified here as the sea) that every life, however illustrious, has to come to an end.
The artistic tension in the poem has been built on the contrast between the two images of Rama: the one of an epic hero who is a timeless part of popular imagination and the other of a mortal who dies when he jumps into the river. His leaping into the river and getting drowned symbolizes his transformation from a legend into a mortal being. After death he becomes a part of this phenomenal world of the elements. The river represents that physical world that is bound by the laws of nature which say that anything born has to die. In another words, Rama’s suicide suggests his leaving the world of cultural imagination and passing into that of ordinary existence.

This poem will remind you of another poem in Hindi written on the same subject. That poem is ‘Ram Ki Jal Samadhi’ by Bharat Bhushan but there is fundamental difference between the two. In the Hindi poem, death does not diminish Rama’s greatness. The images that Bharat Bhushan employs in the poem relate to Rama’s great deeds which he remembers at the time of his death such as his breaking the bow of Shiva. Unlike the Hindi poem, Kolatkar’s poem has an unmistakable note of irony.

39.3.4 A Note on the Form

When you read the poem you will find something unusual about it. You will notice that there are no capital letters or punctuation marks in the poem. If you read the poems of the American poet E.E. Cummings (1894-1962) you will notice that he too does not use capital letters or punctuation marks. But can we offer another explanation for it? We all know that proper nouns are written with a capital letter therefore ‘valmiki’ and ‘rama’ should have been spelt with capital letters. Can we say that Kolatkar does not write these names with capital letters because he wants to suggest that death makes everyone equal and takes away a person’s individuality? Note that in the third stanza, Kolatkar compares Rama’s body to a gourd drifting in the river suggesting that after death there is no difference between the body of Rama and that of a nameless gourd. Similarly, we can say that the absence of punctuation marks tries to recapture in verse the unrestricted flow of the river Saryu in which Rama was drowned.

You will also notice that in this poem the river is the central metaphor. It stands for the principle of change. This image of the river is contrasted with that of the solidly standing royal palace that represents the legend of Rama fixed immutably in our imagination.

**Self-check Exercise I**

1) Select words in the first four lines that suggest the image of a palace.

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2) What does the river symbolize?

3) Explain in your own words the line ‘we cloud the skeleton with folklore’.

39.4 CHAITANYA

39.4.1 The Text

Chaitanya

come off it
said chaitanya to a stone
in stone language

wipe the red paint off your face
i don’t think the colour suits you
i mean what’s wrong
with being just a plain stone
i’ll still bring you flowers
you like the flowers of zendu
don’t you
i like them too

Glossary:

Zendu : a kind of flower

39.4.2 Background to the Poem

Let us know something about Chaitanya. Chaitanya, or Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534), as he is often called, was born in Bengal. He believed that we should ignore religious rituals and worship the Supreme Being in the form of Lord Krishna. He also believed that a devotee should lose his individual self into Lord Krishna and experience the presence of God in his life. One of the ways of destroying the ego is to recite the name of the lord in great ecstasy and to feel boundless compassion and love for God’s entire creation.
39.4.3 Interpretation

Arun Kolatkar’s *Jejuri*, as you know, is a collection of poems dealing ostensibly with the poet’s experience of visiting that place but actually it has poems on many important questions related to living. The poem you have just read has been taken from *Jejuri* and is one of the three ‘Chaitanya’ sections in the book. How is Chaitanya related to Jejuri? It is said that in 1510-11 he visited Jejuri where he tried to reform the people.

The opening lines of the poem tell you that the speaker is Chaitanya. He seems to be talking to a stone that is painted red. The first line (‘come off it’) tells you that the speaker’s tone is informal as if he is talking to an equal and not to a deity. He speaks in ‘stone language’. Can you say what ‘stone language’ means? First, it can mean language that the deity did not understand. It can also mean that people did not understand what Chaitanya was trying to tell them about devotion. When you read the rest of the poem, you will realize that ‘stone language’ suggests that the people of Jejuri did not agree to what Chaitanya was asking them to do. Therefore we can say that Chaitanya’s language was ineffective; it was ‘stone language’.

Let us return to the poem now. The speaker asks the stone to wipe the red paint off its face. If the stone mentioned in the poem is worshipped as a deity, we can safely say that the ‘red paint’ mentioned in the poem is obviously vermillion that devotees put on the stone images they worship. When we explore the image as a symbol, we understand that the ‘red paint’ stands for all kinds of rituals that are merely actions without any real feelings of devotion.

The last four lines mention ‘flowers’ that the speaker will offer to the deity. This word may be contrasted with the ‘red paint’ mentioned earlier. If ‘red paint’ stands for empty rituals, flowers represent real and natural feeling of devotion. The last two lines of the poem tell us that the speaker does not see himself and God to be separate. This is indicated by his saying that both he and God like the zendu flowers.

It appears from the poem that Chaitanya wanted to teach true devotion to the people of Jejuri but they preferred to continue using their old religious rituals. This you will realize when you read another Chaitanya section in *Jejuri* which says that the hills (meaning the people living there) remained unmoved.

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the hills remained still
when Chaitanya
was passing by
a cowbell tinkled
when he disappeared from view
and the herd of legends
returned to its grazing.
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Can we call this a religious poem? In a *Youth Times* interview Arun Kolatkar was asked if he was a religious poet. He replied, ‘A religious poet? No. Or may be religious in the sense that any experience can be religious if experienced deeply enough...’ This poem is religious in the sense that it expresses the poet’s idea of true religious feeling.
Self-check Exercise II

1) Why does Chaitanya ask the stone to wipe the red paint off its face?

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2) Comment on ‘red paint’ and ‘flowers’ as symbols.

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39.5 AJAMIL AND THE TIGERS

39.5.1 Introduction

In this poem Arun Kolatkar uses the mythical tale of Ajamil in a new context. According to the legend, Ajamil was an evil man who was a drunkard and neglected his family. He also gambled and sold off his wife’s ornaments. He became a thief and looted wayfarers. As a result of his evil ways his wife suffered and found it very difficult to look after her children. The story tells us that he was saved from the messenger of death by God. After that he became a different man. He left his sinful ways. He decided to spend the rest of his life helping others.

39.5.2 The Text

Ajamil and the Tigers

The tiger people went to their king and said, ‘We’re starving. We’ve had nothing to eat, not a bite, for 15 days and 16 nights. Ajamil has got a new sheep dog. He cramps our style and won’t let us get within a mile of meat.’

‘That’s shocking,’ said the tiger king. ‘Why don’t you come to see me before? Make preparations for a banquet. I’m gonna teach that sheep dog a lesson he’ll never forget.’
‘Hear, hear’, said the tigers.
‘Careful,’ said the queen.
But he was already gone.
Alone
Into the darkness before the dawn.

In an hour he was back,
the good king.
A **black patch** on his eye.
His tail in a sling.
And said, ‘I’ve got it all planned
now that I know the lie of the land.
All of us will have to try.
We’ll outnumber the son of a bitch.
And this time there will be no **hitch**.
Because this time I shall be leading the attack.’

Quick as lightning
the sheep dog was.
He took them all in as prisoners of war,
the 50 tigers and the tiger king,
before they could get their paws
on a single sheep.
They never had a chance.
The dog was in 51 places all at once.
He strung them all out in a **daisy** chain
and flung them in front of his boss in one big leap.

‘Nice dog you got there, Ajamil,’
said the tiger king.
Looking a little ill
and spitting out a tooth.
‘But there’s been a bit of a misunderstanding.
We could’ve wiped out your herd in one clean sweep.
But we were not trying to creep up on your sheep.
We feel that means are more important than ends.
We were coming to see you as friends.
And that’s the truth.’

The sheep dog was the type
who had never told a lie in his life.
He was built along simpler lines
and he was simply disgusted.
He kept on making frantic signs.
But Ajamil, the good shepherd
refused to meet their eyes
and pretended to believe every single word
of what the tiger king said.
And seemed to be taken in by all the lies.

Ajamil cut them loose
and asked them all to stay for dinner.
It was an offer the tigers couldn’t refuse.
And after the lamb chops and the **roast**,
when Ajamil proposed
they sign a long term friendship treaty,
all the tigers roared,
‘We couldn’t agree with you more.’
And swore they would be good friends all their lives
as they put down the forks and the knives.

Ajamil signed a pact
with the tiger people and sent them back.
Laden with gifts of sheep, leather jackets and balls of wool.
Ajamil wasn’t a fool.
Like all good shepherds he knew
that even tigers have got to eat some time.
A good shepherd sees to it they do.
He is free to play a flute all day
as well fed tigers and fat sheep drink from the same pond
with a full stomach for a common bond.

Glossary:
cramps our style : does not allow us to hunt sheep.
black patch : wearing a patch of black cloth on his eye as it is injured.
hitch : problem.
daisy : a kind of flower.
roast : roast meat.

39.5.3 Interpretation

The poem, as you must have noticed, tells a story in which animals too are characters. It is therefore a fable. A fable is a fictional story in which there are animals as well as mythical characters. The animals are given human qualities such as verbal communication. The story ends with a moral lesson. You must know that a fable is different from a parable in the sense that in the latter there are no animal characters or inanimate things presented as characters.

‘Ajamil and the Tigers’ is a story about how a compromise was reached between Ajamil and the king of tigers. Here in this story Ajamil is presented as a shepherd whose sheep are protected by a brave and honest sheep dog. The tigers cannot hunt sheep and are therefore hungry. They go to their king and complain that the ‘new sheep dog’ has does not let them hunt sheep. The king of tigers goes to fight the sheep dog but is defeated. Then once again he attacks the sheep dog taking every tiger with him but is again defeated. Then the king of tigers uses diplomacy and falsehood and tells the simple Ajamil that there has been some misunderstanding. He claims that the tigers could have killed all the sheep in ‘one clean sweep’ but he feels that ‘means are more important than ends’. So he has come to him as a friend.

The sheep dog tries to tell Ajamil by making ‘frantic signs’ that the tiger king is not telling the truth but Ajamil pretends not to understand the sheep dog. Ajamil invites the king and his tigers to a grand banquet. After that a pact is signed between Ajamil and the tiger king according to which Ajamil offers the tigers some sheep in return for peace. Now there is no fight between the sheep dog and the tigers and both the sheep and the tigers are happy and drink from the same pond. Ajamil is free from worry and can ‘play a flute all day.’
You must have noted that the story has been narrated in the idiom of a Hollywood movie about gangsters. Notice the Americanism in the line ‘I’m gonna teach that sheep dog a lesson he’ll never forget.’ Then you realize that the sheep may represent the common people who are at the mercy of mafia dons. The only way they can save themselves is by offering the criminals some protection money so that they may live in peace. You thus see that the story becomes a cynical comment on the present day situation in which a compromise has to be reached with criminals because the leaders (represented by Ajamil in the poem) do not have the will to punish them. This poem has been interpreted in many ways. M.K. Naik, for instance, says that the story highlights the need for harmony in a life full of conflict. But you could also say that the poem has a philosophical dimension and illustrates with the help of a fable how evil can corrupt the good. Again, you can also interpret the poem as a political satire on the contemporary situation in India in which criminal gangs are able to form a nexus with corrupt political leaders. The sheep dog may represent good and honest people in the system but they are overruled by those in power who have compromised their principles for the sake of convenience. As the protector of his sheep, Ajamil should have listened to what the sheep dog was trying to tell him.

Like a story the poem has dialogue and narration. You will notice how characters in the poem have been developed. The tigers are shown as full of confidence while Ajamil comes across as a weak individual. You also see that the central conflict in the poem is between good and evil in which, unlike in a fable, the good reaches a compromise with evil.

39.5.4 Form and Style

In form ‘Ajamil and the Tigers’ is a satire. In her The Anatomy of Poetry Marjorie Boulton says that a satire is ‘intended to arouse laughter by its witty and severe criticism of abuses.’ Can you identify elements in the poem that arouse laughter? You can, if you look carefully. For instance, when the poet describes the tiger king returning from the battle with a black patch over his eye and his ‘tail in a sling’ we find it funny. We do not expect the majestic tiger looking like a patient in the orthopaedic ward of a hospital. This unexpected turn in description creates humour.

We can also say that the poem fits into the form of a fable. You see that specific numbers have been used in the poem. For instance, the tigers have been hungry for ‘15 days and 16 nights’ or the dog was in ‘51 places all at once’. In fables and fairy tales you often find specific numbers used. For instance, in a fable you will find expressions such as ‘the prince rode through the forest for seven days and seven nights’, ‘the ascetic meditated for twelve years’, and so on.

This poem has dialogue but it is spoken only by the tigers. Most of the dialogue in the poem is what the tiger king says. What Ajamil says is given in the reported speech. Why is it like this? One of the reasons may be that the poet wants to focus only on the tigers and so reports directly what they say. Another reason that goes deeper than this can be that in the kind of world the poet has described symbolically, only the evil has a voice and therefore, it is only the tigers who speak.

The style of the poem is almost bare with hardly any figures of speech used. You will find a simile in ‘Quick as lightning’ and a metaphor in ‘a daisy chain’ but most of the time the poet uses concrete, pictorial words in their literal sense.
Self-check Exercise III

1) What according to you is the moral of ‘Ajamil and the Tigers’?

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2) Pick out expressions in the poem that suggest that the tiger king has been described as a mafia don.

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3) Why does Ajamil refuse to meet the eyes of the sheep dog who is trying to say with ‘frantic signs’ that the tiger king is not telling the truth?

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39.6 AGHA SHAHID ALI (1949-2001)

Agha Shahid Ali belonged to Kashmir and was educated in Kashmir, New Delhi and the U.S.A. earning a Ph.D. from the Pennsylvania State University in 1984. Next year, he also did a Masters in Fine Arts from the University of Arizona. He taught English literature and creative writing in colleges and universities in India and the U.S.A. On December 8, 2001 he died of brain cancer at the young age of fifty-two.

In 1972, when Agha Shahid Ali was twenty-three he published his first collection of poems called Bone Sculpture. This was followed in 1979 by In Memory of Begum Akhtar. But some of his finest poems are to be found in his The Half-Inch Himalayas published in 1987.

Ali’s poetry is markedly different from Arun Kolatkar’s. In his best poetry there is much tenderness and longing for his homeland. You will also find a prominent romantic streak in his poetry. Memory and nostalgia are important elements in his work. He even called one of his collections A Nostalgist’s Map of America which he published in 1991. Although there are major differences between the two, Ali’s poetry will remind you more of the poems of Jayanta Mahapatra than
Indian English Poets

those of Kolatkar or Nissim Ezekiel. Ali’s last book was Call Me Ishmael Tonight which he described as a collection of English ghazals. The ghazal, as you know, is an important genre in Urdu poetry.

Ali not only wrote poetry but was also an accomplished translator. He translated into English the poetry of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the famous Urdu poet. His translation of Faiz’s poetry is titled A Rebel’s Silhouette.

39.7 POSTCARD FROM KASHMIR

39.7.1 Introduction

‘Postcard from Kashmir’ is the prologue poem in Agha Shahid Ali’s collection of poems called The Half-Inch Himalayas published in 1987. It shows how he was moved when he received a picture postcard from Kashmir in America. The poem shows the poet’s deep love for his homeland and nostalgia for it and sets the theme of the volume. The poems in this volume are about the longing for his homeland, memories of it and also about being in exile.

39.7.2 The Text

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

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

This is home. And this the closest
I’ll ever be to home. When I return,
the colours won’t be so brilliant,
the Jhelum waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.

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

(for Pavan Sahgal)

Glossary:

shrink : is reduced to the size of a postcard.
ultramarine : bright blue.
negative : the negative of a photograph.

39.7.3 Interpretation

‘Postcard from Kashmir’ brings to us the poet’s feelings about his homeland Kashmir. It juxtaposes the memory of the poet’s home with the picture of some scenery in Kashmir. When he receives the postcard he is reminded of his home in India. Obviously, he is away from home in some foreign land.

Did you find the first two lines of the poem difficult to understand? How can Kashmir be contained in a mailbox? But when you realize that ‘Kashmir’ here
Arun Kolatkar and Agha Shahid Ali

does not mean the place but a picture postcard showing a view in Kashmir you understand that the word has been used in a different sense. In the second line we are told that the postcard is four inches by six. Why does he use the adjective ‘neat’ in the second line? It is probably to suggest that though the scene from Kashmir is printed on a well-defined, rectangular piece of paper, the poet’s memory of that place is not so clearly outlined. It is hazy and overlapping and is mixed with ambivalent emotions.

In the next two lines the poet tells us something about himself. He likes things that are neat and well-ordered. But we also hear a note of wry regret in his voice. You will see that the lines have irony. They mean the opposite of what they say. The poet appears to be saying that he who prided himself on being clear-headed about things is now confused about what his home means to him. Now he is looking at the picture of the Himalayas on a half-inch stamp affixed to the postcard but he cannot express clearly what the mountains mean to him now, or what memories that picture brings to him.

When you read further you realize that what the poet experiences is complex. For example, we can interpret ‘home’ in more than one sense. Does ‘home’ mean Kashmir or does it mean the place in America where he is living now? If the place where he is living now is home, why does he feel homesick for Kashmir where he was born and spent his early years? Continuing the inherent ambivalence and dichotomy of the poem, the poet says that when he actually visits Kashmir, the place will not have such bright colours that the picture postcard has. Similarly, the water of Jhelum will not be so brightly blue. The postcard then becomes a metaphor for his memories of his homeland. He has a romanticised picture of his homeland in his mind. It is said that distance makes things look more beautiful than they actually are. The Kashmir of his memories has brighter colours than the real Kashmir.

Why does the speaker say that his love will not be so ‘overexposed’ in Kashmir? Here ‘overexposed’ has been used in the sense the word is used in photography. A negative is said to have been overexposed when more light is allowed to fall on it than what is needed. When it happens, the positive that is printed from the negative plate becomes hazy. Here in America his love for his motherland is overexposed because there is too much longing and nostalgia mixed with it making it difficult to understand.

The concluding lines of the poem continue the metaphor of a photograph. When he visits Kashmir his memory will be a little out of ‘focus’ suggesting that the reality of the place will not match the memory of it. His memory will be a large negative photographic plate which is still undeveloped. You will readily see that the poet is talking about how imagination works. It transforms everything. He is suggesting here that there are two kinds of reality: one that is out there, and the other the memory of it.

39.7.4 Style

The poem is spoken in a tone that suggests that the poet is talking to himself. You will notice that the poet builds up on the images of light and dark. The ‘ultramarine’ in line 9 is contrasted with the ‘black/and white’ in lines 13 and 14. We can therefore say that the poet expresses his longing for his homeland with the help of visual imagery. You will also notice that when the poet describes the actual place he uses expressions such as ‘four by six inches’, ‘half-inch Himalayas’, ‘Jhelum’, ‘waters’ all of which have a definite meaning and can be
clearly visualised. But when he talks about his feelings he uses words like ‘home’ and ‘love’, words that cannot be visualized so easily. He achieves this contrasting effect in the poem by balancing concrete words against those that are abstract.

**Self-check Exercise IV**

1) Pick out two words in the poem which you think have been used ironically.
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2) What is the central metaphor in the poem?
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3) Point out two things in the poem that have been contrasted.
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**39.8 LET US SUM UP**

In this unit you read three poems by Arun Kolatkar and one by Agha Shahid Ali. The text of the poems was explained and their implied meaning was also discussed. You also learnt how to point out stylistic devices used in these poems.

**39.9 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES**

**Self-check Exercise I**


2) The river may stand for the flux of time that makes everything eventually transient.

3) The words suggest how legends are made. We invent stories about a man which are passed on from generation to generation turning that man into a hero.
Self-check Exercise II

1) Chaitanya asks the stone to wipe the red paint off its face because he does not want rituals to be a part of devotion to God.

2) Symbolically, red paint represents empty rituals and flowers stand for the real and natural feeling of devotion.

Self-check Exercise III

1) If a leader makes a compromise with evil, his followers have to pay the price for it.

2) ‘I’m gonna teach that sheep dog a lesson he’ll never forget.’ ‘We’ll outnumber the son of a bitch’.

3) It shows that Ajamil knows he is making a mistake and so is feeling guilty.

Self-check Exercise IV

1) ‘Neat’, ‘home’.

2) A photograph.

3) The actual Kashmir and the poet’s memory of it.

39.10 SUGGESTED READINGS


UNIT 40  DILIP CHITRE AND KEKI N. DARUWALLA

Structure

40.0Objectives
40.1Introduction
40.2Dilip Chitre (1938-2009)
40.3The Light of Birds Breaks the Lunatic’s Sleep
  40.3.1The Text
  40.3.2Interpretation
  40.3.3Images
40.4Keki N. Daruwalla
40.5Hawk
  40.5.1The Text
  40.5.2Interpretation
  40.5.3Form and Imagery
40.6Chinar
  40.6.1Introduction
  40.6.2The Text
  40.6.3Interpretation
  40.6.4Style
40.7Let Us Sum Up
40.8Answers to Self-check Exercises
40.9Suggested Readings

40.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

• discuss the poetry of Dilip Chitre and Keki N. Daruwalla;

• understand and talk about Chitre’s ‘The Light of Birds Breaks the Lunatic’s Sleep’ and Daruwalla’s ‘Hawk’ and ‘Chinar’;

• know how to discuss the style of a poem.

40.1INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall introduce you to Dilip Chitre and Keki N. Daruwalla and their poetry. You will read one poem by Chitre and two by Daruwalla. We shall read Chitre’s ‘The Light of Birds Breaks the Lunatic’s Sleep’ and try to understand what the poet wants to say with the help of images.

While reading Daruwalla’s ‘Hawk’ we shall also try to understand the dramatic form of that poem. We shall also try to understand the poem in a wider context and try to understand the symbolism in it.

Daruwalla’s poem ‘Chinar’ relates to Kashmir where this tree grows. We will first make ourselves familiar with the kind of tree chinar is and then read the
Dilip Chitre and Keki N. Daruwalla

poem trying to appreciate the manner in which the poet has celebrated the coming of autumn in Kashmir valley. Besides the visual element a poem often has music in it. We shall try to understand how the poet of ‘Chinar’ has made the poem sound so sweet.

40.2 DILIP CHITRE (1938-2009)

Born in Vadodara in 1938, Dilip Purushottam Chitre, though known primarily as a poet in Marathi and English, was a translator, editor, columnist, painter and filmmaker. In 1951 his family moved to Mumbai where he studied taking his B.A. (Hons.) degree in English from Bombay University. After that he spent three years in Ethiopia teaching in schools.

The first collection of Dilip Chitre’s poems entitled Kavita came out in 1960. It was collection of his Marathi poems. Twelve years later, his English poems appeared in a collection called Ambulance Ride. In 1980, he published Travelling in a Cage which also includes his long poem ‘Ambulance Ride’. He has to his credit a number of anthologies of his Marathi and English poems. As Is, Where Is: Selected Poems, his last collection of English poems, came out in 2008.


Dilip Chitre made an important contribution to the ‘little magazine movement’ in Marathi. In 1954 with Arun Kolatkar and Ramesh Smarth he launched a literary magazine called Shabda. The magazine continued for six years but even in this short span of time it was able to give a new stimulus and a direction to post-independence Marathi poetry. From 1978 to 1980 Chitre worked as an Honorary Editor of Quest (later called New Quest) published from Mumbai. He resumed that editorship in 2001.

Widely travelled in Europe, North America, Africa and Asia, Chitre lectured at various overseas universities and was a Fellow and Writer-in-residence under the German Academic Exchange Programme at the universities of Heidelberg and Bamberg in Germany.

Chitre’s poetry dilates upon time and reality. If you read more poems by him you will notice a dynamic and mutual relationship between what he is saying and how he is saying it. You will also encounter in his poetry his inner world that is often the space in which he moves as a poet. However, when he chooses to write about things and happening around him, he does it in a controlled, tough and unsentimental style.

Now read the following poem.

40.3 THE LIGHT OF BIRDS BREAKS THE LUNATIC’S SLEEP

40.3.1 The Text

The Light of Birds Breaks the Lunatic’s Sleep

The light of birds breaks the lunatic’s sleep
He wakes up moving out of a million dreams

---

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Now read the following poem.

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40.3.1 The Text

The Light of Birds Breaks the Lunatic’s Sleep

The light of birds breaks the lunatic’s sleep
He wakes up moving out of a million dreams

---
His **burning electric wires** begin to **glow**
The lunatic’s fingers extend like wires

Stretched out in the silence:
The lunatic’s veins widen: he feels
Darkness **roaring** in place of blood
That darkness is half a sleep: a wide

Awareness of a kind: even total sleep
Is a blaze in his brain: a flaming awareness
The lunatic watches a sound in the Sun:
And his eyes **paraphrase** the Sun:

Numberless sleeps and lightings awaken
A vast **lullaby** in his flesh and blood
The lunatic sees a bird...flying...and his eyelids flutter
And his eyes, drowning, begin to chirp.

**Glossary:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>light</th>
<th>(here) sound.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>burning electric wires</td>
<td>(here) his mind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>glow</td>
<td>(here) slow down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paraphrase</td>
<td>(literary) to express in one’s own words what somebody has said. (Here) his eyes remind you of the sun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>roaring</td>
<td>(here) flowing fast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lullaby</td>
<td>a soft gentle song sung to make a child go to sleep.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**40.3.2 Interpretation**

In ‘The Light of Birds Breaks the Lunatic’s Sleep’ the poet imagines what happens inside an insane person’s brain. The poem opens with the waking up of the lunatic at dawn. You will see that in the title the poet has used the expression ‘the light if birds’ instead of ‘the sound of birds’ to describe dawn. Thus he has merged one sensation into another and is able to suggest the sense of sight and hearing with the help of the same phrase. When dawn breaks, we see the growing light in the sky and at the same time hear the birds singing. He suggests the half-light of dawn and bird-song in ‘the light of birds’.

When he wakes up the lunatic’s dreams come to an end. The poet uses the metaphor of the filament of an electric bulb to describe the brain of the lunatic. When the bulb burns brightly, the filament is white but as the electric current is switched off it begins to lose its brightness and becomes a dull red (‘electric wires begin to glow’). Can we say that with the help of this metaphor the poet suggests that in the lunatic’s mind his ‘million dreams’ are brighter than the reality of this world? The poet continues the imagery of electricity when he says that the lunatic’s fingers ‘extend like wires’ stretching out ‘in the silence’.

Obviously, the image is that of a person yawning and stretching his arms when he wakes up. What does ‘silence’ mean here? We can say that the most literal interpretation of silence can be that the place where the lunatic wakes up is
silent. But we can also understand ‘silence’ in a metaphorical sense. The world in which the lunatic wakes up is silent because it does not speak to him in a language that he can understand. We can also say that the poet wants us to understand that the dream world of the lunatic is more real for him than the ‘real’ world of the sane people into which he wakes up.

As the lunatic wakes up his veins widen and darkness begins to flow in them. Then the poet adds another metaphor to the idea of darkness: he describes that darkness as ‘half a sleep’. You will immediately notice that this statement has to be understood in a metaphorical sense. When we describe something in terms of something else we are using a metaphor. So what can darkness mean here? We know that darkness indicates an absence of light. But in this expression it must be the absence of something for which we can use ‘light’ as metaphor. Can we say that here darkness represents the absence of understanding or knowledge because we often use ‘light’ as a metaphor for knowledge? Then we may say that the darkness flowing in the lunatic’s veins suggests the absence of knowledge and understanding in the sense ‘normal’ people, that is, those who have not been branded ‘lunatic’, have them. The lunatic does not see things, or understands them, in the manner other people do. Again, we may also say that the darkness flowing in the lunatic’s veins represents a lack of self-awareness in him.

The next lines build on the word ‘darkness’. The ‘darkness’ in the lunatic is actually another kind of awareness. Using the images of light and darkness the poet suggests that the lunatic does not lose awareness even in his sleep. Even in his dreams there is this ‘flaming awareness’. The poet seems to be saying that the lunatic feels things very intensely though we cannot understand how his mind works and how he relates his ideas. We do not understand the logical structure of his ideas. The word ‘flaming’ in the poem recalls another related word ‘sun’. But instead of seeing the sun the lunatic watches a sound in it. Can we say that by deliberately mixing up the senses of sight and hearing the poet implies that there is another order of perception in the lunatic’s mind? Then we read that the lunatic’s eyes ‘paraphrase the sun’. It can suggest that they look as bright as the sun. But if we take the sun to stand for normal reality, the line can also mean that the lunatic perceives reality in his own terms and in that sense he ‘paraphrases’ it. Paraphrasing, as you know, means expressing in different words what somebody has said or written. Thus, the poet is suggesting here that the lunatic has his own language in which he talks about experience. What he says is a paraphrase of what others say in the sense that the lunatic says it using his own vocabulary.

In the concluding lines of the poem, you will come across many expressions that seem to be paradoxical. For instance, lullabies are sung to make someone, especially a child, go to sleep. But the poem tells you that a vast lullaby awakens in his body. You remember that the poem began with the image of a bird. It also ends with the same image. The image of the fluttering of a bird’s wings merges with that of the fluttering of the lunatic’s eyelids. His eyes become a bird and begin to chirp. We can understand such statements if we remember that each word here stands for something other than its dictionary meaning. By using ‘bird’, ‘eyes’ and ‘chirp’ in the same breath the poet seems to be saying that on waking up when the lunatic sees a bird flying and chirping, his eyes too begin to look happy and full of life.

Do you think that the poem is just a record of how a lunatic’s brain works? It definitely is that, but if you replace the word ‘lunatic’ with ‘poet’ or ‘revolutionary’ you can interpret the poem in an altogether different sense. Then
you can say that the poem is telling us that there exists a vast difference in perception between how a poet sees the world around him and how other people do it. Normal people use the logic of cause and effect as the basic format in which to talk about happenings. The poet or the revolutionary may see the same things in an entirely different manner. The poem then seems to imply that other modes of perceiving reality may also be valid.

### 40.3.3 Images

You can study the way images have been used in this poem. An image, as you know, is an expression calculated to re-create in the mind of the reader a sense of sight, or sound, or smell or touch, or taste. The primary purpose of an image is not to make the reader understand something but to imagine, feel and experience it. Therefore, if we wanted to describe everything that an image does to a reader, we will end up writing a very long description of the image.

You will notice that in this poem a contrast has been achieved by placing words suggesting light with those indicating darkness. You can point out many expressions in the poem that suggest light: ‘light’, ‘burning’, ‘glow’, ‘blaze’, ‘flaming’, ‘the Sun’, ‘lightnings’ and ‘sees’. On the other hand, you can locate words that suggest darkness: ‘darkness’, ‘half a sleep’, ‘lullaby’ and ‘drowning’. These images in the poem give you the feeling that here things are either very bright or very dark. There are no half-lights here. This is the kind of world that the lunatic sees; it is a world in which everything is clearly outlined.

### Self-check Exercise 1

1) What do ‘million dreams’ stand for?

2) What does paraphrasing the sun mean?

3) Pick out two expressions that suggest a mixing up of senses.
KEKI N. DARUWALLA

Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla was born in Lahore in 1937. After obtaining his M.A. in English from Punjab University, Chandigarh he joined the Indian Police Service in 1958.

In 1970, Daruwalla published his first collection of poems called *Under Orion*. The next year he published his second book of poems called *Apparition in April*. He received the Uttar Pradesh State Award for this book in 1972. Four years later in 1975 his *Crossing of Rivers* came out. The book has some of the finest river poems written in Indian poetry in English. *Winter Poems* (1980) was his next book of poems which was followed by *The Keeper of the Dead* (1982) for which he won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1984. After that came *Landscapes* (1987), *A Summer of Tigers* (1995) and *Night River* (2000). Although Daruwalla is known primarily as a poet, he has also written short stories, some of which are collected in his book called *Sword and Abyss* published in 1979.

Daruwalla’s poetry has certain unique features that set them apart from the work of other Indian poets in English. He takes poetry one step further from the inward-looking poetry of Sri Aurobindo and Tagore with which Indian poetry in English really began. It was Nissim Ezekiel who decided to write a new kind of poetry that spoke of many other things besides the inner landscape and spiritual issues, which are the favourite subjects of early serious writers of Indian poetry in English. Although the poetry of Ezekiel and others of his generation is chiefly modernist, it is not a slavish imitation of European modernist poets. Daruwalla’s poetry is different from that of other Indian poets because no one has recorded the landscape of northern India with such understanding and honesty. This single fact sets him apart from others because most Indian poetry in English has been essentially urban voicing the problems and issues of the Indian middle class. If at all some poetry on the life in villages has been written, it presents a tourist’s view of rural India. Daruwalla himself says, ‘I am not an urban writer and my poems are rooted in the rural landscape.’ This is refreshingly different in the sense that the modernist poetry that came from Europe (especially England and America) was written by townspeople and was about their problems in a fast disintegrating society. Many Indian poets simply slipped into the European mode of writing as they had somewhat similar problems. Daruwalla, on the other hand, sets out to introduce the Indian landscape to the reader. He does it in a kind of tough, unsentimental language and is seldom tempted to ascend into Wordsworthian epiphanies.

The two poems you are going to read now will tell you more about Daruwalla’s poetry.

HAWK

40.5.1 The Text

I saw the wild hawk-king this morning
riding an ascending wind
as he drilled the sky.
The land beneath him was **filmed** with salt:
Grass-seed, insect, bird—
nothing could thrive here. But he was lost
in the momentum of his own gyre,
a frustrated parricide on the kill.
The fuse of his hate was burning still.

But in the evening he hovered above
the groves, a speck of barbed passion.
Crow, mynah and pigeon roosted here
while parakeets flew raucously by.
And then he ran amok,
a rapist in the harem of the sky.
As he went up with a pigeon
Skewered to his heel-talon
he scanned the other birds, marking out their fate,
the ones he would scoop up next,
those black dregs in the cup of his hate!

2

The tamed one is worse, for he is touched by man.
When snared in the woods
his eyelids are sewn with silk
as he is broken to the hood.
He is momentarily blinded, starved.
Then the scar over his vision is perforated.
Morsels of vision are fed to his eyes
as he is unblended stitch by relenting stitch.
Slowly the world re-forms:
mud walls, trees burgeon.
His eye travels like the eye of the storm.
Discovering his eye
and the earth and sky
with it, he leaps from earth to ether.
Now the sky is his eyrie.
He ferocious floats on splayed wings;
then plummets like a flare,
smoking, and then a gust of feathers
proclaims that has struck.
The tamed one is worse, for he is touched by man.
Hawking is turned to a ritual, the predator’s passion honed to an art:
as they feed the hawk by carving the breast
of the quarry bird and gouging out his heart.

3

They have flushed him out of the tall grasses,
the hare, hunted now
in pairs by mother hawk and son.
They can’t kill him in one fell swoop.
But each time the talons cart away
a patch of ripped fur.
He diminishes, one talon-morsel at a time.
He is stunned by the squall of wings above.
His heart is a burning stable
packed with whinnying horses.
His blood writes stories on the scuffed grass!
His movements are a scribble on the page of death.

4

I wouldn’t know when I was stolen from the eyrie
I can’t remember when I was ensnared.
I only know the leather disc
which blots out the world
and the eyelids which burn with thwarted vision.

Then the perforations, and yet
the blue iris of heaven does not come through.
I can think of a patch of blue sky
when shown a blue slide.
But I am learning how to spot the ones
crying for the right to dream, the right to flesh,
the right to sleep with their own wives—
I have placed them. I am sniffing
The air currents, deciding when to pounce.

I will hover like a black prophecy
weaving its moth-soft cocoon of death.
I shall drive down
with the compulsive thrust of gravity,
trained for havoc,
my eyes focused on them
like the sights of a gun.

During the big drought that is surely going to come
the doves will look up for clouds, and it will rain hawks.

Glossary:

filmed : covered with a very thin layer of something transparent.
parricide : the crime of killing one’s father, mother or a close relative.
barbed : a barb is a point of arrow or hook that is curved backwards to make it difficult to pull out.
skewered : a skewer or some thin, pointed object pushed through something.
dregs : the last drops of a liquid, mixed with little pieces of solid material that are left at the bottom of a container.
broken : trained to hunt.
unblended : allowed to see.
eyrie : a nest that is built high up among the rocks by a bird of prey such as a hawk.
honed : developed to perfection.
quarry : quarry means a bird or an animal that is being hunted or followed.
squall : a sudden, strong gust of wind.
leather disc : hood that is placed on the eye of a hawk.
black : evil.
40.5.2 Interpretation

‘Hawk’ has been taken from *The Keeper of the Dead* published in 1982. You will see that it is about how a hawk is trained as a hunting bird but you can also read it as describing human behaviour. You will notice that throughout the poem the poet has used ‘he’ for the hawk giving it a kind of human identity. This bird of prey projects an image of violence that is a common pattern of behaviour in human society. You can take the hawk as a symbol of the destructive instinct in man. But you may also feel that the bird objectifies the spirit of rebellion against the established order.

The poem, as you must have noticed, is divided into four sections. The opening section catches the hawk at an intense moment of killing. The wild hawk, a powerful bird of prey, is seen hunting other birds in the morning. It has speed. When it flies up in the sky it seems to drill a hole into it. Then we are made to see the world as appears to the hawk from the height. To him the land seems covered with a thin film of salt. You know that if there is too much salt in the soil, no vegetation will grow there. Similarly, when the hawk is prowling about in the sky, no ‘grass-seed, insect, bird’ can thrive. We are told that this hawk is driven by hatred which is like the burning fuse of a bomb ready to go off.

In the evening too, the hawk hovers above ‘the groves’ looking for prey. From the ground he looks like a speck but he is a speck of ‘barbed passion’, always ready to kill. Birds like crows, mynahs or pigeons are roosting below. When a parakeet becomes aware of the hawk’s presence it flies away ‘raucously’. You will notice that by hinting at the silence of the roosting birds and describing the noise made by a flying parakeet, the poet creates a sense of lurking danger in the form of the hawk. We feel that at any moment, the hawk may swoop down on the birds. He has been compared to a rapist in the harem of the sky. He picks up birds at will. As he holds a pigeon in his talons, he scans the other birds and tries to decide which bird he will pick up next. The wild, predatory hawk is burning with hatred which is like a cup in which the smaller birds are the ‘dregs’ that he scoops up.

The second section describes how a hawk is tamed. Such a hawk is much more destructive because he has been ‘touched by the hand of man’. What does the expression mean? Does it mean that because man has trained the hawk to kill, it has become more lethal than the one in nature? Or, could it mean that anything that man touches grows worse than what it was? You will see that both these interpretations are plausible. These two interpretations will take your argument in two different directions. The first interpretation will make you believe that training leads to greater effectiveness; the other will suggest that the poet has a rather unflattering view of the moral qualities of the modern man.

The poem then describes how a hawk is trained to hunt. The training is a painful and frustrating experience for the hawk. His eyes are covered: ‘his eyelids are sewn with silk’. The word ‘sewn’ suggests the pain that the young hawk has to go through. You must have come across the expression ‘eagle-eyed’. The hawk’s most precious possession is his remarkable eyesight but that is taken away from him temporarily so that he can be trained. The next few lines describe how the hawk is given back his sense of sight bit by bit. The poet uses the metaphor of food when he says that ‘morsels of vision are fed to his eyes’. When the hawk can see again, he is fully trained to kill at the command of his master. The hawk’s destructiveness is suggested when his eye is described as ‘the eye of the storm’.
The hawk then begins to hunt. He is described as leaping up into the sky, hovering on ‘splayed wings’ and then suddenly plummeting ‘like a flair’ and striking the quarry in a ‘gust of feathers’. Notice how the poet has suggested a sense of sudden, violent movement. You will also notice that the word ‘storm’ with which the previous movement ended appears to anticipate ‘gust’ in this movement. Man has made hawking a fine art and a ritual. The section ends with the image of a hawk being fed morsels of meat from the body of the bird he has killed.

The third section describes how a pair of trained hawks, ‘the mother hawk and son’, hunts a hare. They attack it repeatedly, and its death is slow. This section also suggests how the hunted hare feels. Its heart is pounding with fear; it is like a stable full of whinnying horses. The last two lines describe pictorially how the hare’s blood can be seen scattered on the grass where it was killed.

You will see that in the final section the hawk himself is telling his story. He begins by saying that he has no memory of the time when he was ‘stolen from the eyrie’. The only thing he remembers is the leather disc that was put on his eyes. He mentions the painful stitching of his eyelids.

But now the hawk is trained. He is learning how to spot the birds he has to kill. Like the young hawk when he was captured, these birds too have a right to live and to procreate. But the hawk has been trained to take that right away. In the closing lines of the poem, the hawk tells us how he feels when he hunts other birds. His presence in the sky means certain death of a bird. There are a number of expressions here that suggest it. You immediately think of ‘black prophecy’, ‘moth-soft cocoon of death’ and eyes focussed like ‘the sights of a gun.’

In the concluding two lines the point of view changes from that of a hawk to a dove’s. There will be a drought and instead of rain the doves will find hawks raining down on them.

You will remember that we often use the word ‘hawk’ for a person with an aggressive and violent approach to problems and a ‘dove’ for one who wants peace at all costs. Do you think that the last two lines suggest that in times to come, violent people will become dominant in society and the peace-loving ‘doves’ will be at their mercy? You will realize thus that this poem can be understood in a wider context too.

40.5.3 Form and Imagery

Now that you have read the poem, how would you like to describe it? Most poems have a single voice but ‘Hawk’ has two voices: one of the narrator and the other of the hawk; therefore you can call it a dramatic poem.

You will see that in the poem there are many images that suggest something that is pointed and has a tendency to hurt. The hawk ‘drill(s)’ the sky, he is seen as a speck of ‘barbed passion’, the pigeon in his talons is ‘skewered’, his eyelids are ‘sewn with silk’ suggesting the use of a needle, his vision is ‘perforated’ and he is fed with morsels of meat that are carved from the breast of the quarry whose heart is gouged out, suggesting the use of a knife. All these images suggest the violent nature of the hawk.

Another set of images are related to wind suggesting the swiftness with which the hawk attacks. He is seen ‘riding an ascending wind’, his eye travels like ‘the eye
of the storm’ and he ‘floats’ on splayed wings. When the hawk attacks there is ‘a
gust of feathers’. The hunted hare is stunned by ‘the squall of wings above’.

To suggest the violence of the hawk, images like the burning ‘fuse’ of a bomb
and his eyes focused on the quarry ‘like the sights of a gun’ have been used.
There are also images that suggest fire. The ‘burning’ fuse of his hatred, the
hare’s heart like a ‘burning stable’ and the hawk’s eyelids that ‘burn with
thwarted vision’ are such images.

Self-check Exercise II
1) Describe how the hawk is trained to kill.
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2) Do you think the hawk represents the violence in man?
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3) Point out images of violence in the poem.
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40.6 CHINAR

40.6.1 Introduction

Chinar (Platanus Orientalis) is an exotic tree that is said to have been brought to
Kashmir from Persia. It is said to have originated in Greece. Kashmiris call it
‘Boune’. Its present popular name Chinar is a Persian word. It is said that when
the Mughal emperor Jahangir first set foot in Kashmir on an autumn day he saw
from a distance a number of chinar trees covered with crimson leaves and in
sheer joy he cried out ‘chi naar’, which in Persian means ‘What a blaze!’

Legend has it that the chinar tree was first brought into India at the time of
Ashoka the Great. It is a very majestic tree growing to the height of 30 meters or
more. The tree has fan-shaped leaves that are green in spring, become yellow in summer and then turn crimson in autumn. The fall of chinar leaves in autumn spreads a crisp, crimson carpet around its base. It is a very long living tree and a chinar tree may be many centuries old.

40.6.2 The Text

The chinar confronts the sunset with its own dusk.
You can hear the drip of crinkled leaf.
Isn’t this what they call dry rain,
this slow, twisting dead-moth descent from the sapless branch?

In the eye of the lake and the running eye of Jhelum
it holds you, this bonfire death that slowly drips fire,
these smouldering rusts without the clank of metal.
A wind alights on the tree and the eye cannot follow
each bronze-scale severed from the mail of the dying giant,
each clenched child-fist of a leaf, the largesse of it
the aching drift of it the flame and the fall of it.

Glossary:
confronts: matches.
dead-moth descent: coming down like a dead moth.
bonfire: a large outdoor fire.
rust: the reddish brown substance that is formed on iron by the action of water and air.
clank: the sound made by metal striking metal.
mail: a chain mail. A protective coat of iron that warriors in the past wore during battles.
largesse: the act or quality of being generous with something.

40.6.3 Interpretation

The poem describes a chinar tree in autumn. It celebrates the onset of autumn in Kashmir. The poem opens with the image of sunset. As the sun sets, the sky takes on shades of crimson and orange. The chinar leaves too are of the same colour and match the sunset in majesty and beauty.

The poem then focuses on the falling leaves. The soft sound of the falling crinkled leaves can be heard. You find that this falling of the leaves has been compared to the falling rain but this is ‘dry rain’ as there is no water. The tree sheds its leaves as its branches lose their sap. The falling leaves look like dead moths descending slowly to the ground.
The poet’s glance then travels away from the chinar. He can see the lake and the running Jhelum. In the clear water of the lake and the river the trees are reflected. You are transfixed by its breathtaking beauty. The use of phrases like ‘the eye of the lake’ and ‘the running eye of Jhelum’ personifies the lake and river. It seems as if these water bodies had eyes in which the russet colour of the chinar leaves is reflected. Why do you think the poet has used the adjective ‘running’ here? Obviously it suggests the flowing water of the Jhelum. But one also feels that the running water represent the flowing tears of joy that the river experiences when it sees such a beautiful sight.

The poem reminds you of the colour of flames. The trees are full of crimson leaves and look as if they were on fire. You are also reminded of the death of the leaves when you come across the phrase ‘this bonfire death.’ Then there is another comparison. The poet feels that these red leaves are like the brown red rust falling off from the chain mail of a warrior. This can happen when in a battle someone strikes the mail with a sword. But here there is no such sound and that is why the poet says that here it happens ‘without the clank of metal.’

The image of a warrior wearing a mail continues. The wind makes the leaves fall and it is happening so fast that the eye cannot follow each leaf as it falls to the ground. The tree then becomes ‘dying giant’. Each scale of his mail seems to be cut off from his armour as it is drops to the ground. The small leaf looks like the clenched fist of a child. The word ‘clenched’ also suggests that the fists of the dying giant are clenched in pain.

You will notice that the last three lines of the poem suggest a different mood. The viewer is grateful to the tree for having given him such a glorious sight with so much generosity. The leaves that drift to the ground look so beautiful that one feels an ache of joy in one’s heart. When you reach the final line you find that the two dominant images have been blended together: the colour of flames (‘the flame’) and the downward movement of the leaves (‘the fall’). This single line makes you visualize the crimson leaves floating lazily down to the ground. The last three lines are not complete sentences; they are phrases only. They suggest the breathless ecstasy of the viewer when he sees the chinar full of red leaves.

40.6.4 Style

After having read the poem when you think of the poem you will remember many words suggesting red or brown colour. You can think of words like ‘sunset’, ‘bonfire’, ‘fire’, ‘smouldering’, ‘rusts’ ‘bronze-scale’ and ‘flame’. All these words bring to you the colour of the chinar in autumn. Many of these words also indicate the presence of fire. Fire dries up moisture. Therefore, the dryness of the leaves has been indicated by the word ‘crinkled’. However, along with the presence of dry leaves, there is also a hint of the presence of water. You come across such phrases as ‘dry rain’, ‘the eye of the lake’ and ‘the running eye of Jhelum’. These expressions bring to you the image of the tree standing near water bodies. Taken together these images suggest the colour of autumn in Kashmir which also has lakes and rivers.

The red colour also reminds you of blood. But we do not see blood unless it is shed. This happens on the battlefield. The image of a dying giant warrior wearing a bronze chain mail indicates flowing blood. You will also notice that the idea of death runs through the poem. This has been expressed by phrases like ‘dead-moth’ and ‘dying giant’. This idea of death is in keeping with the fact that the falling leaves are dead, that is, they have lost their sap.
When you read the poem aloud you will notice that there is a musical quality in it. This music has been created by the use of liquid consonants like /l/, /m/ and /n/ that are the most pronounced in the poem. You can think of phrases like ‘the running eye of Jhelum’, ‘smouldering rusts’, ‘clank of metal’, ‘a wind alights’, and the final line: ‘the flame and fall of it’. The title of the poem, ‘Chinar’, itself has a powerfully stressed /n/ sound in it. Again, you will also notice many prominent sibilant sounds (/s/) in the poem. You can locate many words like ‘slow’, ‘sapless’, ‘smouldering’ ‘severed’ and so on that recreate the soft sough of the wind. These sounds have been balanced by heavy consonants such as /d/ /h/ and /b/. Look at the first movement of the poem carefully. In the second half of each of lines 2, 3, 4, and 5 you come across words such as ‘dusk’, ‘drip’, ‘dry’ and ‘dead-moth’. You will realize that this is a very sensuous poem that makes you see the beautiful sight of the chinar tree and also enables you to hear the soft sounds that are there.

**Self-check Exercise III**

1) Pick out three phrases in the poem that suggest fire.

2) Point out the words that have been used to describe the shape and colour of the chinar leaf.

3) Comment on the music of the poem.

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**40.7 LET US SUM UP**

In this unit you read one poem by Dilip Chitre and two poems by Keki N. Daruwalla. You also learnt how to interpret these poems and how to comment on the imagery and music of the poems.
40.8 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I
1) ‘Million dreams’ imply that there is constant activity going on in the lunatic’s mind, even when he is asleep.
2) The lunatic understands and talks about things in words that other people cannot make sense of.
3) The two expressions are: ‘The lunatic watches a sound in the sun’ and ‘his eyes, drowning, begin to chirp.’

Self-check Exercise II
1) See the interpretation of the poem (40.4.2.).
2) See the interpretation of the poem (40.4.2.).
3) See Form and Imagery (40.4.3.).

Self-check Exercise III
1) ‘bonfire death’, ‘slowly drips fire’ and ‘smouldering rusts’.
3) See ‘Style’ (40.5.4.)

40.9 SUGGESTED READINGS


