

**Block**

# 3

## **INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY**

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## BLOCK INTRODUCTION

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### Block 3: Indian English Poetry

The block on Indian poetry in English is meant to acquaint you with the specific trends that shaped poetry written in the post-independence period. It is in this period that the new canon of Indian English Poetry evolved and gained identity. The units in the present block would familiarize you with trends in Indian English writing of the twentieth century in general and poetry in particular. The discussion begins by contextualizing Indian poets in their specific time span and place. The poets discussed in the block include Nissim Ezekiel, Eunice de Souza, Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Agha Shahid Ali, Dilip Chitre and Keki N Daruwalla. Each of these writers contributed to the canon of Indian English poetry and projected points of view that could coexist along lines of secular existence. Being seminal poetic voices of the twentieth century, they provided a distinct form to the poetic practice in India. We shall see in the four units of this block the key features of this canon and also how each writer added a distinctive viewpoint to it.

Foremost among those who consciously worked towards creating a specific Indian poetic voice was Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004). He along with the fellow writers encouraged young poets to write in English. He published these young poets in journals he was editorially associated with. At the same time, he wrote extensively on the art of writing poetry. When it comes to his own poems, you will find in Nissim Ezekiel a happy amalgam of western thought and Indian sensibility. Ezekiel could write with ease, poems on an Indian subject as well as those that were universal in nature. In many ways, he represented the modern intellectual of the post-independence period. Among the poets mentioned above, we have an important Feminist poet, Eunice de Souza (1940-2017) depicting dramatic scenes of discrimination against women. She, along with Kamala Das, has been instrumental in the evolution of a feminist perspective in Indian literatures, mainly as a poet. In her poem “Bequest” de Souza explores the predicament of young girls caught in the patriarchal web. She along with Nissim Ezekiel would be discussed at length in the first unit of the block.

In unit two, you would be acquainted with the works of Jayanta Mahapatra (b.1928), a poet from Odisha. He wrote simultaneously in English and Odia language. He was a romantic poet and impressed readers by his flights of imagination. The poems of Mahapatra draw an organic picture of the world he inhabits while expressing the effect it has on the poetic self. His poem “A Rain of Rites” is a case in point. A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993) was from Karnataka. He settled abroad. Even though primarily a poet, Ramanujan was also a formidable critic and translator. His scholarship put him in line with the great thinkers of the time. This was on the strength of his contributions in the field of translation. Ramanujan wrote both short lyrics and long verses. His poem “On the Death of a Poem” discusses the subtleties of the creative practice and the role of the poet in the endeavour.

The third unit of the block would offer a view of the poems of Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004) and Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001). The former’s “Ajamil and the Tigers” and the latter’s “Postcard from Kashmir” are in your course. Kolatkar and Shahid Ali are the new age poets, different in sensibility but clear in

perspective. The unit would open with a discussion on the changing paradigm of Indian English poetry and put you in contact with two seminal writers of the latter half of the twentieth century with diverse sensibilities. Kolatkar is strongly rooted in the Indian culture reality while Shahid Ali is an Indian-American poet with a global perspective.

Unit Four would bring you in touch with the phenomenon of the 1980s and 90s, particularly about India's cultural life of the time. The two poets speak of the concerns of our era when life became increasingly mechanical and contrarily, literature looked inwards to point at its own incapacities. You would be able to notice in the poems in this unit a thematic shift and change in poetic style. "Ode to Bombay" and "Chinar" by Dilip Chitre (1938-2009) and K.N. Daruwalla (b.1937) respectively reflect the individual proclivity and stance of the poets.

Thus, you would find that all these units discuss the larger literary scene of post-independence India that became the background against which we could place the poets in your course. At the end of this block you should be able to trace the development of Indian poetry in English that went through various phases of development. With the benefit of hindsight, we can look back at these poets with our specific twenty-first century viewpoint and evaluate them while keeping the present in mind. We can see where poetry has reached today owing to the efforts of poets and thinkers who contributed to its growth in the previous century.



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# UNIT 1 NISSIM EZEKIEL AND EUNICE DE SOUZA

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## Structure

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- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Historical Background
- 1.3 Indian English Poetry
- 1.4 The Modernist Trend in Indian English Writing
- 1.5 Nissim Ezekiel: An Overview
- 1.6 Nissim Ezekiel's "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S": A Reading
  - 1.6.1 The Text
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- 1.9 "Bequest" by Eunice de Souza: A Reading
- 1.10 Eunice de Souza's Aesthetic Approach
- 1.11 Eunice de Souza and the Feminist Trend in Indian Writing
- 1.12 Let us Sum up
- 1.13 Glossary
- 1.14 Questions
- 1.15 References
- 1.16 Suggested Readings

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit you will be able to:

- gain knowledge about the historical background of Indian English Poetry;
- discuss the point of Nissim Ezekiel and Eunice de Souza prescribed for you;
- write about the two poet's style of writing poetry.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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This unit intends to familiarize you with trends in Indian English writing of the twentieth century. The discussion would begin with contextualizing Indian literature written in English in the post-Independence period. Specifically, the unit focuses on two seminal poets of the twentieth century, Nissim Ezekiel and Eunice de Souza, who were instrumental in establishing what can be called the canon of Indian English Poetry. After reading this unit you should be able to gain an understanding of the evolution of Indian English poetry and its lasting appeal. The unit would acquaint you with the major literary trends that influenced writers in the second half of the twentieth century. Through the writings of Ezekiel, you will see how tenets of modernism, essentially a European movement, flourished

in India. In the writings of de Souza you will find the growth of a peculiar Indian feminism. Let us first try and understand the historical moment to which these poets belong, and later we shall explore the category of Indian Poetry in English.

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## 1.2 THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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The decades following the Independence of India brought along new challenges for the country. The partition of 1947 created huge displacement, with millions of refugees left without livelihood and home. This was followed by the tussle the Indian government had with the Princely states that had to be integrated within the country. There was also growing discontent regarding the national language during the 1950s, leading to the creation of linguistic states in 1956. The map of India was in a state of flux. Add to this the fact that there were the wars with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965 and 1971), and the death of Jawaharlal Nehru (1964) that further disturbed peace in Indian's life. Alongside, there were efforts made to strengthen the process of nation building, implementing Five Year plans and setting up of an industrial infrastructure to ensure progress and development. In spite of this, poverty and joblessness continued to be the scourge of the nation. What do you think could be the possible reasons for this? In education, even as the percentage of literacy improved, there wasn't a cohesive education policy to strengthen it and ensure its growth. Importantly, the idealism and selfless devotion of the nationalist movement of the 1930s and 40s dwindled in the post-Independence period and became clichéd words often misused to gain personal ends. The said idealism was replaced by competition, individual growth and careerism, strife for affluence, and a complete disregard of socio-political thought.

These are some of the challenges that India faced in the post-Independence period and become the backdrop against which literature of the time might be evaluated.

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## 1.3 INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

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It is important to remember that politically India became free in 1947 but culturally it remained in the stranglehold of the British by becoming a member of the *British Commonwealth* (see glossary). Thus, cultural influence of the British survived which ensured its hegemony for decades to come. In this atmosphere, the use of English language for communication, expression, and education gained currency among people belonging to the new middle class in India. There was an increased stress on study of English language and literature and a distancing from the regional languages, the onward movement of literatures in the regional languages notwithstanding. Owing to the spike in literacy rates, English readership increased and this added to the growth and popularity of English in India. Indian English literature thus attained a new found importance and the result was that several English journals in India cropped up adding further to the existing ones.

It is at this time that we notice the new trend in Indian English writing, one of bringing out literary journals and magazines that were entirely devoted to creative writing and literary criticism. The concerned journals published literary works from aspiring writers and at the same time presented critical essays that outlined the aesthetics of modern Indian literature. They taught an entire generation of writers in India regarding how to write and what to elect for focus. Western formalist techniques were discussed and applied in Indian literatures. Specifically, the journals devoted to the cause of Indian English poetry gave immense fillip to

its development. Literary and Art magazines began publishing poems by young aspiring writers and published reviews on them. A new wave of literary practice surfaced at the time and Indian writing in English on the whole received greater recognition than before.

Indian English poetry, particularly in the post-Independence period, was driven by the new urge for self-expression and aesthetic form. The romantic and nationalist strains in poetry that were predominant in the first half of the century were increasingly sidelined in the new phase of India's development. The focus of writers shifted towards ideas of individualism, urban life, self-scrutiny along with an engagement with aspects of tradition and modernity. Writing during this period turned experiential, focused as it was on the self and the journey of this self. There was also an entire movement at the time to enhance India's literary capabilities and create a literature that was distinctly Indian, one that spoke of the new times while being mindful of the ancient Indian ethos. Importantly, it was in poetry that the post-independence period witnessed the most crucial developments. In the fifties arose a school of poets who tried to turn their backs on the romantic tradition and write a verse more in tune with the age, its general temper and its literary ethos. They tried, with varying degrees of success, to naturalize in the Indian soil the modernistic elements derived from the poetic revolution effected by T.S. Eliot and others in the twentieth century British and American poetry (Naik, 201).

The effort to look at India's past and present with the available tools of western modern thought gave a distinct character to poetry written during the time. Let us discuss the western movement of modernism that was inherited by writers in India in the post-Independence period.

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## 1.4 THE MODERNIST TREND IN INDIAN ENGLISH WRITING

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Modernism in India found feet specifically in the post-independence period when the eye of the poet turned inwards, as it were, towards the self. In the 1950s, 'new poetry' had come into being in different languages (in Hindi it went by the name of 'nai kavita'). In English the "new poetry" movement was strengthened by the establishment of the Writer's Workshop in Calcutta in 1958 founded by P.Lal and some others who used it as a forum to discuss features of western modernism. Its "Miscellany" was devoted to experimental works written by new writers on the block. In fact, in 1958 the first modernist anthology of Indian poetry in English was edited by P.Lal and K.R. Rao titled *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry*. Nissim Ezekiel was among the first new poets who brought out entire collections of poems based on the new themes of experimentation and representation of the personal voice of the poet. Ezekiel's works made modernism even more popular and appealing among Indian readers.

A modernist poet refrained from advocating politics or making a social comment in literature. Since the war against the imperialist colonizer had been won, Literature turned away from the problems of life and society and in most cases found itself unequipped to deal with the crisis. There was at best a sense of helplessness and personal anguish visible in modernist poetry, which became the popular 'alienation theme' vividly present in Ezekiel's poems. The aggression and zeal for the social ideal were replaced by individual growth and struggle for

selfhood. Modernism was a pan-India movement and was not limited to literatures in English. Its emphases, however, were similar across regions and languages. On this issue, the literary critic E. V. Ramakrishnan in his book *Indigenous Imaginaries: Literature, Region, Modernity* has made an important observation. To quote:

The term modernism implies a literary/artistic movement that was characterized by experimentation, conscious rejection of the nationalist/Romantic as well as the popular, and the cultivation of an individualist, cosmopolitan and insular world view. In the European context, it signified a set of tendencies in artistic expression and writing styles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through a new aesthetic that was iconoclastic, insular and elitist. The aesthetics of modernism in the west had a transnational, metropolitan worldview that excluded the claims of the local and the national and made no concession to the popular taste. While the modernism that emerged in Indian literatures shared many of these defining features, its political affiliations and ideological orientations were markedly different. Due to its postcolonial location, the Indian modernism did not share the imperial or metropolitan aspirations of its European counterpart. It invested heavily in regional cosmopolitan traditions. It was oppositional in content and questioned the colonial legacies of the nationalist discourse. It was elitist and formalistic and deeply distrustful of the popular domain. (241)

Thus, modernism was “elitist” in nature and catered to a limited number of academic groups, and kept out the popular base more or less entirely. Unlike the literature of the pre-Independence period, particularly the progressive literature that centered on social themes, modernist writing focused on individualism and alienation from society. Its approach was formalistic. Experimentation with different literary forms made it appear novel and inspiring. A modernist poet is ever aware that one is responsible for one’s own actions even in the face of situations that render one helpless. It is this awareness that leads to guilt and anxiety in the modernist individual and becomes a perpetual source of grief and outpouring in modernist poems. Ezekiel, despite his contributions to the new literary practice in India that paved way for a canon, needs to be understood in the modernist framework. We might remember that Ezekiel was educated in the western model of education and that he was an urban poet belonging to the metropolis. His emphases are largely drawn from western models and his inspirations come from the works of English modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

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## 1.5 NISSIM EZEKIEL: AN OVERVIEW

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Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) was born in Bombay in a Bene Israel Jewish family. His parents were both teachers and under their influence Ezekiel soon took to translating works from Marathi to English, as well as writing plays and editing fictional works. His first poem was published in 1942 in a literary journal. By 1947, Ezekiel completed his Masters from Bombay University and began teaching at Khalsa College, Bombay. In 1948 a friend of Ezekiel’s, Alkazi, bought tickets for them to sail for England. Ezekiel remarks of that period of youth as one full of adventure. He says –”So with 10 pounds in my pocket, and the exuberance and optimism of youth, I boarded the *Jal Azadi*” (*Bombay Magazine*, 1983). The



years spent from 1948 to 1952 in a foreign country brought new experiences and learning for Ezekiel, among them a few unpleasant too. He stayed in a small basement room, wrote reviews and other short pieces to make ends meet. In a poem, he wrote his impressions of the place thus, “The view from the basement room is rather small/ A patch or two of green, a bit of sky” (“A Poem of Dedication”). Ezekiel joined a clerical position at the Indian High Commission in London but soon grew tired and wished to return to Bombay. To this end he took up a job along with a friend at a cargo ship that was going to India where the two did menial tasks of scrubbing and washing. Before sailing, however, Ezekiel was able to send the manuscript of his poems to the Fortune Press London and the volume got published in 1952. Thus, his first collection of poems titled *A Time to Change* was published in London and was based on his experiences of that period. Once back in India, Ezekiel took up job as sub-editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* under the editor C. R. Mandy, who was instrumental in cultivating the new literary sensibility in India. In 1953 his second collection of poems titled *Sixty Poems* came out. Editing added finesse to his poems as Ezekiel became ever more conscious of the art of writing.

In his later years, along with writing and publishing poetry, Ezekiel became a leading literary critic of his day as he edited and published magazines, and advising young writers how to write poetry. About these years of the 1950s of learning and practicing writing, Ezekiel has said, “I joined Shilpi Advertising as copywriter and in the earlier part of the mornings I edited *Quest*, the sister magazine to *Encounter*. I also wrote a great deal of literary and art criticism, the latter of which Alkazi taught me, though he never cared to write it himself. During my five years at Shilpi, I was elevated to the manager’s position and then sent to the USA to study their hard sell techniques. But I learnt more about art and other things there than about advertising” (*Bombay Magazine*, 1983). By 1960s Ezekiel had established himself as a poet and critic to reckon with. He was appointed as lecturer at Mithibai College in 1961 and later joined the Bombay University and gained professorship there. A series of publications appeared after this. These include the following collections: *The Third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965), *Hymns in Darkness* (1976) and *Latter Day Psalms* (1982).

Ezekiel was heavily influenced by the Irish-English poet, W. B. Yeats, and identified with him at the level of identity and politics. He felt himself to be like Yeats both an insider and outsider in his country. Note that Ezekiel was a Jew belonging to the Bene Israel community. It is believed that a group of this Jewish community landed in Southern Maharashtra 2000 years ago when their ship was marooned in a storm. Most of those who travelled didn’t return and decided to settle in India instead. Thus, while Ezekiel was born in India his culture and roots come from elsewhere. Yeats on the other hand was an Irishman who settled in England. In his poetry, he always returned to the Celtic myths of Ireland for inspiration and blended the English modernist approach with his ‘Irishness,’ as it were. Ezekiel draws a lot from Yeats’ works. In fact, Ezekiel’s poem “Enterprise” is from the collection *The Unfinished Man* the title of which was borrowed from Yeats’ epigraph to his poem “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”.

Linda Hess, a scholar and friend of Ezekiel defined him as “an endless explorer of the labyrinths of the mind, the devious delvings and twistings of the ego, and the ceaseless attempt of man and poet to define himself, to find through all the

myth and maze a way to honesty and love” (*Quest*, 1966). Some of the themes and issues in Ezekiel’s poems include the notion of time and its changing course; the metaphor of the journey and pilgrimage; departure from home and the return to it; and struggle for selfhood. In an attempt to pursue passions and find balance in life, Ezekiel writes in a poem: “I do not want the yogi’s concentration/ I do not want the perfect charity/ Of Saints nor the Tyrant’s endless power/I want a human balance humanly acquired” (“A Poem of Dedication”). Ezekiel can be both Philosophical and abstract, and material and witty. “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S” belongs to the latter kind. It is a poem written in a humorous style and is both amusing and ironical. Let us read this poem and try locating its significance.

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## 1.6 NISSIM EZEKIEL’S “GOODBYE PARTY FOR MISS PUSHPA T.S”: A READING

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### 1.6.1 The text

Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.

Friends,  
our dear sister  
is departing for foreign  
in two three days,  
and  
we are meeting today  
to wish her bon voyage.

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

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

Surat? Ah, yes,  
once only I stayed in Surat  
with family members  
of my uncle's very old friend-  
his wife was cooking nicely...  
that was long time ago.

Coming back to Miss Pushpa  
she is most popular lady  
with men also and ladies also.

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

Pushpa Miss is never saying no.  
Whatever I or anybody is asking  
she is always saying yes,  
and today she is going  
to improve her prospect  
and we are wishing her bon voyage.  
Now I ask other speakers to speak  
and afterwards Miss Pushpa  
will do summing up.

### 1.6.2 Analysis

Let us see the facts that emerge from the poem—to begin with, we know that the speaker is addressing a group of people gathered to bid farewell to Pushpa T.S. who is going to settle down abroad; next, Pushpa T.S. as also the people present at the party belong to the upper middle class, that is, to the family of advocates and aristocrats. We are told that “Miss Pushpa is coming/from very high family”. It is this group that becomes the target of ridicule in the poem. It is about the wealthy and privileged who nurtured hopes of bagging an opportunity abroad so they could flaunt it and win admiration of others in India. Further, Pushpa T.S. is described in the poem as a meek submissive woman who is a picture of admiration for the assumed male speaker. His references expose the conservative upper-class society in India for whom a woman ever smiling, “cooking nicely” and “never saying no” is an image of perfection and beauty. We are not told what kind of a woman she is and what her thoughts and ideas are. We see her through

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the eyes of the judging speaker who represents a patriarchal outlook and tells us what “good spirit” in a woman is and what bad is. Pushpa T.S., we are told, is also a popular lady among the crowd, especially men. She remains frozen in the narrative of the speaker who fixes her in a role and a type. Importantly, Ezekiel exposes the male gaze through the speaker’s expressions where the woman is observed minutely and unsparingly.

The irony in the poem comes from the fact that the speaker uses the structure and idiosyncrasies specific to the indigenous languages of India while the spoken language is actually alien. This misfit amuses the reader. For instance, the poet calls Pushpa T.S. “sister” which is an Indian nomenclature, a way of addressing a woman with respect. It seems the speaker has the vernacular phrases in mind while the language used is English so that the poem appears to be a transliteration into English. Another amusing aspect of the Indian English deployed liberally by Ezekiel in the poem is the use of the gerund form of the verb popularly used in Indian variations of English. Satire and irony are at the centre of this poem.

The poem brings into the question the identity and role of the English language. This question had engaged writers who chose to write literary works in English during the nationalist movement. In the post-Independence period, it appeared pertinent to ask— What is India’s relation with the English Language? The question is an uncomfortable one because we despised the colonial rule and the colonizers, how could we then embrace their language and express our emotions through it? Why should we do such a thing? Should we not have discarded the English language along with the removal of the British from seat of power? Language, however, runs deep in cultures. Once English had entered our lives, mixed with the Indian culture, it continued to thrive. The result is what we see in the poem “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.”. In fact, Ezekiel made Indian English the theme of another of his poem titled “A very Indian Poem in Indian English”. In independent India, English continued to enjoy a superior position in life. If one were to be seen as civilized and polished, one had to be a suave English speaker since without it one felt incompetent and inferior. We do not feel incapable if we do not know other languages. Why is that the case? This mindset is an indicator of *cultural hegemony* (see glossary) that the English language has over us. Not being able to speak in English became a stigma and it continues to oppress the minds of Indian people till now. Ezekiel was able to look at this obsession with the English language particularly among middle class Indian people who remained culturally submissive to the colonial Language and felt compelled to use it to assert their superiority.

However, this usage is very different from the poets’ use of Indian English for their creative writing. Those who received western education abroad or at home wrote with similar ease and poise as their counterparts in the west. This upper middle-class intelligentsia spoke and wrote in English like their erstwhile masters. They consciously inculcated the style and manner of westernized English. So, the specimen of English that you witness in “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S” and “A very Indian Poem in Indian English” is not how Ezekiel spoke or wrote. It is how the large sections of Indian people who learnt the language or were somewhat familiar with it used it in everyday life, as also those who wished to prove their superiority by the fact that they knew English and would use only English in Indian gatherings. Ezekiel creates an amusing picture of people gathered to bid goodbye to a lady of their club who is enviously going abroad.

The poet is at the same time satirical of this group in society that shows off its knowledge of the English language and maintains an upper-class attitude while in reality they make a complete fool of themselves. But fools before whom? The poet and the likes of him who know the nuances of the language. While the poet exposes the foolishness of this section of society that continues to obsess over the English language and its usage, he also opens space for us to see that the judging eye of those who can satirize this group laugh at them and mock their *Indianisms* (see glossary), namely the westernized urban intelligentsia. M.K. Naik is of the opinion that Ezekiel in such poems assumes an “easy superiority expressing itself in surface irony as in his ‘Very Indian’ poems ‘in Indian English’, in which the obvious linguistic howlers of Indian students are pilloried with metropolitan snobbishness”(203-4). The poet, thus, adopts a patronizing attitude towards those who are ill-equipped to use English. His surface level irony in the treatment of the subject also betrays his own position as one who could never fully accept his semi-Indian identity and ever remained in a state of self-alienation. In one of his poems titled “Background, Casually” he wrote of the alienation felt by his community—“my ancestors, among the castes, were aliens crushing seed for bread”.

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## 1.7 EZEKIEL’S STYLE AND APPROACH

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Ezekiel wrote poems of two different kinds—the terse, meticulous and the lucid, free. He painstakingly carried the themes in each poem to their logical end while maintaining a kind of determination and focus while making the point. Ezekiel was known for his use of subtle irony, particularly, the distant ironic stance he could assume in the poem that turned from humorous to sardonic. However, he maintained in poetry a formality of manner and paid great attention to rhyme scheme and perfection in stanza forms. He was equally adept with the colloquial style in poetry.

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## 1.8 EUNICE DE SOUZA: AN OVERVIEW

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Let’s now turn our attention to the other poet in the course, Eunice de Souza. She is a woman writer from the Goan Catholic community who has the benefit of having English as her first language and therefore successfully deploys the spoken English idiom of her community. The reality she depicts through her poems is starkly Indian. Her representations as also language carries a distinct Indian flavour. Eunice de Souza(1940-2017) remained an active thinker till her last days. She taught English literature for over thirty years at St. Xavier’s College in Mumbai. She spent her childhood in Pune and graduated from the University of Mumbai after which she went to the Marquette University, Wisconsin to pursue her Masters. She came back to India and attained a PhD from the University of Mumbai. Interestingly, when de Souza returned to India and applied for a teaching position it was Nissim Ezekiel who interviewed her and dissuaded her from taking the job, suggesting it would make her unhappy and this became a start to a long standing friendship. De Souza through Ezekiel met several contemporary poets including Kamala Das, Gieve Patel and Dom Moraes, among others. She engaged with the themes of contemporary society in her poems and fictional pieces. Her seminal poetry collections include *Fix* (1979), *Women in Dutch Painting* (1988), *Ways of Belonging: Selected Poems* (1990), *Selected and New Poems* (1994), and *Learn from the Almond Leaf* (2016). De Souza primarily known as a poet

also wrote novellas in her later days such as, *Dangerlok* (2001) and *Dev and Simran* (2003). Her poems revolve around the predicament of women in Indian society, particularly when seen from the lens of a Christian family. Certainly, de Souza doesn't become the mouthpiece of Christian value system or tradition. She critically looks at institutions of family, religion and marriage from a close observant eye. For instance, her first collection *Fix* brings to the fore the ambivalence the subject feels towards her parents. The stance is assertive and feminist. De Souza spent most of her life in India and understood the pulse of the times, the changing scenario particularly with respect to women. She saw the change over decades where women came out into the public sphere, received education and began going to work. This instilled new hope in her and gave her a decided stance from where she could critique the social institutions working necessarily against the interests of women. She evocatively expressed it in poetry. Her style is serious and witty, seldom casual or flippant. There is focus and discipline in her poems.

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## 1.9 “BEQUEST” BY EUNICE DE SOUZA: A READING

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“Bequest,” taken from the collection *Ways of Belonging: Selected Poems* (1990) is a projection of Christian values and their changing meaning in contemporary society. Let us first read the poem—

### Bequest

In every Catholic home there's a picture  
of Christ holding his bleeding heart  
in his hand.

I used to think, ugh.

The only person with whom  
I have not exchanged confidences  
is my hairdresser.

Some recommend stern standards,  
others say float along.

He says, take it as it comes,  
meaning, of course, as he hands it out.

I wish I could be a

Wise Woman

smiling endlessly, vacuously  
like a plastic flower,  
saying Child, learn from me.

It's time to perform an act of charity  
to myself,

bequeath the heart, like a  
spare kidney –

preferably to an enemy.

Although de Souza's "Bequest" is on the theme of the oppressive environment of a Christian home, the poem is different from her early poems such as "Catholic Mother" that came out in 1979. While "Catholic Mother" juxtaposes the judgmental Christian community against the silent woman figure, "Bequest" brings into focus specifically the woman subject who has to fight many battles. Bequest at one level brings out the predicament of a woman in contemporary society and at another, lays bare the state of affairs around this subject, that is, the way of life in a Christian family. These two themes are central in understanding de Souza's works. Most of her poems are about women who are strong and determined and must deal with the pressures emanating from their surroundings. In "Bequest," too, she lays it down for us. The subject active as a figure in the poem is sick of those who seem to control her life. She is not the typical Indian woman submitting to authority, speaking less and observing decorum. On the contrary, she is vocal about her thoughts and feelings and is certainly not the one to compromise or accept the given. Those who follow the norms in society as also those who uphold and ensure their upkeep "recommend" to her as "stern standards, /others say float along" are not she would relate to. Both options are unacceptable to her. Then comes the third voice in the poem, "He says, take it as it comes, /meaning, of course, as he hands it out". The male figure "he" represents the patriarchal viewpoint who in the garb of "take it as it comes" actually means take it as he likes it. Does the woman have a choice when so many voices work to suppress the voice of the female subject who refuses to submit to the patriarchal order? De Souza shows a sense of disgust for them and a spirit to fight them out. The disgust that she experiences in the beginning of the poem when she speaks about her reaction to seeing a picture of Christ holding his bleeding heart in his hands and she thinks "ugh," that gets connected with her abhorrence for the upholders of tradition and patriarchy. This is evident particularly in the last stanza when she says—

"It's time to perform an act of charity  
to myself,  
bequeath the heart, like a  
spare kidney –  
preferably to an enemy".

Why does the poet think that bequeathing her heart would be an act of charity? Why does she think the heart should be treated as a spare kidney and why would she prefer giving it to an enemy and not a friend?

It is a feminist poem in which the woman subject speaks her mind. Her poems become stark because they hit out simultaneously at the religious and patriarchal orders. She is irreverently vocal about her thoughts on both.

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## 1.10 EUNICE DE SOUZA'S AESTHETIC APPROACH

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The poems of de Souza are in one sense personal and in another distant and social. The poet becomes the subject of the poems and draws herself out of them. She recounts the feelings of the subject by standing outside it. This sharpens the observation shared with the reader. For this reason, her poems seldom appear melodramatic or word-heavy. At a few places, they are confessional, but soon

the feminist in her wakes up and takes charge. This lends her grit and the urge to resist.

To reiterate, de Souza's poems are dramatic in nature for she portrays with words vivid scenes from our surroundings that have a picturesque quality. In descriptions she turns ironic—the hypocrisy of social discourses is brought to the centre and the stance of the poet in the process assumes a clear image.

Since de Souza has both the eye of a critic and poet, she considers language a key issue in writing. She makes it a subject of serious discussion. Ever self-critical of her writing and her use of words de Souza believed in working hard on her poems, editing them till they reached an aesthetic point. In one of her interviews she outlined the importance of language in poetry by suggesting that, 'language is what poetry is all about. It's not about wearing your heart on your sleeve, courage and all that. It is finally language. And if you forget that you are not really a poet' (from *Contemporary Indian Poetry in English*, 118). Clearly by placing emphasis on language, de Souza formulated a new aesthetic of poetry. She has taken poetry out of the realms of pure passion, heart-felt emotions (or what may be called the feminine elements in a poem). Ever conscious about the use of language and its manifold meanings, de Souza is a craftswoman whose emotions seldom supersede the central idea in a poem. For her the feeling which is at the centre of a poem requires discipline of language. The poem according to her is based on a feeling which is remembered and recreated. This feeling has to be disciplined stringently. This constitutes the aesthetics of de Souza's works.

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### 1.11 EUNICE DE SOUZA AND THE FEMINIST TREND IN INDIAN WRITING

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Eunice De Souza contributed to the canon of women's poetry in particular and to the Indian feminist tradition in general by unequivocally pointing out the source of female oppression. She was courageous enough to put in the dock religious practices and social values that controlled women and strengthened the hold of patriarchy in society. To call a spade a spade and to treat with contempt such malpractices made her de Souza's poems stand out among the rest.

The roots of Feminism in India may be traced to the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with seminal works of Savitribai Phule (1831-1897) and Tarabai Shinde (1850-1910) coming to the fore. Shinde's *Stree Purush Tulana* became a modern feminist text interrogating the prejudices of society necessarily set against women. The national movement in India and the struggle for independence brought women out of their homes and into the sphere of public life. This added immensely to the growth of women's movement. During the Gandhian phase women became equal participants in life. The cause, however, was focused on attaining freedom from the imperialist British rule. But as a corollary, women began to express and assert themselves in the public sphere. However, feminism as a systematic approach and a full-fledged movement in India came up properly only in the latter half of the twentieth century when women thinkers, theorists, social activists and writers took it upon themselves to begin pushing for women's cause in literature, culture and politics. These women expressed opinions as also made claim on their rights. A whole section of women emerged on the scene who took up the cause of women, and fought for their equal status in country's environment.



There occurred a paradigm shift and a change of attitude that became visible in women's writings. One could identify a changing trend in writers such as Kamala Das in the nineteen sixties who began to write about herself as an independent subject with an identity of her own. Women's writing of the 1960s and 70s was often confessional, expression as it was of an anguished and disturbed subject. This was replaced by a more self-assured feminist voice of the 1980s and 90s that disregarded social validation, experimented with the literary form and probed the vital aspects of life including gender. Eunice de Souza while incorporating certain aspects of the confessional writing of the 60s and 70s, de Souza aligns more with the new age feminists whose works are bold, incisive and self-critical. The outer world and the conflicts of the inner world are treated with equal detachment in her works. The engagement with the subject matter is personal but the writer is ever conscious that the predicament is produced by society.

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## 1.12 LET US SUM UP

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You must have noted that the unit was divided into three distinct sections. The first part was devoted to the development of Indian English writing in general and poetry in particular. The second section focused on the poet Nissim Ezekiel and his specific concerns. The third one brought to the centre the works of Eunice de Souza and her feminist outlook. You may have noticed that de Souza, like Ezekiel, was an urban western educated poet, but she speaks in the voice of the oppressed, of the women of her community and is, therefore, able to depict in her poems the realities of Indian ethos with precision. For de Souza, there is little escape from patriarchal conventions for a woman. However, Ezekiel and de Souza are both deft in their use of satire. They can effectively drive a point home through satirical representation. We also note that their perspectives differ—de Souza seldom turns philosophical, and Ezekiel successfully escapes from personal anguish to make entry into the philosophical.

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## 1.13 GLOSSARY

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- British Commonwealth** : refers to the British Commonwealth of Nations, a voluntary association whose members include United Kingdom and its erstwhile colonies to maintain goodwill and friendship among one another and with the ex-colonizer. The British monarch remains the symbolic head of this association.
- Cultural hegemony** : domination through cultural and ideological means. It refers to maintaining rule over a group or country through its social institutions and practices.
- Indianism** : suggests a distinct Indian way of using the English language; a word or idiom that is characteristic of Indian English.

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## 1.14 QUESTIONS

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- 1) Write a note on the growth and popularity of Indian English in the post independence period.
- 2) What are the characteristic features of Indian English poetry? How is it different from the romantic and nationalist poetry of the pre-independence period?
- 3) What do you think is Ezekiel's purpose in presenting to us the 'indianisms' in the poem "Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S"?
- 4) Do you agree that Eunice de Souza's poems are personal and yet socio-political in nature? Give reasons for your answer.

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## 1.16 SUGGESTED READINGS

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## UNIT 2 A. K. RAMANUJAN AND JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Modern Indian Literature and the Issue of English Language
- 2.3 A. K. Ramanujan: An Overview
- 2.4 A.K. Ramanujan “On the Death of a Poem”: A Reading
- 2.5 Ramanujan’s Poetic Style
- 2.6 Jayanta Mahapatra: An Introduction
- 2.7 Jayanta Mahapatra’s Poem “A Rain of Rites”: A Reading
- 2.8 Jayanta Mahapatra’s Poetic Style
- 2.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.10 Glossary
- 2.11 Questions
- 2.12 References
- 2.13 Suggested Readings

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit would acquaint you with two major poets of modern Indian English, A. K. Ramanujan from Karnataka and Jayanta Mahapatra from Odisha. After reading this unit we shall be able to get acquainted to:

- the life and works of A. K. Ramanujan and Jayanta Mahapatra;
- discuss Ramanujan’s poem “On the Death of a Poem” and his poetic style;
- discuss Mahapatra’s poem “A Rain of Rites” and his poetic style.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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You will note that despite their interests in the rich culture of their region, the two poets A. K. Ramanujan and Jayanta Mahapatra broaden the scope of their poetry to include universal emotions and speak specifically about the idea of the poet and the poetic practice in the twentieth century. Interestingly, Ramanujan deploys the crisp short lyric of the *vachanas* in his poems and Mahapatra resorts to the imagism and experimentalism that was popular in the early modernist literature of the West in the twentieth century. Both writers use the English language freely without carrying the burden of it as a foreign language. They are able to knit well the English language with the local Indian experience. Thus, language becomes unself-conscious yet focused on the described experience; it is in this sense not self-referential. Let’s look at the question of language in modern Indian literature.

## 2.2 MODERN INDIAN LITERATURE AND THE ISSUE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Modern Indian Literature had to deal with the specific problem of English language. During the British colonial rule the English language was inducted into the formal education system and it became the medium of instruction in higher education. Along with this, the British sought to bring modern education in India. The teaching of classical literature was replaced by modern literature much of which was English. The study of regional literatures was thus supplemented with English language and literature. Knowledge of English also ensured employment opportunities for the young educated Indians. The language worked as a great equalizer as the new class of Indians found a means through which they could connect and communicate with fellow Indians. Where regional languages created barriers in communication, English came in handy. Thus, as Sujit Mukherjee has observed, “English literature was, by and large, the link literature of modern India. Correspondingly, English as a link language was shared by all educated Indians, and made them fit for employment in several capacities under the British. Not only could the educated Indians communicate with the British in this language, they could also communicate with one another on, as it were, a neutral language territory”. In this way the English language acquired a secular identity. Even after 1947, no substitute emerged on the scene that could replace English and become the link language of India. Even as Hindi was being touted as the national language, it did not receive support of many states. The scenario post-independence changed the status of English considerably. It was no more a compulsory medium of college teaching. States could choose their regional language of instruction in schools. This made the future of English precarious, yet it remained a functional language used across India. It also became a bridge through which cultures within India and outside could be understood. Thus, Indian English literature in the post-independence period emerged as a significant choice before a writer who wished to get across to different regions, states and the larger world abroad. Indian English literatures and Indian literatures in translation thus became an important link between the regional and world literatures. English language in the hands of Indian writers assumed the status of a local language constantly being appropriated to suit the context. It was no more an alien language or the colonizer’s language but one directed towards exploring Indian life from a different perspective.

A.K. Ramanujan in an interview with Chirantan Kulshrestha has given his bits on the use of English language in India. He brings out a specific problem that writers in India faced while using the English language. According to him:

Indians writing in English is mostly writing in a second language and it raises several questions. . . Usually a second language is not learned in childhood. When one writes in a second language not learned in childhood, superimposed on a first, one may effectively cut oneself off from one’s childhood. . . Second language also tends to be learned formally. They are learned or used in an active community of native speakers, though it may be somewhat different for a few city Indians. It is true that a great deal of live intellectual dialogue in south Indian cities does take place in English still. But few of us know English well enough to describe common intimate things in English—a kitchen operation, an obscure gesture, a family quarrel. We’re split linguistically in so many ways (from *Oxford India Ramanujan*,41).

Ramanujan further observes that this spilt has made a great deal of Indian writing in English what he calls “upstairs English, platform English, idiom-book English, newspaper English. With no slang available, they are stuck in a ‘register’, a formality, a learned posture”(41). Also, he notes that with a foreign second language like English we are separated from the community of people in India and in fact in the process become elites. Thus according to Ramanujan “true language use is unconscious” whether in primary or secondary language—”the more self conscious it is the more artificial it becomes, and the more trammled in manners, rules, opinions” (42).

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### 2.3 A. K. RAMANUJAN: AN OVERVIEW

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A. K. Ramanujan (1929-1993) was a prolific writer and scholar of South Asian literature and culture. He received the Padmi Shri award in 1983 for his contribution to Indian literature and scholarship. Four volumes of his poems in English that were published in his lifetime include *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Selected Poems* (1976), and *Second Sight* (1986), along with several other poems published posthumously such as in *Collected Poems* (1995). Ramanujan was an avid translator of Tamil and Kannada works. He translated ancient Tamil and medieval Kannada poetry into English. *Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1967); *Speaking of Siva*, and Kannada Bhakti poems by Virsaiva Saints (1973) are some of his translations. *The flowering tree and other Oral Tales from India* came out posthumously in 1997. Also, his posthumous collection of essays, *Collected Essays* was published in 1999. A polyglot, Ramanujan was also a poet, essayist, translator, folklorist, and playwright. About his poems in particular and poetry in general, Ramanujan has observed the following—

I do rework poems a lot. Something around me often touches me and returns me to an old unfinished piece and makes me see what I tried to say there. I return to it and redo it and if this redoing is any good, it reflects not only the change in myself, but in redoing I find myself changed. So there is a kind of dialectic between oneself and the poems and things, the craft has to be inspired continually. Every little change, every self-criticism you make has to be a creative act. There is no line between craft and inspiration, no real line between intelligence and imagination. At that point its sensibility (I almost said ‘character’) or nothing— all through, in the beginning, the middle, the end. If not, it’ll really show. There’ll be dead words, holes, borrowings, helpless patches, betrayals. (*Oxford India Ramanujan* 39)

Certainly, poetry for Ramanujan was a product of hard labour. He wasn’t ever fully satisfied with the final work because for him there was no final point of creativity. It was a continuous effort. Interestingly, Ramanujan in the above passage mentions the effect his poems have on him even as he is working on them. As is rightly suggested, the relation between the self of the poet and poem is **dialectical** (*see glossary*); one keeps altering and reshaping the other and that it works both ways. He also points out that in creativity there aren’t distinct categories of imagination and intelligence— two parts of the brain that exist separately. No, in life as in literature both are ever active and in fact constitute one unit. According to Ramanujan, integrated presence can be seen in the sensibility that gets projected in a work of art. Without it, poetry would lose its value. There would be hollow expressions and no spirit in it. With this, you

would have gained a sufficient enough understanding on Ramanujan’s bent of mind, his emphasis on character in poetry as also his views on the use of English language by Indian writers. Now let us turn to the specific poem “On the Death of a Poem” in your course.

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## 2.4 A.K. RAMANUJAN “ON THE DEATH OF A POEM”: A READING

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This poem was published in the collection *Second Sight* (1986), the last collection of poetry published in his lifetime. It came two decades after the first collection *The Striders* and contains poems of his mature phase.

“On the Death of a Poem” specifically deals with the question of how a poem gets formed in the mind of the poet. You will note that images in the poem are personified (“images consult one another”). They talk and have thoughts which they share with one another. Does it mean that images have an identity of their own and a will of their own? In answer one might say, they are not entirely guided by the poet’s wish. The poet is absent from the poem. He seems to play little role in the discussions and is not the voice of conscience. Let us have a look at the text:

**“On the Death of a Poem”**

Images consult  
 One  
 Another,  
 A conscience-  
 stricken jury,  
 and come  
 slowly  
 to a sentence.

As is evident, the poet is not an active agent who might have created the poem. The focus is entirely on images and words that get formed in a sentence. Who writes the poem? Is it the poet or images of events and people that write themselves on the page through the agency of the poet who might at best be a catalyst? The English modernist poet T.S. Eliot at least thought that was the case—for him the poet was a passive entity, a medium through which poetry flowed. He called the poet a “catalytic agent,” a depersonalized subject. A. K. Ramunjan was not a modernist writer like Eliot but he was well aware of this dimension of poetry, that it gets created on its own. Thus, the intimate process of creating a poem is laid bare before us where the poet is sensitive to the inner workings of a poem and believes that his words and images talk to one another and have a life of their own. Even as Ramanujan claimed that he had no theory of poetry and that he wrote poems as they occurred to him, he was ever conscious about the poetic form. He knew that disjointed images had to be brought together while ensuring that the form of the work was not diffused and coherence was maintained in it. These ideas are brought to light in the present poem where Ramanujan discusses poetically the art of writing and the struggles of the poet—the problem of managing images that may not cohere and might die without actually becoming

the poem he intended. Thus, the poem brings to the fore many interpretations about the making of poetry and the poet.

Let's have a close look at the poem. Images in it play an important role. They discuss and consult, they are the "conscience-stricken jury". Why do you think images are "conscience-stricken"? What bothers them? Is it the case that they don't stand up to the challenge faced by the poet? Are they ill-equipped to project the intent? Or are images in fact skeptical of the poet, judging the aim of the poet? Surely, they have the last say since they are the "jury" in the case. Images are in a state of conflict and they must also play the part of the jury and decide what the poem says and whether they will be a part of it. Having reached at a resolution, they tread "slowly" and cautiously before they decide to become a part of a sentence. Images come alive as people in the poem to whom the poet owes articulation and who in turn owe a picture to the poet. This uneasy interaction between images and the poet gives a dramatic quality to the poem.

Why do you think the poem is titled "Death of a Poem"? What does the poet want to convey through it? Is it about how a poem dies when it is caught in judgements? In consultations and discussions, is the spirit of the poem lost? Does a poem that is left mid-way remains incomplete because images do not cohere leaving the poet dejected? The present poem brings up for discussion these questions. The central idea of the poem is that creating a poem can be a challenging task and that it may not reach completion, thus leading to its 'death'. The tone of the poem is impersonal and controlled as the poet deals with the process of creative expression in abstract terms. There is little flamboyance or amplification of the subject in the poem. It might indeed be said that the direct precision in the economy of phrase heightens its poetic quality.

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## 2.5 RAMANUJAN'S POETIC STYLE

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A. K. Ramanujan grew fond of writing short poems particularly in his later phase. After having translated the classical Tamil and Kannada verses his poetic style became terse and precise, almost aphoristic. He used indirect short statements with a wide range of meaning. These are mostly fleeting thoughts captured and crystallized in poetry. They do not necessarily move in a specific direction. Take, for instance, his poem "Self Portrait". It is of nine lines made up of short statements woven together in a single sentence. Let me quote the entire poem here:

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,  
Often signed in a corner  
By my father.

As in the previous poem the intent is hidden somewhere and the meaning has to be worked out by the reader personally. This poem is about the poet who has the

capability to look at oneself from outside and at the same time enter other people's lives. He cannot recognize himself and in fact sees in his reflection an image of his father or for that matter somebody else but him. The self-portrait and the portrait of the stranger are in fact one.

Ramanujan's poems have been viewed as belonging to the tradition of medieval *vachanas* which were short concise lyrical axioms. About Ramanujan's creative practice, Molly Daniels (A. K. Ramanujan's wife) has observed that his poems exhibit his "gift for yoking of the dissimilar, and in his later works, we notice that the use of opposites and contraries makes subjectivity more universal". At the same time, she claims that Ramanujan's "true contemporaries were the classical Tamil poets of two millenniums ago. His short lyric contains a large thought" ("An A.K. Ramanujan Story", xiv). In this sense, he carries the tradition of classical Tamil literature in his poetry. Ramanujan has also spoken about the impact it had on him, "These classical Tamil poems attracted me by their attitude to experience, to human passion, and to the external world; their trust in the bareness, the lean line with no need to jazz it up or ornament it. They seemed to me Classical, anti-Romantic, using the words loosely, as we know them in European Literature" (Interview with CJ 43-44). That was the model Ramanujan applied in his own poems—direct, bare and classical in style but based on human passion and experience. There is very little of the romantic in Ramanujan. For that kind of poetry, we must look towards the second poet of this unit, Jayanta Mahapatra who despite evoking myths and legends and speaking of history and memory in his poems, stuck to the romantic idiom and deployed all its characteristic features. Let us now turn our attention towards him.

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## 2.6 JAYANTA MAHAPATRA: AN INTRODUCTION

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Jayanta Mahapatra was born in a Christian family in Cuttack, Odisha in 1928 and spent most of his life there. He studied at the Ravenshaw College in Cuttack to specialize in Physics and at Patna Science College, after which he went on to teach at various colleges in Odisha. Thus, there is a distinct local colour in his writing and Mahapatra prefers to remain in this territory. To go into the family background of the poet, it is worth noting that extreme economic hardship forced his grandfather to convert to Christianity in 1866.

During the nineteenth century, conversions to Christianity in India mainly happened for two reasons—to escape deprivation and starvation, and to rid oneself off the stigma of the low caste. The Christian missionaries, when they first arrived in India in the early nineteenth century, promised food and free education to the common people if they converted to Christianity. The ordinary folks who struggled to make ends meet had little option but to accept the new religion as their own. In the specific case of Odisha, the Christian missionaries came to the region in 1822 and created conditions for a literary revival. The first Odia Bible had already been published in 1811. The missionaries, however, established schools and brought out regular Odia periodicals and newsletters. They set up the first Odia printing press in 1836 which gave a boost to the Odia language and literature. Needless to say, spread of Christianity happened alongside. However, a landmark event in Odisha's history mobilized the Odia people. In 1868, at a meeting of the Asiatic Society held in Calcutta it was proposed that Bangla be made compulsory in Odia schools. It was an attempt by the British administration to de-recognize the Odia language. For ease of administration, Indian officials working for the



East India Company in Bengal province convinced the British that Odia was a dialect of Bangla and thus the status accorded to a national language was set to be taken away from Odia. This united the Odia people against the injustice of the British as they became aware that their Odia identity was under threat. It led to a massive resistance from the Odia people who fought for their language and culture. Thus, we might keep in mind that “modern Odia writing arose from an urgent need to preserve the language and prevent the submersion of an Odia identity”. It is this that constitutes the defining feature of Modern Odia literature—the awareness of their culture and history and the need to preserve it. The fight against linguistic submersion of Odia was specifically taken up by the pioneers of Odia literature in the nineteenth century such as Gaurishankar Ray, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Radhanath Ray and Madhusudan Rao. These writers mobilized the people and led the campaign against the language policy of the administration. It was to be a long battle since the onslaught on language didn’t stop. In fact, in 1895 the central administration made Hindi the language of schools in Odia areas stripping Odia language of its rightful claim. It was only in 1905 that the policy was reversed and Odia got its due place. But in the process an entire generation of writers and thinkers came to the centre of the scene and pursued the cause of the Odia people as a collective group and spoke of their concerns.

This is the tradition that the twentieth century Odia writers such as Jayanta Mahapatra inherited. Even as he began writing poetry at the age of forty, Mahapatra constantly engaged with the history of Odisha and created images in his poetry based on local legends and myths. There are references to the Kalinga war of the ancient period and to the famine of 1866 in Odisha in his poems. Specific points in history when the lives of the people were shaken and changed are Mahapatra’s points of engagement as he builds a narrative around these events. Further, elements of nature and their interplay—the historical, mythological and folklorish— became significant in Mahapatra’s scheme of things. This could be seen as the larger political concern of the poet who wished to be seen as an Odia poet more than anything else.

Jayanta Mahapatra’s poems were first published in international journals such as the *Critical Quarterly*, the *Kenyan Review* and the *Sewanee Review*. His collections of poems include *Close the Sky*, *Ten by Ten* (1971), *A Rain of Rites* (1976), *Relationships*(1980), *Life Signs* (1983), *A Whiteness of Bone* (1992) and *Shadow Space* (1997). An acclaimed poet, Mahapatra also translated Odia poetry into English. For instance, he translated the poems of Gangadhar Meher, Sachi Routray, Soubhagya Mishra and Sitakanta Mahapatra. He also edited journals like *Chandrabhaga* and *Kavya Bharati*. His contribution to Odia literature is seminal.

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## 2.7 JAYANTA MAHAPATRA’S POEM “A RAIN OF RITES”: A READING

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The poem begins in the following manner—

Sometimes a rain comes

Slowly across the sky, that turns

Upon its grey cloud, breaking away into light

Before it reaches its objective.

The poem is not a general comment on rain. The poet refers to a particular kind of rain— “a rain” that “breaks away into light”. Such a rain does not take the regular course of coming down straight to the earth. It instead turns upon the “grey cloud” that has harboured it and bursts this cloud turning it into lightning before the rain touches the ground. The poet is referring to a common natural phenomenon of lightning but looks at it through the agency of rain. The latter is an active agent that hit the clouds. The poet becomes one with the rain and thinks of what it does to the cloud. Also, note the poet wants us to remember that the rain has the capability to strike the very cloud that contained it. We may note that in the poet’s scheme of things, the rain turns fiery and uncontrollable, and its wrath does not spare the cloud. In the second stanza, the poet introduces “I” in it, his subjectivity, and the impact this has on him. It is borne out by the following lines:

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

The rain known to the poet is not the same as the one mentioned in the first stanza. He contrasts the two kinds of rain and states that he perhaps wished that the two would stay close and coexist. It is sustained by the line, “the rain I have known and traded all this life/ is thrown like kelp on the beach”. The rain that is available to the poet is like the kelp, that is, a seaweed that grows in underwater forests. He wishes for a miraculous rain that bursts and shines through lightning is another form of the same he knows. The metaphor of such a rain is extended further. It is like “some shape of conscience” or “a malignant purpose in a nun’s eye”. It works for him to know that his conscience resembles the phenomenon and is like a wicked intention in someone who is supposed to be as pure and untainted as a nun.

What do you think the rain signifies in the first two stanzas of the poem? At one level, the rain could refer to the poetic muse, where the poet feels that creative inspiration should have come to him as some revelation or miracle with a power of lightening, one that could break clouds. At another level, it comes to him in the form of ordinary things, bringing along doubt and self-doubt, making him question his own intentions and purposes, and striking at his conscience. The poem could be about the struggles of the poet with creativity. Further, the rain could signify life itself. The poet might have wished for a glorious life and career, while in reality he is stuck in the monotonous and the banal, engaged with the average concerns of life. It could thus refer to the poet’s *existential* (see glossary) crisis. Since, rain is a symbol of fertility, it could refer to the fruition in life the poet hopes for. The rain could stimulate his creative practice. You could add more interpretations to the symbol of the rain. Let’s discuss these points in the light of the following stanza of the poem—

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.

The stanza poses a question, but one that is rhetorical since the poet knows the answer. His position is that none exists “to whom the cold cloud brought” passion referred to in “the blood to his face”. Gone are the days when the poet had an eye-opening moment of revelation. There is a kind of weariness expressed through these lines as the poet persona “numbly” climbs to the mountain tops where his “soul quivers on the edge of answers”. The poet is on a quest, a search for resolution, yet aware that exhaustion and timidity alone would be met at the end. The climbing up the mountain top carries a resonance of the modernist motif of the Myth of Sisyphus. According to the myth, in order to punish Sisyphus, the gods had condemned him to roll a rock up to the top of the mountain without a break. Once Sisyphus climbed the top of the mountain, the rock would fall back to the ground because of its weight. The gods thought there couldn’t be a worse punishment than futile, hopeless work. Albert Camus (1913-1960, French modernist writer and visionary, in his essay “The myth of Sisyphus” used this myth to make his point about the twentieth century human existence. He found Sisyphus to be the “absurd hero” epitomizing the predicament of the modern intellectual. The myth is tragic and so is the modern consciousness—an ordinary person works each day in his life on the same tasks hoping to reach at the top. It appears likely that at some point in time, one becomes conscious of the futility of it all.

The myth in question works in the background of the poem when the poet becomes conscious of the absurdity that impacts one’s life. We might take into consideration the last two lines of the poems where two questions are posed for us to go over:

Which still, stale air sits on an angel’s wings?

What holds my rain so it’s hard to overcome?

The angel guiding or protecting him is presented not a powerful charismatic figure. Instead, it is wearied just as the poet-subject is. It carries “still, stale air” and suggests an all-encompassing inertia. The poet believes that the cosmos is set against him and withholds the rain that belongs to him. It is not allowed to reach him. It is as if the poet-subject were fighting this cosmic battle all by himself.

Thus, the poem speaks of the intense solitude of the poet and his moments of questioning and self-questioning. The entire poem is centered upon the poet’s being. The cultural ethos and the local flavours of Odia life that Mahapatra was known for are not the focus, and the poem brings to the fore the tragic consciousness of the poet unable to resolve his life’s dilemmas. For K. Ayyappa Paniker, the irony, in Mahapatra works to achieve not just a satiric effect but “to heighten a tragic awareness” (18). Mahapatra takes recourse to modernist devices and motifs to bring home the point of his own alienation and crisis.

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## 2.8 JAYANTA MAHAPATRA’S POETIC STYLE

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You must have noticed that in Mahapatra, images appear as montage. An event or a phenomenon becomes the starting point for the poet to explore a feeling that is then explained through a set of images. At the same time, no image is separately put to use. Instead, all images get interconnected and work in unison. This takes care of the problem of a pre-determined schema. New and fresh combinations add great poetic value to the representation. A conscious poetic style emerges in

the process. Mahapatra deliberately creates coded metaphors and places them together in the poem with the aim that the meaning gets created on its own.

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## 2.9 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit you have studied in detail the specific concerns of Indian English poets A.K. Ramanujan and Jayanta Mahapatra, both of whom were modern poets of the post-colonial period. Indian English poetry in their works stands out as self-assured as well as exploratory. These poets are not self-conscious in their use of Indian English nor do they make it a subject of a predetermined concern. Their focus is on the experience and emotion of the individual in the existing period. They creatively use the English language for meeting their creative ends. While A.K. Ramanujan is structured and succinct in his poetic style, Mahapatra is deft in his use of romantic images. In them we see a variety of themes and styles suggesting that Indian poetry in English has come a long way and become more self-assured than before in its aesthetic working.

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## 2.10 GLOSSARY

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<b>Dialectical</b>	:	an approach that deals with two or more contradictory perspectives. In it, ideas opposed to each other can still be seen in their connection and dynamic working.
<b>Existential</b>	:	it refers to a school of thought based on the principal of 'existence precedes essence'. The existential crisis stems from the idea that life has no essence per se and that which happens does not take humans forward.

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## 2.11 QUESTIONS

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- 1) Discuss modern Indian English poetry as it emerged in the post-independence period.
- 2) What are A.K. Ramanujan's views on the use of English by Indian writers? Discuss.
- 3) Translation of classical Tamil helped Ramanujan develop his own poetic style. Comment.
- 4) What does the rain signify in the "Rain of Rites"? Explain.
- 5) Mahapatra was an Odia poet with a modernist sensibility. Discuss

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## 2.12 REFERENCES

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## 2.13 SUGGESTED READINGS

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A.K. Ramanujan and Jayanta  
Mahapatra

Das, Bijay Kumar. *The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra*. Kolkata: Writers workshop, 1992.

Mahapatra, Jayanta. *Door of Paper: Essays and Memoirs*. New Delhi: Authors Press, 2007.

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## UNIT 3 ARUN KOLATKAR AND AGHA SHAHID ALI

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Changing themes of Indian English Poetry
- 3.3 Arun Kolatkar: An Overview
- 3.4 A Reading of Kolatkar's Poem "Ajamil and the Tigers"
- 3.5 Agha Shahid Ali: An Introduction
- 3.6 "Postcard from Kashmir": An Analysis
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Glossary
- 3.9 Questions
- 3.10 References
- 3.11 Suggested Readings

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit you will be able to:

- gain knowledge of the life and works of Arun Kolatkar and Agha Shahid Ali;
- critically analyse the poems of the two poets.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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This unit would open with a discussion on the changing paradigm of Indian English poetry and acquaint you with two seminal writers of the latter half of the twentieth century showing diverse sensibilities. One of them is strongly rooted in the Indian culture and reality while the other is an Indian-American poet with a global perspective. You would note that Indian English poetry in the hands of these writers is both political and aesthetically equipped. Each, in one's own terms, experiments with the poetic form to get across the central idea. Romanticism and sentimentalism are largely kept out of the purview in their poems. While Arun Kolatkar is more satirical, Agha Shahid Ali is intense. Their poems, however, are thought-centric in their basic strain which adds to their appeal. Let's first look at the larger literary scene of the post-independence period that would become a background against which we can place these poets.

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### 3.2 THE CHANGING THEMES OF INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

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The post-colonial period in India brought new challenges for the people who had visualized a free and equitable society. Since the 1960s, the dominant strain of disillusionment in Indian literature had been at its peak. Meanwhile, the focus

of Indian literature had shifted from the social concerns to individual struggles. The poetic practice became refined as more educated sections sprung up in Indian society—we had a growing educated young population that looked for job opportunities and strove to achieve individual success in all fields. This was accompanied by the urge to better one's social position and climb the social ladder. As a result, a burgeoning middle class emerged in India that was educated and intellectually evolved. It is from among this group that new poets emerged. These new poets were well versed with English language as also the western culture. Their readers were also the enlightened groups coming from the middle class; they wanted to read works that represented their concerns. Thus, reading literary works became a private affair, meant for self-fulfillment and pleasure. It had little role to play in the socio-political life of the time. Indeed, its area shifted from the social space of common people to literary clubs, cafes and drawing rooms where educated men and women sat and talked. This shift led to a change in concerns, too. Questions of injustice, poverty and suppression were discarded and likewise, literary expression focused on middle class aspirations of men and women, their personal relationships of love and marriage and disillusionment with life. But the cause for this disillusionment would not be stretched to the social dimension; those remained rooted in individual flaw or incapacity. However, this was accompanied by a new kind of unabashed audacity particularly in poetry that looked critically at the spiraling growth of capitalism in the country. Both the writers discussed in this unit fall in this latter category.

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### 3.3 ARUN KOLATKAR: AN OVERVIEW

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Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004), a bilingual poet who wrote equally well in his mother tongue Marathi and English. He was also an artist and a translator. Born in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, Kolatkar grew up in British India and witnessed the dawn of the new nation. In this sense, he knew the concerns that troubled the country in its phase of nation-building. In 1947, he did matriculation and in 1949 joined the JJ School of Art in Mumbai to pursue fine arts. Kolatkar wanted to become an artist and tried his luck at painting but soon moved towards advertising. He began his career as a commercial artist working for advertising firms, and took to writing poetry seriously only later in life. Once he had elected poetry to be his main interest, Kolatkar began critically observing the way in which Indian society moved towards consumerism and money-making. The post-colonial India was turning exclusionist in attitude where those who did not believe in the ideals of individual success and profit were increasingly sidelined and left in the lurch. Gone were the days of raising slogans for justice and equality. The discourse of post-colonial India was based on a particular kind of progress meant for the rich and the powerful, not for the poor and the destitute. This reality became more than evident in sensitive writers like Kolatkar who took it upon themselves to challenge the centres of authority through their poetic practice.

Kolatkar's collection of poems *Kala Ghoda* expresses the wrath of the artist-poet against a system that was meant to benefit the common people and instead sidelined them. Kolatkar designed the cover for his volume of poems as well, so both the cover and the poems became a statement about the prevailing system. The collection speaks about the ills of urban life as he saw them in (then) Bombay. The title *Kala Ghoda* is a reference to a popular art district of downtown Mumbai and houses the heritage buildings and museums. Kolatkar's first collection of poetry *Jejuri* won him the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1976. Since it earned

recognition the world over, it was believed by many among the literati that Indian English poetry had turned a new leaf. In the poems included in the volume *Jejuri*, Kolatkar boldly targeted the hypocritical ways of the Brahmins and the functioning of the oppressive religious order in society. The title of the collection was inspired from the temple town of Jejuri in Maharashtra, a place of pilgrimage. Kolatkar had visited the place in 1963 and captured in poetry what he saw there. Kolatkar called a spade a spade and seldom used the sophisticated poetic idiom that you would find in the poems of Ezekiel or Mahapatra, for instance. His was a more direct and assertive style, a bold stance countering the corrupt nexus of religion and capitalism in our society. An experimentalist, Kolatkar continued to explore and stretch the medium of poetry. Sometimes, he would use in his poems expletives that shocked the readers, at other times, he would use the simple folktale form to convey his message. He had the ability to engage the reader in a narrative poem as well as a dramatic poem. According to the critic Afeefa Banu, Kolatkar belonged to,

A group of Marathi poets whose poetry showed strong affinities with a whole range of radical poetry from European Dadaist, to Futurists and Surrealists, to the contemporary Beats of the US. Although he started writing in Marathi and English simultaneously, he won acclaim as a great poet in Indian English first. One remarkable feature of Kolatkar's poetry, both Marathi and English, is that he treats language as a living entity. The poems speak in different voices and tones, English of the American western Movies, and Marathi speckled with Bombaiyya Hindi, often dotted with sarcasm and irony, which many critics find difficult to digest. (28)

Thus, Kolatkar's works are marked by originality since the play with language happens at a deeper level. Language is not merely a passive medium that carries the writer's intent. In his poems, language begins to take its own shape and suggests simultaneous points of references. The ways in which it develops and formulates the idea make the poems gripping.

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### 3.4 A READING OF KOLATKAR'S POEM "AJAMIL AND THE TIGERS"

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The poem "Ajamil and the Tigers" is taken from the collection *Jejuri* and builds a narrative in verse. As mentioned above, Jejuri was a pilgrimage town and the poetic subject of *Jejuri* is centered around a pilgrimage, a journey with which the collection opens. Its last poem is about the imminent return of the narrator poet. In the collection, there are several poems on the place and the myths and how guides and saints build their own narrative about this mystical town. The place has a mythical significance created through centuries of story-telling. The poem "Ajamil and the Tigers" belongs to this group of poems. It is meant to be a religious-moral tale. But it doesn't stop there. One can interpret the poem from socio-political point of views as well. The poem is structured as a **fable** that is an animal tale and works as an **allegory** (see glossary) for our times as well. Like all allegories this poem, too, has a message and a lesson. The question is—what kind of a picture is the poet presenting? Is it a critique on the modern system of living or some general moral axiom he is presenting through the tale? What is his purpose in writing such a story? Also, is this story meant for children or a part of children's literature or yet a take on the existing social system? In order to reach an understanding, Let us first read the poem.



**“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 didn’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,

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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 heap.

‘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 his 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.

At the most simplistic level, the poem narrates a story about animals. In the story along with animals who talk, there is the figure of a man Ajamil who can converse with them. What kind of a tale is this? And Who is Ajamil? He is a legendary character from the tales in *Jayadri Mahatmay*. According to the legend, Ajamil was a devotee of *Khandoba* (an avatar of *Vishnu*) worshipped in Jejuri. He would take the sheep for grazing, and even after having sinned was redeemed because in his last moments before death he took the name of god.

Here in the poem, Ajamil has the responsibility of protecting the sheep. For this, he has kept a sheep dog that protects the sheep from being hunted by the tigers. The sheep dog is efficient and skilled at his job, because of which the tigers have been going hungry. The afflicted tigers approach their tiger king and raise their concern, telling him they have not eaten for fifteen days. The tiger king angry with the sheep dog speaks like a goon who owns the place, as in, "I'm gonna teach that sheep dog a lesson" and "that son of a bitch". He decides to launch an attack with his gang of tigers. When they attack, ironically, they are beaten by the swift dog that was at 51 places all at once. The dog enchains them. Do you see the irony of the situation here? The boastful tigers are in chains and sheep dog controls them. It is just the opposite of what we expected. However, having lost the battle physically to the dog, the tiger king manipulates and changes his stance. He tells Ajamil that they came to make friends, not to fight. Ajamil too understands their state and motive, he is not innocent. He appears to take them seriously but understands, too, their penchant for treachery. Yet, he tries to use the situation to his advantage. He knows he has to live with the tigers in the times to come—so, why should he displease them? Thus, he offers them to join for dinner which the tigers readily accept. They are treated with lamb and roast. After this, Ajamil signs a pact with them of friendliness. The tigers happily agree. Ajamil sends them back with gifts—leather jackets and sheep to carry home. Thus, the story narrated in the poem ends in a compromise and apparently a harmonious existence is ensured at the end.

It is worth questioning, yet—Are the sheep happy with the arrangement? Do they have a say in the matter? In fact, they constitute the silent subjects in the poem. They never speak nor converse among one another and we are given no

clue as to what they might be thinking on the matter. Ajamil decides to sacrifice some sheep to protect the rest and keep the tigers happy. The fate of those whose life is at stake is really not in their hands.

The poem at one level speaks of harmonious coexistence achieved through diplomatic intervention. Of course, in nature one cannot expect both tiger and sheep drinking water from the same pond. It goes against the logic of nature's equilibrium. Take for instance, one of Aesop's fables, "The Lion and the Goat" where the lion and the goat quarrel over who should go first to the water fountain to quench their thirst. In the fable, they are determined to fight one another till death, till they see vultures hovering over them waiting for one of them to fall so they could become food for the vultures. Finally, the lion and the goat decide to patch up and not be foolish and die in a quarrel. The story of the sheep and the tigers presented in the poem by Kolatkar has an uncanny resemblance to Aesop's story. We know that the sheep can never be friends with the tiger. Yet, Ajamil was able to achieve the impossible and reach conciliation. Yet how? He bribed the tigers with gifts and some sheep.

Now, read the poem as a social and political satire, and it would take a different dimension altogether. Seen from this angle, one could argue that Ajamil represents the state, and thus acts as the state's agent. He could be the middleman, the broker, who has to deal with the crooks, whose job it is to protect the common people and who maintains an entire section of deputies or watchdogs working for the state. The sheep dog could as well be the ordinary honest man who does not understand double dealing, yet becomes a part of the network of corruption. Unknowingly, he becomes an agent of vice who facilitates the work of people like Ajamil. What about the tigers? They represent the corrupt elements in society whose nexus grew by the day in independent India. They could be Dacoits, criminals or the moneyed sections having power and influence. The tigers, confident and bold seem to hold everyone in their power. These people must be placated. They are the rogues who want their share in everything. The Bombay scene of criminals and hooligans that was a nascent group in the 1970s but became formidable in the decades to come is prophetically captured here. The whole scene changes to a precarious Bombay life where different kinds of stakeholders fight for their share and use cunning and deceit to get by. The poem thus speaks of a deeper systemic malaise operative in society. Reality suddenly becomes complex and difficult to understand. The silent sheep remain the victim and go unnoticed in the poem. They neither have a say nor a role to play in matters that affect their lives. What could be more ironical?

The idea of sacrifice and compromise are also presented with equal weight in the poem. If we focused on these from a religious-ethical point of view, the poem would appear to be a narrative of sacrifice for god and compromise as the essence of life. However, the question is—Does the poet approve of the sacrifice made by Ajamil or the compromise that was reached between him and the tiger-king? Is the poet showing in fact a realistic version of the story, suggesting that in today's world diplomacy and cunning go hand in hand? Who is the guilty one here? Finally, who lost and who won—Ajamil and the tigers who won or that the sheep who suffered a serious loss? Do you think the issue got resolved? All these questions get raised as we read the poem. This makes the poem thought-provoking. The more we think about these issues, the better we shall grasp the truth of our world. The poem brings to our notice how the law of the land was changing at the time, and how deceit and trickery became the order of the day.

In another poem titled “Crabs”, Kolatkar deploys the image of crabs as threats. The poem begins in a dramatic way “Look, look./ Just look at them. /The crabs. / There are two of them./ They’re keeping watch/on whom, you ask?/ on you of course,/who else?”. Again, the meaning is unclear but Kolatkar imaginatively gives colour to the dramatic scene and alerts the reading, saying, “They’re going to eat your eyes”. The image of the crabs has to be decoded and it is never clear in the poem what these crabs represent. On his part, Kolatkar tells us that there are entire sections in society operating in a hidden manner out to grab and kill those who challenge the powers that be.

Kolatkar’s poetic practice was critical of the elements of tradition, lineage and folklore on the one hand and bohemianism, alternate culture and imagism on the other. With the advantage of being an artist, Kolatkar could create word-pictures that moved and spoke. He experimented with these and in some cases made poetry out of such details. These corroborate the acumen and skill of the poet. Importantly, Kolatkar would not compromise on his perspective while experimenting with the poetic form.

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### 3.5 AGHA SHAHID ALI: AN INTRODUCTION

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Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001) was a Kashmiri poet who was born in a highly educated and well to do family in Srinagar. He grew up in Srinagar and received his early education there. Shahid Ali studied at the University of Kashmir to complete his Bachelor’s degree and attained his Master’s degree from Hindu College of Delhi University. Shahid Ali taught in Delhi University for a while before leaving the country to pursue his Phd. from Pennsylvania in 1975. Later, he moved to Arizona to pursue a course in creative writing. This was followed by a period of teaching in various colleges and universities in the US and settled down there. He wrote all his poems in English, and considered English as his first language and Urdu his mother tongue. This gave him the identity of an Indian American poet. He became an American citizen in 2001, and the same year died of brain cancer in Amherst, Massachusetts. His poems had a universal appeal even as Kashmir loomed large in them. The range and variety of his poems speak for his inclusive vision. Partly because of the exposure he received in his growing up years, he drew inspiration from various sources. The largely secular and western atmosphere around him made him adopt a multicultural outlook. The subjects of his poems range from museums and historical places to happenings in Damascus and Chile. He was equally stirred by art cinema, American pop music, Indian classical music, film bhajans and Ghazals. The dynamic personality of Agha Shahid Ali combined with his sensitivity and intensity of expression to make him a poet of vast appeal.

He wrote political poems that spoke of inequality and injustice in society. He also translated the poems of the revolutionary Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz; these were published as a collection titled *The Rebel’s Silhouette* (1992). His career of three decades as a poet is marked by a large number of collections, notable among them being *Bone Sculpture* and *A Walk Through Yellow Pages*.

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### 3.5 “POSTCARD FROM KASHMIR”: AN ANALYSIS

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Taken from the collection *The Half-inch Himalayas*, the poem “Postcard from Kashmir” speaks of the poets’ changing relation with the place he calls home. It

is about how an entire lived experience of his children has shrunk in the size of a postcard. Let us have a look at it:

“Postcard from Kashmir”

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's waters so clean,  
So ultramarine. My love  
So overexposed.

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

In this poem, Shahid Ali looks back nostalgically at his country of birth and more particularly the Kashmir he knew. The postcard in the present case is all he has as a reminder of his motherland. Kashmir has fitted neatly into a post card of four by six inches unlike the reality which is complex and far from diverse. The poem juxtaposes what is and what appears to be the reality in Kashmir. Also, being away from Kashmir, in a distant land of the United States, the poet's perspective has changed. The towering presence of the Himalayas seen from Kashmir occupies a space of half an inch on the postcard. The perspective of distance has enabled the poet to look at it objectively. Yet, he cannot do that sufficiently well because the memory he carries is way stronger than the present-day conditions. With distance, the perspective becomes broader and more comprehensive. What does the poet see? The poet compares the picture of Kashmir on the postcard with the one he carries in his mind that is “a giant negative, black and white, still undeveloped”. Note that the photograph in his mind is “giant” unlike the postcard that is small. The photograph of his mind has not been printed yet, it has remained undeveloped in the photographer's studio. Pitched against these two images (of the poet's mind and that carried in the postcard) is the third image of the actual Kashmir, which the poet would not be able to relate with, even if he decided to go back home. As he says, when I return, “The colours won't be so brilliant, /The Jhelum's waters so clean, /So ultramarine”. There is also the suggestion that the picture in his mind is as brilliant, clean and ultramarine as the one represented in the postcard: “this is the closest/I'll ever be to home”.

The implication is that the actual Kashmir has lost its brilliance and beauty. It is no more a place the poet can call his home. An uneasy relation with the past as also with the home one has left behind is predominant in the poem. Looked at as a **Diaspora** (see glossary) poem, it has the stock themes of divided cultural and national identities, memories and nostalgia, in addition to an altered perspective of the subject as well as the mingling of the east and west. At a political level, Shahid Ali always remained disturbed by the unfolding situation in Kashmir and the struggles of its people during the 1990s. In an imaginative sweep, the poet wrote the prose poem “Dear Shahid” where his grief is amply projected. To quote an excerpt from the poem—

*Dear Shahid:*

I am writing to you from your far-off country.

Far even from us who live here

Where you no longer are.

Everyone carries his address in his pocket

At least his body will reach home.

The tension in the Kashmir valley is aptly suggested through these lines where life is precarious and uncertain. In a lot of his poems on Kashmir and those speaking of his parents, Shahid Ali deploys the narrative form as if he were recounting a story and then in the middle of it, he adds images to the narrative to fulfill the poem’s poetic journey. He goes back often in such poems to his childhood or to a time when he wasn’t born for bringing out the histories as he saw them. Those included the specific episodes dealing with his ancestors, parents and the common people of the place. There is nostalgia and a deep sense of pain attached with his response. In the poem “Snowmen” Shahid Ali begins with, “My ancestors, a man/ Of Himalayan snow,/ Came to Kashmir from Samarkand,/ Carrying a bag,/ Of whale bones”. In another poem titled “A Dream of Glass Bangles” Shahid Ali revives a traumatic moment of his childhood—“those autumns my parents slept/ warm in a quilt studded/with pieces of mirrors/ on my mother’s arms were bangles/like waves of frozen rivers” and soon the scene shifts to “the air a quicksand of snow/ as my father stepped out/ and my mother/ inside the burning house/ a widow smashing the rivers/ on her arms”. There is a strong imprint of the very personal perceptions of the poet in the scenes described here which suddenly turn from soft moments into tragedy.

Novelist Amitav Ghosh wrote about the impact of Shahid Ali’s poetry saying, “His 1997 Collection, *The Country Without a Post Office*, had a powerful impression on me. His voice was like none I had ever heard before, at once lyrical and fiercely disciplined, engaged and yet deeply inward. Not for him the mock-casual almost-prose of so much contemporary poetry: his was a voice that was not ashamed to speak in a bardic register”. This is an apt description of Shahid Ali’s genius. The poems dealing with home and Kashmir particularly are of this strain and move the reader immensely. His style is personal and suggestive while his vision is cosmopolitan. Images and narratives merge in his poetry, and the emotional sweep of the poems make this poet particularly appealing. The pain expressed by him in his verses is impressive for its outreach and concern.

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### 3.7 LET US SUM UP

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The dark surrealistic style of Kolatkar with a hint of irony suggests that Indian English poetry has evolved a great deal and has formed a distinct style of its own. Without the self-consciousness of their predecessors, the contemporary Indian poets writing in English freely borrow the techniques and styles of the western poets without accepting their perspective. The vision is essentially Indian as also the concerns of the poet. We can see that with Kolatkar Indian English poetry has come of age. In Agha Shahid Ali's case we find that the personal and the political are aesthetically united. His perspective is historical and his themes inclusive. He has a rare intensity of emotion that he can skillfully and effectively articulate. This goes deeper than sentimentality. Even as grief carries the force in his poetry, it is seldom existential or self-referential. Even though diverse in concerns, the two poets discussed in this unit project an image of objectively reading the cultural scene in contemporary India with engagement.

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### 3.8 GLOSSARY

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<b>Allegory</b>	:	a creative piece that has a story running at two distinct levels—the literal level and the metaphorical.
<b>Fable and Parable</b>	:	a fable is a short story that consists of animals as central characters who converse with one another. Fables have a moral behind them. A parable is also a short story but one that does not involve animals as characters. A moral purpose always works behind it.
<b>Diaspora</b>	:	literature of the diaspora refers to literary works written by those whose country of origin is different from their country of residence. Diaspora authors are those who have settled outside their native country and yet are constantly haunted by the memories of the home.

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### 3.9 QUESTIONS

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- 1) Write a note on the concerns of Indian English Poetry in the post-independence poetry.
- 2) Comment on the use of irony in the poem "Ajamil and the Tigers".
- 3) Kolatkar has deployed the form of the fable to comment on the political reality of India at the time. Discuss.
- 4) Agha Shahid Ali's poem "Postcard from Kashmir" projects three images of Kashmir. Explain these in the light of the discussion in this unit.
- 5) Write a note on Kashmir as an overarching theme in the poetry of Shahid Ali.

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Arun Kolatkar and Agha  
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## UNIT 4 DILIP CHITRE AND KEKI N. DARUWALLA

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### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Dilip Chitre: An Introduction
- 4.3 Dilip Chitre's Poem "Ode to Bombay"
- 4.4 Keki N. Daruwalla: An Introduction
- 4.5 Keki N. Daruwalla's Poem "Chinar"
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 References
- 4.9 Suggested Readings

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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The unit is meant to acquaint you with the phenomenon of the 1980s and 90s in India's cultural life in general and Indian poetry in particular. In the context, the poets analyzed in the present unit speak of the concerns of this era as life became increasingly opportunity-centric and literature looked inwards to point at its own incapacities. Dilip Chitre and Keki N. Daruwalla are the poets we shall be focusing upon in this unit. You would be able to notice in the poems analyzed here a shift in thematic concerns and change of the poetic style. Importantly, during the period, disillusionment among poets turned to cynicism as there was little that inspired writers. They took to expressing ordinary themes and wistfully looked at life.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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As has been mentioned in the previous units, Indian English Poetry became more and more self-oriented in the post-Independence period. It turned to self-interrogation and focused on creating an identity for it, particularly distancing itself from the concerns of the poor and deprived. Indian English poetry tried to emulate the western literary trends and chose to merge with what was considered mainstream writing. In order to make a mark for itself and to be seen as a distinct entity, Indian English poetry had to generate a new kind of expression by turning to customs and traditions; those would be redefined and made relevant. Linguistic skills were attended to with gusto. The formal in writing was sought to be replaced by the popular and aggressive. The writers of the 1960s made the individual a common reference point to which the poet returned after having traversed other areas of interest. The issue of identity was sorted out in this manner. Kamala Das, and later Eunice de Souza brought in freshness of ideas and created a concrete feminist framework for literary emphasis. Later still, came on the scene poets making a choice to be political in their stance—both Agha Shahid Ali and Arun Kolatkar in their own way made it a point to comment on the problems of the day. Likewise, A.K. Ramanujan made Indian poetry crisp and succinct. His care with language and a humanist perspective gave the required push to Indian English

poetry. In Dilip Chitre, the urban westernized perspective is more pronounced and there is a blurring of the poetic position as he persists with the artistic world and shuns social concerns. In Daruwalla there is both sophistication and a humanist approach that forces the fellow writers to take a second look at their roles. Initiative and sense of independence are the markers of contemporary Indian English poetry. Shirish Chindhade has observed that “It is a paradoxical fact that Indian poetry in English has flourished with the native colours, situations and experience chiefly after independence. It has boldly divorced itself from the mainstream of English poetry in an effort to be an independent entity and has emerged as part of ‘Indian’ literature (28).

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## 4.2 DILIP CHITRE: AN INTRODUCTION

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Dilip Chitre (1938-2009) was born in Vadodra, Gujarat. Although his mother tongue was Marathi, he knew Gujarati equally well, and because of his early education in a Jesuit school he learnt English when young. He was well versed in Hindustani language, too, that was spoken in a larger part of the country in the pre-independence period, Chitre attained a comprehensive view of Indian cultures and languages owing to the different places he stayed in his formative years. When he was twelve, his family moved to Bombay. Exposure to many languages enabled Dilip Chitre to take up for expression both Marathi and English. He also translated Marathi works into English. He is best known for his translations of the Bhakti poet Tukaram. A writer, critic, translator, and filmmaker, Chitre also penned a novel titled *Morphysus*. He was a leading figure in the “Little Magazine” movement that took shape in Marathi literature.

Two things find specific mention in Chitre’s poetry, the urban surroundings and broader social concerns. We are struck by his stress on the modern outlook that is critical of the mundane. He has successfully delinked himself from the values of the National Movement. It is the emerging India that takes his attention. It is progressive in the apparent sense. At the same time though, the erosion of modernity in outlook worries him. Not to shed tears for peace and harmony being targeted by the neo-rich in the country, Chitre would have us take a position on the drift happening towards dogma. He appears to be a misfit in his surroundings that are pressed hard by the mighty in society. This may have taken him to the solace in the saint poet Tukaram. So far as social concerns are concerned, Chitre is not with the model of planned development. He sees in it an increasing influence of the state. The poet in Chitre would find powers of the regime daunting since there lie the many restrictions on free enterprise and dynamism. The way left in the context is of seeking shelter in the world of art. It is also noteworthy that Chitre would not be sufficiently aware of the pitfalls of the Cold War active in literature. He was a known votary of keeping literature outside the pale of social influence and commitment. For him, it would be better if the writer confined himself to the world of individual sensitivity and the processes of the mind.

Chitre’s first collection of Marathi poems was published in 1960 titled *Kavita*. His English poetry collections include, *Ambulance Ride* (1972), *Travelling in a Cage* (1980), *The Mountain* (1998), *No Moon on the River Karha* (2000), *Post-climactic Love Poems* (2005), and *As Is, Where Is: Selected Poems* (2007), among others. His translation of Tukaram’s poems under the title *Says Tuka* (1991) and the book *Shri Jnande’s Anubhavamrut: The Immortal Experience of Being* (1996)

drew critical notice. For him, the postcolonial era opened up new avenues to establish intercultural discourse. He considered it a “truly pluralistic global literary tradition” (126). In many ways, Chitre represented this pluralistic global tradition in writing. Being a poet from urban background, Chitre speaks from the point of view of the modern upper-middle class that saw life from the prism of the metropolis. In the urban centres, he recognized diversity. At the same time, he finds himself alone, often isolated. This leads him on to the path of cynicism. In his poems, the immediate moment is crucial, the here and now, which expands to include the commonly experienced emotion, the universal experience. Even when he offers a view of space and time, it is either a generic view or specifically meant for the urban city-dweller. Consider how Chitre outlines this idea in the poem “Absence from Myself”—

Spaces, spaces, spaces  
 Time leaves no detail untouched  
 And time takes all details away  
 My ancestors and so is my successor  
 That leaves me no space but here and now.

The “here and now” is the focus of the poem where the poet is placed between ancestors and his successors both of whom are dead and the poet alone is alive. The poem in your course “Ode to Bombay” also engages with the question of the present moment and its transience as also the question of life and death. Both are of ephemeral nature. At one level, the poem is about the city, then Bombay. He associated this place along with other metropolitan cities as governed by ideas of ambition and acquisition. The spread of ambition and acquisition that make the citizens alienated in their surroundings do harm to the mental health of society. We need to critically evaluate the poet’s point of view and think about the causes behind such an assessment of contemporary India. Does he approve or disapprove of such circumstances? Does he remain non-committal? This would bring us closer to the worldview of a writer. Let’s look specifically at the poem in our course and gain clarity on the issue.

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### **4.3 DILIP CHITRE’S POEM “ODE TO BOMBAY”**

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Let us read the poem.

“Ode to Bombay”

I had promised you a poem before I died  
 Diamonds storming out of the blackness of a piano  
 Piece by piece I fall at my own dead feet  
 Releasing you like a concerto from my silence  
 I unfasten your bridges from my insistent bones  
 Free your railway lines from my desperate veins  
 Dismantle your crowded tenements and meditating machines  
 Remove your temples and brothels pinned in my skull

You go out of me in a pure spiral of stars  
A funeral progressing towards the end of time  
Innumerable petals of flame undress your dark  
Continuous stem of growing

I walk out of murders and riots  
I fall out of smouldering biographies  
I sleep on a bed of burning languages  
Sending you up in your essential fire and smoke  
Piece by piece at my own feet I fall  
Diamonds storm out of a black piano

Once I promised you an epic  
And now you have robbed me  
You reduced me to rubble  
This concerto ends.

By convention, an ode is a poem addressing a particular person, season or place. The ode is lyrical and might be sung. It does not follow a particular meter or rhyme scheme and is irregular in pattern. It is made a poem by the tone the poet adopts or a picture and image the poet uses to communicate something important for the benefit of the listener. That description is wholly sustained by the “Ode to Bombay” in which the city with the name Bombay is spoken to. The poet speaker is the observer and has the city in front of him which engages him and binds him to the place. The poem begins with the writer making the statement “I had promised you a poem before I died.” The tone is personal. The question arises, why the poet brings in the theme of death in the opening line? See the queries arising from the mention of death. Is the poem precisely about death that may apply to the poet, and by association to the city as well? If we move to the third line, we note that the writer refers to his own dead feet and releases the city (you) from there. The sole purpose is to share with the city the loss of quality suffered by the speaker. It is not a simple poem. The word that comes to mind about the piano is a conscious selection of the details of the picture. It poses problems. For instance, the piano has black keys but the poet has turned that into blackness. To complicate it further, diamonds are shown as storming out piece by piece. The link of concerto with the piano is logical—the instrument gives out a musical composition with the poet’s silence being its medium. Once again though, the help is offered by the poet as silence has a close affinity with death. Indeed, one might call the first stanza entirely devoted to the subject of death through a metaphor that is extended further to cover a whole variety of details in the city’s life. Those are—bridges, bones, railway lines, dismantling of tenements or small structures keeping company with temples, where people go to worship, and to brothels that symbolize carnal pleasure. Imagine the vast range of the first stanza and likewise of the city under view. All this is achieved through deployment of the metaphor of death.

The poem explores the conflicting relation the poet has with the city of Bombay that excites him and at the same time hurts him. There is both endearment and detachment experienced by the poet for this city. In this city, diamonds fall from blackness—"Diamonds storming out of the blackness of a piano". This is how the poet visualizes the city of Bombay. What does this reference suggest? At one level, it is a reference to the city of dreams that Bombay became famous for during the latter half of the twentieth century. Bombay was the place of glamour, films, arts and commercial cinema where people with starry eyes came from all parts of the country to fulfill their dreams. It became a symbol of gaining quick success and fame. See that diamonds aptly project the city, they shine against the background of a musical note such as that of a piano. At another level the phrase stands in sharp contrast to what follows it: "Piece by piece I fall at my own dead feet". The picture of glamour and amazement is replaced by the poet breaking apart as if he were made of pieces that begin to fall. It is an expression of how the city has broken him, shattered him and taken away from him his own being. A similar expression occurs in the closing lines of the poem—"you have robbed me/ You reduced me to rubble". There is a constant reiteration that the city has consumed the poet and reduced him to what he calls a rubble. It has taken the essential human quality from him and yet this deserves to be called an epic according to the poet, as he claims: "Once I promised you an epic." The poem is worthy of being sung in an ode. The complete destruction of the poem is the final stroke with which the concerto ends—the concerto of the poet's own destruction and death.

Meanwhile the poet remains engaged with the city for it seems to have an overwhelming presence in the poem—as if poet were a lover and the city a beloved. It is clear from the poem that the poet finds himself in the clutches of the city and wishes to break free from it. He says, "I unfasten your bridges from my insistent bones/Free your railway lines from my desperate veins". There is also the suggestion that the city has entered his very being, in his veins and bones, and that he can barely escape its influence. The reference to railway lines and machines tells us that the city is moving towards industrialization and turning mechanized. The poet finds the new life almost unbearable, yet he is stuck to the place. The only way he can sever ties with the city is in death—"You go out of me in a pure spiral of stars /A funeral progressing towards the end of time". Note that the poet has lived to see riots and murders that abound in the city "I walk out of murders and riots". He knows the city's brothels and its underbelly. These leave an impact on him as he helplessly goes over them, "I fall out of smouldering biographies/ I sleep on a bed of burning languages". He cannot come out unscathed from these as he says he breaks into pieces and the pieces fall on his feet. The picture in the poem turns violent as also oppressive, and yet there is a sense of moving on. The wide range of the poem makes it appear as a concerto with its high and low notes, its climactic moment and its tragic close. It appears like a musical composition where the poet is the composer, narrator, observer and the victim. The strong force of the city of Bombay acts upon him and consumes him. The subject poet is a passive entity, a site on which this dramatic composition is played. The city of Bombay is the active agent that has its way and has capability to destroy the poet subject.

In the poem, we come across the attitude of despair that might remind us of English poets such as T.S. Eliot. Indeed, Eliot was there in the cultural air in that period and had entered the English syllabi in India's universities. Look at the

images in the poem and compare them with those in Eliot, particularly the ones he wrote around the time of the First World War. One might specifically refer to the *Waste Land*.

Let us now turn our attention to another poet who deploys locales skillfully and makes them palpable like human beings with the situations in which they are placed. We observe that places are not outside the influence of human beings, as independent geographical entities with no social characteristics enshrined in them. They are invariably merged with human motives, aims and aspirations and express the dynamic of life the same way as humans carry in their gestures the flavour and fragrance of the places. Let us see how far it may be true of the poet Daruwalla.

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#### 4.4 KEKI N. DARUWALLA: AN INTRODUCTION

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Born in 1937 in Lahore that later became a part of Pakistan, Keki N. Daruwalla grew up in an educated Parsi family that moved to Junagarh in 1945. His father was a professor in the Government College, Lahore and the family constantly kept moving from one place to another. Keki Daruwalla kept changing different schools to keep pace with the movement in the family. In consequence, the young man who would one day become a poet gained deeper knowledge of the world of words, images and the sound patterns inherent in the social circumstance. The result was that Keki N. Daruwalla, as he grew up, became well versed in English, Hindi, Gujarati and Punjabi, and attained a working knowledge of Urdu which he studied for two years in school. For Daruwalla, English is very much an Indian language that has over decades been coloured by the local idiom. It easily fits in with other languages.

In 1958, Daruwalla joined the Indian police service and grew in rank to become the special assistant to the prime minister on international affairs. He was engaged in cabinet secretariat roles till retirement. A recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award which he won in 1984 for his collection *The Keeper of the Dead*, Daruwalla took up for depiction in his poetry the marginalized communities much like his own to comment on life. He is often seen as a landscape poet whose poetic vision is expansive as his scenes vary from Moscow and England to Kashmir and Banaras. The natural world and its depth remain engaging subjects for Daruwalla who finds that pictures of a place add to the feel of a region, bringing to life its community and people. The two are in fact inseparable in his poems. According to James Finn Cotter, Daruwalla has combined “perfect narrative tension with psychological perception, so that the reader is drawn into the scene and then let go”. Take for instance his *Crossing the Rivers*. It is rich in vivid descriptions that are at the same time symbolic. As he claims in the Introduction to *Two Decades of Indian Poetry 1960-1980*, “My poems are rooted in landscape which anchors the poem. The landscape is not merely meant there to set the scene but to lead to an illumination. It should be the eye of the spiral. I try that poetry relates to the landscape, both on the physical, and on the plane of the spirit. For me a riot-stricken town is landscape (21). This identification of the place with a feeling and an event is typical of Daruwalla’s writing. You as young readers would be able to trace it in the specific poem meant for study in your course.

Daruwalla’s ten volumes of poetry include, *Under Orion* (1970), *Apparition in April* (1971), *Crossing the Rivers* (1976), *Winter Poems* (1980), *The Keeper of*

*the Dead* (1982), *Landscapes* (winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Award, 1987) *A Summer of Tigers* (1995), *The Map Maker*, *The Scarecrow and the Ghost* (2004). His stories have been collected in *Sword and Abyss* (1979) and *The Minister for Permanent Unrest and Other Stories*. He has also written a novel *Pepper and Christ*. Daruwalla was awarded the Padmi Shri in 2014.

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#### 4.5 KEKI N. DARUWALLA’S POEM “CHINAR”

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The poem “Chinar” by Daruwalla is a fine example of landscape poetry. It evokes the image of the tree chinar and that gets extended to Kashmir. It also brings alive the river Jhelum and the lakes of Kashmir. At the same time, the moment of dusk when the faint light touches all the static elements is vividly evoked in the poem—the visual imagery that sets him apart from other poets of his generation. Let us now read the poem.

##### “Chinar”

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.

The title of the poem “Chinar” is indicative both of nature and social place. It is linked with the arrival of autumn in Kashmir. The indications come from words such as “dry rain” and “sapless branch” that characterize the season’s change. We note that the poet does with effort catch nuances of the season and of contemporary history. There is something in nature that leaves him dissatisfied



with it. We are fascinated by mention of the eye of the lake and the running eye of Jhelum. The two are one and yet different. The former is relatively fixed and the latter is a symbol of movement. The active river is connected with the crinkled leaves of the chinar. Has the water of the river not reached the trees that stand next to it? Is it a metaphor of the source not giving life to the surroundings? In an answer to this, we may say that for the poet, something inexplicable has happened to the valley and its inhabitants. Chinar is a symbol of the people of Kashmir who are strong and dignified but have lost verve and positive spirit over time.

The poet is consistent in his use of the details that speak as loud as the words in the poem. Take a look at the first stanza. What is signified by the dusk of the chinar? Does the word denote change or decline? It might speak of the mix of the hopeful and its opposite. For the poet, as stressed earlier, chinar is more than a tree, it is a cultural icon of stability and strength. Its shade is protective and sheltering, yielding a soothing space that preserves life. If all these are threatened in a specific situation, the different parts of the tree will have to bear the weight of the issues confronting the community of Kashmiris. Additionally, what does the sunset stand for? Does it give character to the place or the tree that is affected by it? The two questions draw a line of distinction between the two, the tree and the season, but we remain aware of the sense of distance between them. That gives the reader a sense of unease. For us, it is not a sense of wonder but of worry. The poem is subtle in its message and the writer's sympathies appear to lie with that possible integration between nature and social life which is sadly missing at the time the poem is composed. We realize that the poem symbolizes a disturbed scene in nature carrying the burden of political turmoil and turbulence in the region. In a positive way, the writer visualizes the state of things as community-oriented. Thus, the selection of the symbol helps us understand the discourse as secular and material, not airy and ephemeral.

To us, the poem has steered clear of the mysticism that is a cliché often used about consciousness of the people. The poet has a sense of control running through the poem in terms of a bond of nature. A careful avoidance of political divides and ideological gaps between the hegemonic ideas of the nation and those of the highly sensitive periphery ensures a deft balance; it keeps the poem stuck to the theme of pain and worry than of suggesting easy solutions. How the identity of the place gets merged with the mission of joining a broader politics of nationalism comes to the fore as the poem proceeds towards the end. The same are observed in the poem "Chinar" that you have for reading and analyzing. Note that the poet is barely visible in the poem. He offers to us a description of a moment—the transition of seasons and of the day, as dusk takes over. The image of transition is central to the poem. And yet the poet is not at the centre of it. The absence of the 'I' in the poem makes one aware that the poet is nowhere talking about himself or the impact that the scene has on him—he is somewhere on the sidelines from where he observes the phenomenon. Of course, the poetic voice is present in the way things are projected. The poet remains hidden but not his viewpoint that helps in shaping the poem. The conscious choice to remain in the background is part of Daruwalla's larger politics. His poems are seldom self-referential, that is, the focus of the poem is not the poet but the place he is describing. He foregrounds the picture that begins to speak independently to the reader with minimal intervention of the poet. Even as the descriptions are the poet's, the interpretation appears to be that of the reader. This adds to the aesthetic quality of the poem.

Shirish Chindhade, while referring to Daruwalla's poem "Boatride along the Ganga" (from the collection *Crossing the River*) and specifically the lines "What plane of destiny have I arrived at/ where corpse-fire and cooking-fires burn side by side", has observed that,

Daruwalla's lines embody an entire mode of faith embraced by a people. This kind of intense awareness of his environment and its roots is what precisely makes Daruwalla an authentically or legitimately 'Indian' poet—not even an urban poet but the poet of his native hills, plains, rivers and faiths. (11)

Here, Chindhade has emphasised the 'Indianness' and authenticity of expression in Daruwalla, his Parsi identity notwithstanding. On the other hand, Chindhade is of the opinion that "Chitre, though born and brought up in the Indian culture" fails to find his "roots here" (123). Even as Daruwalla spent most of his time in urban centres, he is hardly an urban poet, quite different though from Chitre in whom urbanity is quite pronounced.

About Daruwalla's poetic sensibility, Norman Simms has observed that "by meaning less than it speaks, the [Daruwalla] poem is more than its words: what it signifies is less than what it designates". Brevity of expression enhances the meaning of his poems. His is a poetry of keen observation and social comment. Daruwalla seldom writes political poetry, yet he is often satirical towards blind faith and superstition. His poetry springs from various cultures, projecting myths and legends that abound in Indian life. He takes a critical look at the phenomenon with a humanist's eye. Even as some of his poems appear word-heavy containing complex image structures, his poetic craft is not compromised as the meaning of the poem is taken to its logical end. Add to this the fact that his vision is of a liberal humanist; it keeps the poem open-ended. There is a diversity of subject matter in Daruwalla, and the poet portrays the concerns sensitively. While being rooted in reality, Daruwalla takes the actual experience and feeling to a mystical level where the poetic spirit gets specifically projected. Daruwalla is conscious of the use of word-structures, images and the voices submerged in the situation he deals with. He sensitively combines these under an honest liberal perspective.

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## 4.6 LET US SUM UP

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This unit has provided an analysis of the poems "Ode to Bombay" and "Chinar" by Dilip Chitre and K.N. Daruwalla respectively. The thematic concerns of both poets might have become clearer to you in the process. These two poets provide a concrete view of Indian English poetry as the concerns expressed in them have an allegiance to the urban experience. Their poetry is influenced by the larger trends active in our culture. There is a conscious attempt in them to stick to the roots and to the place one might call one's home. This gives uniqueness to their works. Chitre draws inspiration from the universally felt emotion in his reach. In the case of Daruwalla, the projection of the place and its people together create urgency. Keki N. Daruwalla belongs to the same period as Dilip Chitre. That gives us an opportunity to go into their respective sensibilities and see their distinctions as well as similarities. Daruwalla has a marked streak of rationality and value-based social stand. He is highly sensitive to the needs of culture in modern surroundings and alive to the humanist values existing in our world.

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## 4.7 QUESTIONS

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- 1) Comment on the metaphor of death in the poem “Ode to Bombay”.
- 2) What is an Ode? Is the title of Chitre’s poem justified in your view?
- 3) Comment on the use of the landscape in the poems of K.N. Daruwalla and Dilip Chitre.
- 4) Discuss the symbol of Chinar in Daruwalla’s poem.

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