

Block

2

FORMS OF PROSE: SHORT STORIES AND ESSAYS

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BLOCK 2 INTRODUCTION

In this our second Block of the course on Understanding Prose (BEGE-141) we have taken up two major forms of prose i.e. the Short Story and the Essay.

In **Unit 1** we've taken up a very poignant short story 'Misery' by Anton Chekhov, who is a master in the art of story telling.

In **Unit 2** we have chosen another interesting story by Judah Waten entitled 'Mother'.

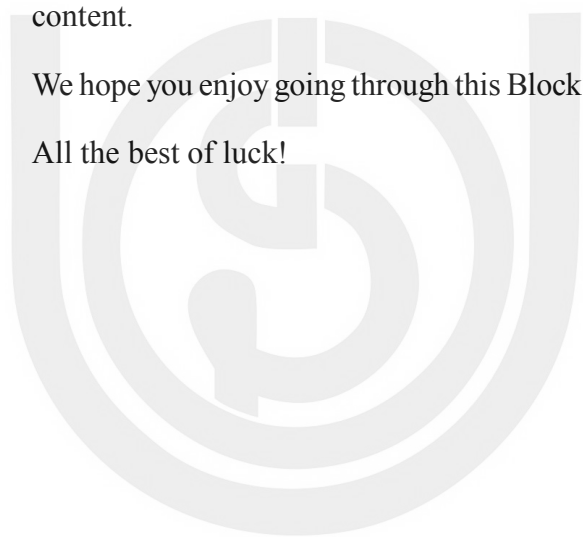
In **Unit 3** we have taken up an essay by George Orwell entitled 'Shooting an Elephant'.

Last but not the least, in **Unit 4** we have a very interesting essay 'On Seeing England for the First Time' by Jamaica Kincaid.

In examining the essay we will deal mainly with two questions: What has the writer to say? And how does he say it? The first involves the theme or the subject matter and the second is the style or the manner of presentation of the content.

We hope you enjoy going through this Block as much as we did putting it together.

All the best of luck!



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UNIT 1 ‘MISERY’ – ANTON CHEKHOV

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 ‘Misery’
 - 1.2.1 Text
 - 1.2.2 Glossary
- 1.3 Discussion
- 1.4 Style
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading the story and this Unit carefully, you should be able to

- look at the story in terms of human misery
- understand the meaning and significance of the title ‘Misery’
- appreciate the simple narrative prose style of Anton Chekhov

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov is a well-known Russian short story writer and playwright. He was born on January 29, 1860 and died at the early age of 44 in 1904. He was a doctor by profession and a writer by temperament and aptitude. He once said, “Medicine is my wife and literature is my mistress.” He began by writing short humorous stories for journals, and light one-act comedies. Among the greatest of his mature short stories are ‘Ward No. Six’ (1892), ‘Gooseberries’ (1898) and ‘The Lady with the Little Dog’ (1899). Plays like *Uncle Vanya* (1900), *Three Sisters*, (1901) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) are considered classics of world drama. He wrote sympathetically about characters of all classes, the bored upper classes as well as the deprived poor. His work is known for its unique combination of comedy, tragedy and pathos. Chekhov has enjoyed great popularity in England. English translations of his works started appearing as early as 1903, and influenced leading playwrights and fiction writers.

Chekhov is considered the most important influence on the development of the modern short story. His stories dispensed with plot; he concentrated on what is happening in the minds of his characters, their “stream of consciousness”, rather than external incidents. He was an early practitioner of the “stream of consciousness” technique used by novelists like Henry James, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. In Chekhov, plot is subordinate to character. Because the short story as a form is too short for the development of character, Chekhov’s stories focus on a particular mood. This new way of writing a story at times poses difficulties to the reader. Chekhov defended his open-ended stories saying “the role of an artist is to ask questions and not to answer them”.

The story 'Misery', first published in 1886, does not pose any difficulty as it deals with an experience that touches all of us at some point in our lifetime. Let us now read the story, in an English translation by Ralph E. Matlaw.

1.2 'MISERY'

1.2.1 Text

"To whom shall I tell my grief?"

The twilight of evening. Big flakes of wet snow are whirling lazily about the street lamps, which have just been lighted, and lying in a thin soft layer on roofs, horses' backs, shoulders, caps. Iona Potapov, the **sledge**-driver, is all white like a ghost. He sits on the box without stirring, bent as double as the living body can be bent. If a regular **snowdrift** fell on him it seems as though even then he would not think it necessary to shake it off. . . His little mare is white and motionless too. Her stillness, the angularity of her lines, and the stick-like straightness of her legs make her look like a **halfpenny gingerbread horse**. She is probably **lost in thought**. Anyone who has been torn away from the plough, from the familiar gray landscapes, and cast into this **slough**, full of monstrous lights, of unceasing uproar and hurrying people, is bound to think.

It is a long time since Iona and his **nag** have **budged**. They came out of the **yard** before dinnertime and not a single fare yet. But now the shades of evening are falling on the town. The pale light of the street lamps changes to a vivid color, and the bustle of the street grows noisier.

"Sledge to Vyborgskaya!" Iona hears. "Sledge!"

Iona starts, and through his snow-plastered eyelashes sees an officer in a military overcoat with a hood over his head.

"To Vyborgskaya," repeats the officer. "Are you asleep? To Vyborgskaya!"

In token of assent Iona gives a tug at the reins which sends cakes of snow flying from the horse's back and shoulders. The officer gets into the sledge. The sledge-driver clicks to the horse, cranes his neck like a swan, rises in his seat, and more from habit than necessity **brandishes** his whip. The mare cranes her neck, too, crooks her stick-like legs, and hesitatingly sets off. . . .

"Where are you shoving, you devil?" Iona immediately hears shouts from the dark mass shifting to and fro before him. "Where the devil are you going? Keep to the right!"

"You don't know how to drive! Keep to the right," says the officer angrily.

A coachman driving a carriage swears at him; a **pedestrian** crossing the road and brushing the horse's nose with his shoulder looks at him angrily and shakes the snow off his sleeve. Iona **fidgets** on the box as though he were sitting on thorns, jerks his elbows, and turns his eyes about like one **possessed** as though he did not know where he was or why he was there.

"What rascals they all are!" says the officer **jocosely**. "They are simply doing their best to run up against you or fall under the horse's feet. They must be doing it on purpose."

Iona looks at his fare and moves his lips. . . . Apparently he means to say something, but nothing comes but a **sniff**.

"What?" enquires the officer.

Iona gives a wry smile, and straining his throat, brings out **huskily**: "My son . . . er . . . my son died this week, sir."

"H'm! What did he die of?"

Iona turns his whole body round to his fare, and says:

"Who can tell! It must have been from fever. . . . He lay three days in the hospital and then he died. . . . God's will."

"Turn around, you devil!" comes out of the darkness. "Have you gone cracked, you old dog? Look where you are going!"

"Drive on! drive on! . . ." says the officer. "We shan't get there till tomorrow going on like this. Hurry up!"

The sledge-driver cranes his neck again, rises in his seat, and with heavy grace swings his whip. Several times he looks round at the officer, but the latter keeps his eyes shut and is apparently disinclined to listen. Putting his fare down at Vyborgskaya, Iona stops by a restaurant, and again sits **huddled up** on the box. . . . Again the wet snow paints him and his horse white. One hour passes, and then another. . . .

Three young men, two tall and thin, one short and hunchbacked, come up, railing at each other and loudly stamping on the pavement with their **goloshes**.

"Cabby, to the Police Bridge!" the hunchback cries in a cracked voice. "The three of us, . . . twenty **kopecks**!"

Iona tugs at the reins and clicks to his horse. Twenty kopecks is not a fair price, but he has no thoughts for that. Whether it is a **rouble** or whether it is five kopecks does not matter to him now so long as he has a fare. . . . The three young men, shoving each other and using bad language, go up to the sledge, and all three try to sit down at once. The question remains to be settled: Which are to sit down and which one is to stand? After a long **altercation**, ill-temper, and abuse, they come to the conclusion that the **hunchback** must stand because he is the shortest.

"Well, drive on," says the hunchback in his cracked voice, settling himself and breathing down Iona's neck. "**Cut along!** What a cap you've got, my friend! You wouldn't find a worse one in all Petersburg. . . ."

"He-he! . . . he-he! . . ." laughs Iona. "It's nothing to boast of!"

"Well, then, nothing to boast of, drive on! Are you going to drive like this all the way? Eh? Shall I give you one in the neck?"

"My head aches," says one of the tall ones. "At the Dukmasovs' yesterday Vaska and I drank four bottles of brandy between us."

"I can't make out why you talk such stuff," says the other tall one angrily.

"You lie like a brute."

“Strike me dead, it’s the truth! . . .”

“It’s about as true as that a louse coughs.”

“He-he !” grins Iona. “Me-er-ry gentlemen!”

“Tfoo! the devil take you!” cries the hunchback indignantly. “Will you get on, you old plague, or won’t you? Is that the way to drive? Give her one with the whip. Hang it all, give it her well.”

Iona feels behind his back the jolting person and quivering voice of the hunchback. He hears abuse addressed to him, he sees people, and the feeling of loneliness begins little by little to be less heavy on his heart. The hunchback swears at him, till he chokes over some elaborately **whimsical** string of **epithets** and is overpowered by his cough. His tall companions begin talking of a certain Nadyezhda Petrovna. Iona looks round at them. Waiting till there is a brief pause, he looks round once more and says: “This week. . . er. . . my. . . er. . . son died!”

“We shall all die, . . .” says the hunchback with a sigh, wiping his lips after coughing. “Come, drive on! drive on! My friends, I simply cannot stand crawling like this! When will he get us there?”

“Well, you give him a little encouragement . . . one in the neck!”

“Do you hear, you old plague? I’ll make you smart. If one **stands on ceremony** with fellows like you one may as well walk. Do you hear, you old dragon? Or don’t you **care a hang** what we say?”

And Iona hears rather than feels a slap on the back of his neck.

“He-he! . . .,” he laughs. “Merry gentlemen God give you health!”

“Cabman, are you married?” asks one of the tall ones.

“I? He he! Me-er-ry gentlemen. The only wife for me now is the damp earth. . .

He-ho-ho! . . . The grave that is! . . . Here my son’s dead and I am alive. . . . It’s a strange thing, death has come in at the wrong door. . . . Instead of coming for me it went for my son. . . .”

And Iona turns round to tell them how his son died, but at that point the hunchback gives a faint sigh and announces that, thank God! they have arrived at last. After taking his twenty kopecks, Iona gazes for a long while after the **revellers**, who disappear into a dark entry. Again he is alone and again there is silence for him. The misery which has been for a brief space eased, comes back again and tears his heart more cruelly than ever. With a look of anxiety and suffering Iona’s eyes stray restlessly among the crowds moving to and fro on both sides of the street: can he not find among those thousands someone who will listen to him? But the crowds **flit by heedless** of him and his misery. . . . His misery is immense, beyond all bounds. If Iona’s heart were to burst and his misery to flow out, it would flood the whole world, it seems, but yet it is not seen. It has found a hiding-place in such an insignificant shell that one would not have found it with a candle by daylight.

Iona sees a house-porter with a parcel and makes up his mind to address him.

“What time will it be, friend?” he asks.

“Going on for ten. . . . Why have you stopped here? Drive on!”

Iona drives a few paces away, bends himself double, and gives himself up to his misery. He feels it is no good to appeal to people. But before five minutes have passed he draws himself up, shakes his head as though he feels a sharp pain, and tugs at the reins. . . . He can bear it no longer.

“Back to the yard!” he thinks. “To the yard!”

And his little mare, as though she knew his thoughts, falls to **trotting**. An hour and a half later Iona is sitting by a big dirty stove. On the stove, on the floor, and on the benches are people snoring. The air is full of smells and stuffiness. Iona looks at the sleeping figures, scratches himself, and regrets that he has come home so early. . . .

“I have not earned enough to pay for the oats, even,” he thinks. “That’s why I am so miserable. A man who knows how to do his work, . . . who has had enough to eat, and whose horse has had enough to eat, is always at ease. . . .”

In one of the corners a young cabman gets up, clears his throat sleepily, and makes for the water-bucket.

“Want a drink?” Iona asks him.

“Seems so.”

“May it do you good. . . . But my son is dead, mate. . . . Do you hear? This week in the hospital. . . . It’s a queer business. . . .”

Iona looks to see the effect produced by his words, but he sees nothing. The young man has covered his head over and is already asleep. The old man sighs and scratches himself. . . . Just as the young man had been thirsty for water, he thirsts for speech. His son will soon have been dead a week, and he has not really talked to anybody yet He wants to talk of it properly, with **deliberation**. . . . He wants to tell how his son was taken ill, how he suffered, what he said before he died, how he died. . . . He wants to describe the funeral, and how he went to the hospital to get his son’s clothes. He still has his daughter Anisya in the country. . . . And he wants to talk about her too. . . . Yes, he has plenty to talk about now. His listener ought to sigh and exclaim and lament. It would be even better to talk to women. Though they are silly creatures, they **blubber** at the first word.

“Let’s go out and have a look at the mare,” Iona thinks. “There is always time for sleep. . . . You’ll have sleep enough, no fear. . . .”

He puts on his coat and goes into the stables where his mare is standing. He thinks about oats, about hay, about the weather. . . . He cannot think about his son when he is alone. . . . To talk about him with someone is possible, but to think of him and picture him is insufferable anguish. . . .

“Are you munching?” Iona asks his mare, seeing her shining eyes. “There, munch away, munch away. . . . Since we have not earned enough for oats, we will eat hay. . . . Yes, . . . I have grown too old to drive. . . . My son ought to be driving, not I. . . . He was a real cabman. . . . He ought to have lived. . . .” Iona is silent for a while, and then he goes on:

“That’s how it is, old girl. . . . Kuzma Ionitch is gone. . . . He said good-by to me. . . . He went and died for no reason. . . . Now, suppose you had a little colt, and

you were own mother to that little colt. . . . And all at once that same little colt went and died. . . . You'd be sorry, wouldn't you? . . ." The little mare munches, listens, and breathes on her master's hands. Iona is carried away and tells her all about it.

1.2.2 Glossary

sledge: a long vehicle pulled by horses or mares for travelling over ice and snow

snowdrift: a deep pile of snow blown together by the wind

half penny gingerbread horse: a sweet cake flavoured with ginger made in the shape of a mare and priced at half a penny.

lost in thought: absorbed in thought

slough: a very soft wet area of land

nag: horse, especially one which is old or ill

budged: moved

yard: an area outside a building

brandish: to wave in order to threaten

pedestrian: a person walking in the street

fidget: to make constant small restless movements, unable to remain still or quiet

possessed: as if taken over by madness or an evil spirit

jocosely: humorously, playfully

sniff: a sound of sniffing

huskily: sounding rough as if throat is dry, hoarse

huddled: curled one's body into a small space

goloshes: rubber coverings worn over shoes in wet weather

kopecks: a unit of money in Russia; one-hundredth of a rouble

rouble: chief currency in Russia

hunchback: a person with a hump on his back

altercation: a noisy argument

cut along: go on

whimsical: unusual or rather playful

epithets: adjectives or phrases to describe a character or an important quality

stand on ceremony: behave formally

care a hang: not care at all

revellers: merry making persons, especially after alcoholic drinks

flit by: pass by

heedless: not paying attention

trotting: moving at a steady pace

deliberation: careful consideration

blubber: cry noisily

1.3 DISCUSSION

This is a story of a father's grief over the death of his son. The grief is within him and he desperately wants to speak about it to lighten his burdensome misery. But no one is ready to listen to him. The story describes the old man's urge to share his grief with others, his despair at not being able to find a compassionate audience and his final effort to disgorge his misery by talking to his mare, his one and only companion.

The old man in grief is a sledge driver. He is the protagonist of the story. The other characters who appear briefly during the course of the story are riders on his sledge who have neither the time nor the inclination to listen to him. They live in a world of their own and cannot sympathetically relate to the old man in his grief.

The story 'Misery' has a sub title 'To Whom Shall I Tell My Grief?' While the grief is over the loss of his son, his misery is not finding an outlet to unburden his grief.

After reading the story, note how many times the word 'misery' appears in it. You will discover that it appears towards the latter half of the story five times and on a sixth occasion it is used as an adjective 'miserable'.

Can you see the significance of this word in the context of the title of the story?

In this one word 'misery' the title accurately summarizes the mood the story carries. It tells us about the self-centred, unresponsive and feelingless nature of human beings in this world. The title 'Misery' portrays the overwhelming grief of Iona Potapov, the old sledge-driver over the loss of his son and his futile attempts to share it with fellow travellers in his sledge.

The first part of the story describes the old man's grief and his repeated efforts to catch the attention of the sledge riders and his failure to make them listen to his tale of woe. The resulting emotion goes beyond grief and becomes misery. Hence the title word 'misery' appears in the latter part of the story.

Misery means a great suffering of the mind or body. Here the suffering is not physical but felt within the heart. There can be no cure for emotional distress unless it is let out and shared with others. The old man has to keep his emotions within, as there are no listeners to lend an ear. He has been rendered alone by the death of his son, but his loneliness increases when he finds no one with whom he can share his agony. He is severely alone and therefore is miserable.

Let us see how the story begins.

It is evening. Chekhov describes realistically the shades of darkness all around, heightened by the white snow. We hear a lot of movement of people, but in the darkness no one is visible. Iona Potapov is an old man bent double with age and grief. He sits white like a ghost and his mare stays still and motionless. All around them is the constant motion of people who are not seen but whose voices are heard. The writer is able to focus on the loneliness of Iona, the sledge driver. He is surrounded by people and yet remains all alone in his grief. The darkness around him is a measure of the darkness within him. He is like a ghost in white (as he is covered by the snowflakes) for he experiences a death-in-life existence.

The first passenger is an army officer. He is in a hurry to reach his destination. He is a contrast to Iona in every respect. Iona is old and weary, the officer is young and full of life. Iona is lost in grief, the officer jokes in a light-hearted mood. Iona desperately seeks the officer's attention, the officer sits with his eyes shut and his ears closed "disinclined to listen". Chekhov using the stream-of-consciousness technique presents the continuous flow of grief in Iona without resorting to graphic description.

The second group of passengers on the sledge is a bunch of three revellers, young, rumbustious (making merry in a noisy way) with not a care in the world. They behave as though they are drunk. One of them is a hunchback. Despite his physical deformity, he feels superior to the old man who is weighed down with grief. All of them have no sympathy for the old man who tries to tell them of his son's death. The old man is gentle and kind to his mare; he does not whip his mare to speed up. In contrast the revellers ride roughshod over his feelings. Iona is happy to see them merry, but they have no eyes to discern the old man's sorrow. An officer or a party goer, their attitude to the old father in grief is the same. Neither can empathise with Iona's sadness.

The old man is left alone. Let us see how the writer describes his situation:

Again he is alone and again there is silence for him. . . . The misery which has been for a brief space eased comes back again and tears his heart more *cruelly than ever*. With a look of anxiety and suffering Iona's eyes stray restlessly among the crowds moving to and fro on both sides of the street: can he not find among those thousands someone who will listen to him? But the crowds flit by heedless of him and his misery. . . . His misery is immense, beyond all bounds. If Iona's heart were to burst and his misery to flow out, it would flood the whole world, it seems, but yet it is not seen. It has found a hiding-place in such an insignificant shell that one would not have found it with a candle by daylight.

His misery is immense. It can swamp the whole world and yet its immensity is not seen. It is within him and no one can even fathom the depths of its intensity. Iona longs for people to whom he can unburden himself. When the revellers are in his sledge, he is comforted with the thought that he has company to share his grief with. To that extent his grief is eased. But when he is back alone in his sledge watching crowds moving to and fro, he realizes that a crowd is no company. "Iona drives a few paces away, bends himself double, and gives himself up to his misery."

One more attempt to speak to a young cabman proves futile. He is alone but he still has his mare. He unburdens his heart to the passive mare. For the first time, he mentions his son's name Kuzma Ionitch. He is gone. He has preceded him to the grave. He asks the mare how she would feel if she had a colt and the colt died. "You'd be sorry. Won't you?" The mare does not answer. It breathes on his hand. But in that unspoken moment the animal's tender and unprotesting looks comfort the old man. He feels that he has touched a sympathetic chord in his mare – the only possession he has still with him. He pours his heart out to her. He has found an outlet for his grief.

Is the mare really listening? Is she compassionate and understanding? Or is the last part of the story just the old man's fancy? The ending is deliberately left

inconclusive. But the story drives home the point that humans are basically insensitive to other's pain and lack any involvement and sharing in the grief of fellowmen.

'Misery' – Anton Chekhov

1.4 STYLE

The story you have read is written in a straightforward narrative style. What strikes the reader is its quality of simplicity. Chekhov has an eye for detail and he is a photographic and cinematographic realist. It is as though he has a camera that accurately portrays a piece of life. Chekhov once said that "Art tells the truth" and Tolstoy said "Art tells the truth because it expresses the highest feelings of man." Chekhov's seemingly simple story affirms the truth about human behaviour.

'Misery' is a good example of Chekhov's typical theme and narrative structure. It does not focus on everyday reality, but centres on the psychological aftermath of an event that breaks up everyday routine and leaves the central character helpless. The rhythm of the sledge driver Iona's life is broken by the news of his son's death. He feels the need to communicate his feelings of loss to his fares. The story is not about an event, it is rather about the lack of one. It is the objectification of grief and its incommunicable nature, through the presentation of deliberate details.

Chekhov's prose is lucid, with a simple vocabulary (the translator has attempted to follow this style). He uses metaphorical language to recreate the scene – consider the description of the sledge-driver, "all white like a ghost". This simile is apt for the snow, it also indicates the listlessness of Iona, overpowered by grief.

Reading his story in prose is like reading a poem as the style is compressed, imaginative and almost lyrical displaying strong emotions and feelings. A Russian critic, Andrei Voznesensky, writing about Chekhov, says that he is "a master of understatement, of concealed meaning, of twilight scenes and of prose as compressed as poetry . . ."

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Relate the sub title 'To Whom Shall I Tell My Grief?' to the main title of the story 'Misery' .

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- ii) Who is more sympathetic – the officer or the revellers or the young cabman? And why?

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- iii) Why does Iona pour out his history to the mare?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

1.5 LET US SUM UP

The story 'Misery' by Anton Chekhov deals with human insensitivity to other people's grief. It captures the agony of an old man who has been recently bereaved following the death of his son and his need to speak about his grief and unburden himself. The indifferent and unsympathetic world has no time to respond to his misery.

The story gives an authentic portrayal of human nature that remains unaffected by the sorrows of the world so long as they do not impinge on it at a personal level.

1.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Refer to section 1.3
- ii) The officer at least asks him the question as to how his son died. The revellers have nothing to ask him. The only question they put to him is to mock at him as to whether he was married.
- iii) Refer to the last section in 1.3 Give your own interpretation as to whether talking to the mare shows Iona to be fanciful or truthful. Does he find the tenderness and affection seen in the mare's eyes comforting in contrast to the unresponsive indifference of fellow men?

UNIT 2 ‘MOTHER’ – JUDAH WATEN

Structure

2.0 Objectives

2.1 Introduction

2.2 Judah Waten

2.3 ‘Mother’

2.3.1 Text

2.3.2 Glossary

2.4 Discussion

2.5 Characters

2.5.1 Mother

2.5.2 Father

2.5.3 Son

2.6 Background

2.7 Prose Style

2.8 Let Us Sum Up

2.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to:

- introduce you to Judah Waten and one of his famous short stories ‘Mother’,
- provide a background of the relevance of Australian writing and
- give detailed analysis of the plot and characters of this story

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, there has been a tremendous growth of interest in literature and cultures apart from those of Britain and America which had till recently dominated the literary scene. Even in India there has been an enthusiastic upsurge of interest in these literatures, and they are being given added importance in English departments across the country. Australian literature is now being seen as an interesting subject of literary studies, with special relevance to us Indians for various reasons. The shared colonial experience led to many similarities as well as differences between the experiences of the two countries and these have found their way into the literatures of both countries. Here it must be pointed out that even though there was a history of colonialism in both the countries, there were differences in this shared colonial experience. Australia was a settler colony where the main aim of the British colonizers was to create a new British colony for their deported convicts. The British in India, however, saw trade and commerce as their main reason for being here. In spite of these differences there are many reasons why a knowledge about Australia is relevant to us as Indians.

When we study literature from Australia, not only do we develop a social, political, historical and cultural awareness of the country, but we are also able to explore

connections between Australia and India. When we speak of Australian literature we include literature written by people of British or European origin who settled there during the early eighteenth century. We also include writings by the original inhabitants of the land — the Aborigines as well as the diasporic people — i.e. the new immigrants to Australia.

Therefore, since there are so many varied groups writing in the country, the themes too are varied in nature. The early settlers wrote about their desire to deal with the new land and native people. The Aborigines wrote about the traumatic invasions by the British. And the later groups of immigrants had their own issues to project in their writing. It is to this group that Judah Waten belongs and his story 'Mother' amply reflects his diasporic nature.

2.2 JUDAH WATEN

Judah Leon Waten (1911-1985), short story writer, novelist and essayist, was born in Odessa (then part of the Russian empire) to a Jewish Russian Family. His parents migrated to Australia in 1914. So he can be called a Russian born Jewish Australian writer. He was educated at Perth, and later at University High School, Melbourne when his family moved to Melbourne in 1926. His father worked as a draper, and later as a travelling salesman. Judah Waten learnt English as a young child, and wrote in English, but he was very conscious of his Yiddish linguistic and literary heritage, and translated the works of Yiddish writer like Pinchas Goldhar (1901-1947) and Herz Bergner (1907-1970) into English. Waten lived in Melbourne for the rest of his life. He joined the Communist Party of Australia in 1926 while still at school, and remained loyal to communism and the U.S.S.R. till the end of his life. He received the Patrick White Award (posthumously) for his contribution to Australian Literature. He has written a number of short stories and seven novels, which include *The Unbending* (1954), *Time of Conflict* (1961), *Distant Land* (1964), *Season of Youth* (1966) and *Scenes of Revolutionary Life* (1982).

In the 1940's Goldhar encouraged Waten to write about his childhood; his fictionalized reminiscences appeared as short stories, collected in the book, *Alien Son* (1952). This was the first work about the life of non-British immigrants in Australia; it evoked a sympathetic response because Australian society was changing, with the influx of a large number of Jewish immigrants after the 1930's following the rise of Hitler. Waten writes about diasporic existence, particularly the difficulties (and simple pleasures) experienced by non-English speaking migrants in Australian society. Differences in culture, food and family are emphasized, as are particular displacement difficulties experienced by older, non-English speaking immigrants, particularly women who look after their families and the home. His tales are based on his own experiences - we learn about how he was treated by other children, about life in his impoverished family, with his somewhat eccentric, travelling-salesman father. 'Mother' represents an immigrant mother's complex experience as envisaged by her male child. It captures the tensions that go with migration even in seemingly new havens.

Let us read the text of the story now.

2.3 ‘MOTHER’

2.3.1 Text

When I was a small boy I was often **morbidly conscious** of Mother’s intent, searching eyes fixed on me. She would gaze for minutes on end without speaking one word. I was always **disconcerted** and would guiltily look down at the ground, anxiously turning over in my mind my day’s activities.

But very early I knew her thoughts were far away from my **petty doings**; she was concerned with them only in so far as they gave her further reason to justify her hostility to the life around us. She was preoccupied with my sister, and me; she was forever concerned with our future in this new land in which she would always feel a stranger.

I gave her little comfort, for though we had been in the country for only a short while I had assumed many of the ways of those around me. I had become estranged from her. Or so it seemed to Mother, and it grieved her. When I first knew her she had no intimate friend, nor do I think she felt the need of one with whom she could discuss her innermost thoughts and hopes. With me, though I knew she loved me very deeply, she was never on such near terms of friendship as sometimes exist between a mother and son. She **emanated** a kind of certainty in herself, in her view of life, that no opposition or human difficulty could **shrivel** or destroy. “Be strong before people, only weep before God,” she would say and she lived up to that precept even with Father.

In our little community in the city, **acquaintances** spoke **derisively** of Mother’s refusal to settle down as others had done, of what they called her propensity of **highfalutin** day-dreams and of the severity and unreasonableness of her opinions.

Yet her manner with people was always gentle. She spoke softly, she was measured in gesture, and frequently it seemed she was functioning automatically, her mind far away from her body. There was a grave beauty in her still, sad face, her searching, dark-brown eyes and black hair. She was thin and stooped in carriage as though a weight always lay on her shoulders.

From my earliest memory of Mother it somehow seemed quite natural to think of her as apart and other-worldly and different, not of everyday things as Father was. In those days he was a young-looking man who did not hesitate to make friends with children as soon as they were able to talk to him and laugh at his stories. Mother was older than he was. She must have been a woman of nearly forty, but she seemed even older. She changed little for a long time, showing no traces of growing older at all until, towards the end of her life, she suddenly became an old lady.

I was always curious about Mother’s age. She never had birthdays like other people, nor did anyone else in our family. No candles were ever lit or cakes baked or presents given in our house. To my friends in the street who boasted of their birthday parties I self-consciously repeated my Mother’s words, that such celebrations were only a foolish and eccentric form of self-worship.

“Nothing but deception,” she would say. “As though life can be chopped into neat twelve-month parcels! It’s deeds, not years, that matter.” Although I often

repeated her words and even prided myself on not having birthdays I could not restrain myself from once asking Mother when she was born.

“I was born. I’m alive as you can see, so what more do you want to know?” she replied, so sharply that I never asked her about her age again.

In so many other ways Mother was different. Whereas all the rest of the women I knew in the neighbouring houses and in other parts of the city took pride in their housewifely abilities, their odds and ends of new furniture, the neat appearance of their homes, Mother regarded all those things as of little importance. Our house always looked as if we had just moved in or were about to move out. An **impermanent** and impatient spirit dwelt within our walls; Father called it living on one leg like a bird.

Wherever we lived there were some cases partly unpacked, rolls of linoleum stood in a corner, only some of the windows had curtains. There were never sufficient wardrobes, so that clothes hung on hooks behind doors. And all the time Mother’s things accumulated. She never parted with anything, no matter how old it was. A shabby green plush coat **bequeathed** to her by her own mother hung on a nail in her bedroom. Untidy heaps of **tattered** books, newspapers, and journals from the old country mouldered in corners of the house, while under her bed in tin trunks she kept her dearest possessions. In those trunks there were bundles of old letters, two heavily underlined books on nursing, an old Hebrew Bible, three silver spoons given by her aunt, with whom she had once lived, a diploma on yellow parchment, and her collection of favourite books.

From one or other of her trunks she would frequently pick a book and read to my sister and me. She would read in a wistful voice poems and stories of Jewish liberators from Moses until the present day, of the heroes of the 1905 Revolution and pieces by Tolstoy and Gorki and Sholom Aleichem. Never did she stop to inquire whether we understood what she was reading; she said we should understand later if not now.

I liked to hear Mother read, but always she seemed to choose a time for reading that clashed with something or other I was doing in the street or in a nearby **paddock**. I would be playing with the boys in the street, kicking a football or spinning a top or flying a kite, when Mother would unexpectedly appear and without even casting a glance at my companions she would ask me to come into the house, saying she wanted to read to me and my sister. Sometimes I was overcome with humiliation and I would stand listlessly with burning cheeks until she repeated her words. She never **reproached** me for my disobedience nor did she ever utter a **reproof** to the boys who taunted me as, **crestfallen**, I followed her into the house.

Why Mother was as she was only came to me many years later. Then I was even able to guess when she was born.

She was the last child of a frail and overworked mother and a **bleakly** pious father who **hawked** reels of cotton and other odds and ends in the villages surrounding a town in Russia. My grandfather looked with great disapproval on his offspring, who were all girls, and he was hardly aware of my mother at all. She was left well alone by her older sisters, who with feverish impatience were waiting for their parents to make the required arrangements for their marriages.

During those early days Mother rarely looked out into the streets, for since the great **pogroms** few Jewish children were ever to be seen abroad. From the iron grille of the basement she saw the soles of the shoes of the passers-by and not very much more. She had never seen a tree, a flower, or a bird.

But when Mother was about fifteen her parents died and she went to live with a widowed aunt and her large family in a far-away village. Her aunt kept an inn and Mother was tucked away with her cousins in a remote part of the building, away from the **prying** eyes of the customers in the **taprooms**. Every evening her aunt would gaze at her with startled eyes as if surprised to find her among the family.

“What am I going to do with you?” she would say. “I’ve got daughters of my own. If only your dear father of blessed name had left you just a tiny dowry it would have been such a help. Ah well! If you have no hand you can’t make a fist.”

At that time Mother could neither read nor write. And as she had never had any childhood playmates or friends of any kind she hardly knew what to talk about with her cousins. She spent the days cheerlessly pottering about the kitchen or sitting for hours, her eyes fixed on the dark wall in front of her.

Some visitor to the house, observing the small, lonely girl, took pity on her and decided to give her an education. Mother was given lessons every few days and after a while she acquired a **smattering** of **Yiddish** and-Russian, a little arithmetic, and a great fund of Russian and Jewish stories.

New worlds gradually opened before Mother. She was seized with a passion for **primers**, grammars, arithmetic and story books, and soon the idea entered her head that the way out of her present dreary life lay through these books. There was another world, full of warmth and interesting things, and in it there was surely a place for her. She became obsessed with the thought that it wanted only some decisive step on her part to go beyond her aunt’s house into the life she dreamed about.

Somewhere she read of a Jewish hospital which had just opened in a distant city and one winter’s night she told her aunt she wanted to go to relatives who lived there. They would help her to find work in the hospital.

“You are mad!” exclaimed her aunt. “**Forsake** a home for a wild fancy! Who could have put such a notion into your head? Besides, a girl of eighteen can’t travel alone at this time of the year.”

It was from that moment that Mother’s age became something to be **manipulated** as it suited her. She said to her aunt that she was not eighteen, but twenty-two. She was getting on in years and she could not continue to impose on her aunt’s kindness.

“How can you be twenty-two?” her aunt replied greatly puzzled.

A long pause ensued while she tried to reckon up Mother’s years. She was born in the month Tammuz according to the Jewish calendar, which corresponded to the old style Russian calendar month of June, but in what year? She could remember being told of Mother’s birth, but nothing outstanding had happened

then to enable her to place the year. With all her nieces and nephews, some dead and many alive, scattered all over the vastness of the country only a genius could keep track of all their birthdays. Perhaps the girl was twenty-two, and if that were so her chance of getting a husband in the village was pretty remote; twenty-two was far too old. The thought entered her head that if she allowed Mother to go to their kinsmen in the city she would be relieved of the responsibility of finding a dowry for her, and so reluctantly she agreed.

But it was not until the spring that she finally consented to let her niece go. As the railway station was several miles from the village Mother was escorted there on foot by her aunt and cousins. With all her possessions, including photographs of her parents and a tattered Russian primer tied in a great bundle, Mother went forth into the vast world.

In the hospital she didn't find that for which she hungered; it seemed still as far away as in the village. She had dreamed of the new life where all would be noble, where men and women would dedicate their lives to bringing about a richer and happier life, just as she had read.

But she was put to scrubbing floors and washing linen every day from morning till night until she dropped exhausted into her bed in the attic. No one looked at her, no one spoke to her but to give her orders. Her one day off in the month she spent with her relatives who gave her some cast-off clothes and shoes and provided her with the books on nursing she so urgently needed.

She was more than ever convinced that her deliverance would come through books and she set about swallowing their contents with renewed zest.

As soon as she had passed all the examinations and acquired the treasured diploma she joined a medical mission that was about to proceed without a moment's delay to a distant region where a cholera epidemic raged. And then for several years she remained with the same group, moving from district to district, wherever disease flourished.

Whenever Mother looked back over her life it was those that shone out. Then she was with people who were filled with an **ardour** for mankind and it seemed to her they lived happily and freely, giving and taking friendship in an atmosphere pulsating with warmth and hope.

All this had come to an end in 1905 when the medical mission was dissolved and several of Mother's colleagues were killed in the uprising. Then with a heavy heart and little choice she had returned to nursing in the city, but this time in private houses attending on well-to-do ladies.

It was at the home of one of her patients that she met Father. What an odd couple they must have been! She was **taciturn**, choosing her words carefully, talking mainly of her ideas and little about herself. Father bared his heart with guileless abandon. He rarely had secrets and there was no division in his mind between intimate and general matters; he could talk as freely of his feelings for Mother or of a quarrel with his father as he could of a **vaudeville** show or the superiority of one game of cards as against another.

Father said of himself he was like an open hand at solo and all men were his brothers. For a story, a joke, or an apt remark he would forsake his father and

mother, as the saying goes. Old tales, new ones invented for the occasion, jokes rolled off his tongue in a never-ending procession.

Every trifle, every incident was material for a story and he haunted music-halls and circuses, for he liked nothing better than comedians and clowns, actors and **buskers**.

He brought something bubbly and **frivolous** into Mother’s life and for a while she forgot her stern precepts. In those days Father’s clothes were smart and gay; he wore bright straw hats and loud socks and fancy, buttoned-up boots. Although she had always regarded any interest in clothes as foolish and a sign of an empty and frivolous nature Mother then felt proud of his fashionable appearance. He took her to his favourite resorts, to music-halls and to teahouses where he and his cronies idled away hours, boastfully recounting stories of successes in business or merely swapping jokes. They danced nights away, though Mother was almost **stupefied** by the band, the bright lights, and looked with distaste on the extravagant clothes of the dancers who **bobbed** and **cavorted**.

All this was in the early days of their marriage. But soon Mother was filled with misgivings. Father’s world, the world of commerce and speculation, of the buying and selling of goods neither seen nor touched, was repugnant and frightening to her. It lacked stability, it was devoid of ideals, it was fraught with ruin. Father was a trader in air, as the saying went.

Mother’s anxiety grew as she observed more closely his mode of life. He worked in fits and starts. If he made enough in one hour to last him a week or a month his business was at an end and he went off in search of friends and pleasure. He would return to business only when his money had just about run out. He was concerned only with one day at a time; about tomorrow he would say clicking his fingers, his blue eyes focused mellowly on space, “We’ll see.”

But always he had plans for making great fortunes. They never came to anything but frequently they produced unexpected results. It so happened that on a number of occasions someone Father trusted acted on the plans he had talked about so freely before he even had time to leave the tea-house. Then there were fiery scenes with his faithless friends. But Father’s rage passed away quickly and he would often laugh and make jokes over the table about it the very same day. He imagined everyone else forgot as quickly as he did and he was always astonished to discover that his words uttered hastily in anger had made him enemies.

“How should I know that people have such long memories for hate? I’ve only a cat’s memory,” he would explain innocently.

“If you spit upwards, you’re bound to get it back in the face” Mother irritably upbraided him.

Gradually Mother reached the conclusion that only migration to another country would bring about any real change in their life, and with all her persistence she began to urge him to take the decisive step. She considered America, France, Palestine, and finally decided on Australia. One reason for the choice was the presence there of distant relatives who would undoubtedly help them to find their feet in that far-away continent. Besides, she was sure that Australia was so different from any other country that Father was bound to acquire a new and more solid way of earning a living there.

For a long time Father paid no heed to her agitation and refused to make any move.

“Why have you picked on Australia and not Tibet, for example?” he asked ironically, “there isn’t much difference between the two lands. Both are on the other side of the moon.” . .

The idea of leaving his native land seemed so fantastic to him that he refused to regard it seriously. He answered Mother with jokes and tales of travellers who disappeared in balloons. He had no curiosity to explore distant countries, he hardly ever ventured beyond the three or four familiar streets of his city. And why should his wife be so anxious for him to find a new way of earning a living? He had never given one moment’s thought to his mode of life and he could not imagine any reason for doing so. It suited him like his gay straw hats and smart suits. Yet in the end he did what Mother wanted him to do, though even on the journey he was tortured by doubts and he positively shouted words of indecision. But he was no sooner in Australia than he put away all thoughts of his homeland and he began to regard the new country as his permanent home. It was not so different from what he had known before. Within a few days he had met some fellow merchants and, retiring to a cafe, they talked about business in the new land. There were fortunes to be made here, Father very quickly concluded. There was, of course, the question of a new language but that was no great obstacle to business. You could buy and sell - it was a good land, Father said.

It was different with Mother. Before she was one day off the ship she wanted to go back.

The impressions she gained on that first day remained with her all her life. It seemed to her there was an irritatingly superior air about the people she met, the customs officials, the cab men, the agent of the new house. Their faces expressed something ironical and sympathetic, something friendly and at the same time **condescending**. She imagined everyone on the wharf, in the street, looked at her in the same way and she never forgave them for treating her as if she were in need of their good-natured tolerance.

Nor was she any better disposed to her relatives and the small delegation of Jews who met her at the ship. They had all been in Australia for many years and they were anxious to impress newcomers with their knowledge of the country and its customs. They spoke in a **hectoring** manner. This was a free country, they said it was cultured, one used a knife and fork and not one’s hands. Everyone could read and write and no one shouted at you. There were no oppressors here as in the old country.

Mother thought she understood their talk; she was quick and observant where Father was sometimes extremely guileless. While they talked Father listened with a good-natured smile and it is to be supposed he was thinking of a good story he could tell his new acquaintances. But Mother fixed them with a firm, relentless gaze and, suddenly interrupting their injunctions, said in the softest of voice, “If there are no oppressors here, as you say, why do you frisk about like house dogs? Whom do you have to please?” Mother never lost this hostile and ironical attitude to the new land. She would have nothing of the country; she would not even attempt to learn the language.

And she only began to look with a kind of interest at the world round her when my sister and I were old enough to go to school. Then all her old feeling for books and learning was re-awakened. She handled our primers and readers as if they were sacred texts.

She set great aims for us. We were to shine in medicine, in literature, in music; our special sphere depended on her fancy at a particular time. In one of these ways we could serve humanity best, and whenever she read to us the stories of Tolstoy and Gorki she would tell us again and again of her days with the medical mission. No matter how much schooling we should get we needed ideals, and what better ideals were there than those that had guided her in the days of the medical mission? They would save us from the soulless influences of this barren land.

Father wondered why she spent so much time reading and telling us stories of her best years and occasionally he would take my side when I protested against Mother taking us away from our games.

“They’re only children,” he said. “Have pity on them. If you stuff their little heads, God alone knows how they will finish up.” Then, pointing to us, he added, “I’ll be satisfied if he is a good carpenter; and if she’s a good dressmaker that will do, too.”

“At least,” Mother replied, “you have the good sense not to suggest they go in for business. Life has taught you something at last.”

“Can I help it that I am in business?” he suddenly shouted angrily. “I know it’s a pity my father didn’t teach me to be a professor.”

But he calmed down quickly, unable to stand for long Mother’s steady gaze and compressed lips.

It **exasperated** us that Father should give in so easily so that we could never rely on him to take our side for long. Although he argued with Mother about us he secretly agreed with her. And outside the house he boasted about her, taking a peculiar pride in her culture and attainments, and repeating her words just as my sister and I did.

Mother was very concerned about how she could give us a musical education. It was out of the question that we both be taught an instrument, since Father’s business was at a low ebb and he hardly knew where he would find enough money to pay the rent, so she took us to a friend’s house to listen to gramophone records. They were of the old-fashioned, cylindrical kind made by Edison and they sounded far away and thin like the voice of a **ventriloquist** mimicking far off musical instruments. But my sister and I marvelled at them. We should have been willing to sit over the long, narrow horn for days, but Mother decided that it would only do us harm to listen to military marches and the stupid songs of the music-hall.

It was then that we began to pay visits to musical emporiums. We went after school and during the holidays in the mornings. There were times when Father waited long for his lunch or evening meal, but he made no protest. He supposed Mother knew what she was doing in those shops and he told his friends of the effort Mother was making to acquaint us with music.

Our first visits to the shops were in the nature of **reconnoitering sorties**. In such emporiums Mother looked the attendants up and down while we thumbed the books on the counters, stared at the enlarged photographs of illustrious composers, and studied the various catalogues of gramophone records. We went from shop to shop until we just about knew all there was to know about the records and sheet music and books in stock.

Then we started all over again from the first shop and this time we came to hear the records.

I was Mother's interpreter and I would ask one of the salesmen to play us a record she had chosen from one of the catalogues. Then I would ask him to play another. It might have been a piece of violin by Tchaikovsky or Beethoven or an **aria** sung by Caruso or Chaliapin. This would continue until Mother observed the gentleman in charge of the gramophone losing his patience and we would take our leave.

With each visit Mother became bold and several times she asked to have whole symphonies and concertos played to us. We sat for nearly an hour cooped up in a tiny room with the salesman restlessly shuffling his feet, yawning and not knowing what to expect next. Mother pretended he hardly existed and, making herself comfortable in the cane chair, with a determined, intent expression she gazed straight ahead at the whirling disc.

We were soon known to everyone at the shops. Eyes lit up as we walked in, Mother looking neither this way nor that with two children walking in file through the passageway towards the record department. I was very conscious of the humorous glances and the discreet sniggers that followed us and I would sometimes catch hold of Mother's hand and plead with her to leave the shop. But she paid no heed and we continued to our destination. The more often we came the more uncomfortably self-conscious I became and I dreaded the laughing faces round me.

Soon we became something more than a joke. The smiles turned to **scowls** and the shop attendants refused to play us any more records. The first time this happened the salesman mumbled something and left us standing out-side the door of the music-room.

Mother was not easily **thwarted** and without a trace of a smile she said we should talk to the manager. I was filled with a sense of shame and humiliation and with downcast eyes I sidled towards the entrance of the shop.

Mother caught up with me and, laying her hand upon my arm, she said. "What are you afraid of? Your mother won't disgrace you, believe me." Looking at me in her searching way she went on, "Think carefully. Who is right - are they or are we? Why shouldn't they play for us? Does it cost them anything? By which other way can we ever hope to hear something good? Just because we are poor must we cease our striving?"

She continued to talk in this way until I went back with her. The three of us walked into the manager's office and I translated Mother's words.

The manager was stern, though I imagine he must have had some difficulty in keeping his serious **demeanour**.

“But do you ever intend to buy any records?” he said after I had spoken.

“If I were a rich woman would you ask me that question? Mother replied and I repeated her words in a halting voice.

“Speak up to him,” she **nudged** me while I could feel my face fill with hot blood.

The manager repeated his first question and Mother, impatient at my hesitant tone, plunged into a long speech on our right to music and culture and in fact the rights of all men, speaking her own tongue as though the manager understood every word. It was in vain; he merely shook his head.

We were barred from shop after shop, and in each case Mother made a stand, arguing at length until the man in charge flatly told us not to come back until we could afford to buy records.

We met with **rebuffs** in other places as well.

Once as we wandered through the university, my sister and I sauntering behind while Mother opened doors, listening to lectures for brief moments, we unexpectedly found ourselves in a large room where white-coated young men and women sat on high stools in front of arrays of tubes, beakers and jars.

Mother’s eyes lit up brightly and she murmured something about knowledge and science. We stood close to her and gazed round in astonishment; neither her words nor what we saw conveyed anything to us. She wanted to go round the room but a gentleman wearing a black gown came up and asked us if we were looking for someone. He was a distinguished looking person with a florid face and a fine grey mane.

Repeating Mother’s words I said, “We are not looking for anyone; we are simply admiring this room of knowledge.” The gentleman’s face wrinkled pleasantly. With a tiny smile playing over his lips he said regretfully that we could not stay, since only students were permitted in the room.

As I interpreted his words Mother’s expression changed. Her sallow face was almost red. For ten full seconds she looked the gentleman in the eyes. Then she said rapidly to me, “Ask him why he speaks with such a condescending smile on his face.”

I said, “My mother asks why you talk with such a superior smile on your face?”

He coughed, shifted his feet restlessly and his face set severely. Then he glared at his watch and without another word walked away with dignified steps.

When we came out into the street a spring day was in its full beauty. Mother sighed to herself and after a moment’s silence said, “That fine professor thinks he is a liberal-minded man, but behind his smile he despises people such as us. You will have to struggle here just as hard as I had to back home. For all the fine talk it is like all other countries. But where are the people with ideals like those back home, who aspire to something better?”

She repeated these words frequently, even when I was a boy of thirteen and I knew so much more about the new country that was my home. Then I could argue with her.

I said to her that Benny who lived in our street was always reading books and papers and hurrying to meetings. Benny was not much older than I was and he had many friends whom he met in the park on Sunday. They all belonged to this country and they were interested in all the things Mother talked about.

“Benny is an exception,” she said with an impatient shrug of her shoulders, “and his friends are only a tiny handful.” Then she added, “And what about you? You and your companions only worship bats and balls as **heathens** do stone idols. Why, in the old country, boys of your age took part in the fight to deliver mankind from oppression! They gave everything, their strength and health, even their lives, for that glorious ideal.”

“That’s what Benny wants to do,” I said, pleased to be able to answer Mother.

“But it’s so different here. Even your Benny will be swallowed up in the smug, smooth atmosphere. You wait and see.”

She spoke **obstinately**. It seemed impossible to change her. Her vision was too much obscured by passionate dreams of the past for her to see any hope in the present, in the new land.

But as an afterthought she added, “Perhaps it is different for those like you and Benny. But for me I can never find my way into this life here.”

She turned away, her narrow back stooped, her gleaming black hair curled into a bun on her short, thin neck, her shoes equally down at heel on each side.

2.3.2 Glossary

morbidly conscious:	aware with a feeling of melancholy and depression.
disconcerted	: disturbed, upset.
petty doings	: small acts of little importance.
emanated	: give out (breath or an odour).
shrivel	: decrease in size, range or extent, dry up.
acquaintance	: a person less intimate than a friend, someone you know slightly.
derisively	: in a scornful and mocking manner.
highfalutin	: absurdly pompous or pretentious.
impermanent	: not permanent.
bequeath	: leave or give by will after one’s death.
tattered	: worn to shreds.
paddock	: in Australia, an empty field or plot of land.
reproach	: scold, find fault with.
reproof	: censure severely or angrily, blame.
crestfallen	: sad and disappointed.
bleakly	: dreary, cheerless.
hawk	: sell or offer for sale from place to place.

pogroms	: organized massacre of an ethnic group (especially Jews in Russia).
prying	: offensive inquisitiveness.
taprooms	: a room where alcoholic drinks especially beer, are served over a counter.
smattering	: a slight or superficial understanding of a subject.
Yiddish	: A dialect of German including words from Hebrew and other modern languages, spoken by Jews from central and east European countries; written in the Hebrew script.
primer	: an introductory text book.
forsake	: give up.
manipulate	: influence or control shrewdly or deviously.
ardour	: feeling of great warmth, enthusiasm.
taciturn	: habitually reserved and uncommunicative.
vaudeville	: variety entertainment with singing, dancing and comedy in it.
busker	: street performer.
frivolous	: not serious in content or behavior.
stupefied	: as if struck dumb with astonishment and surprise.
bobbed	: moved up and down repeatedly.
cavorted	: pranced around.
condescending	: behave in a patronizing manner.
hectoring	: bullying, intimidating.
exasperated	: greatly annoyed; irritated.
ventriloquist	: a person who can speak without moving the lips, creating the illusion that the sound is coming from somewhere else.
reconnoitring	: exploring to gain information.
sorties	: a military action in which besieged troops burst forth from their position.
aria	: an elaborate song for solo voice in an opera.
scowls	: a facial expression of dislike or displeasure, a severe frown.
thwart	: hinder or prevent (efforts, plans, or desires).
demeanor	: (behavioral attributes) the way a person behaves towards other people.
nudged	: pushed against gently.
rebuffs	: rejection.
heathen	: a person who does not believe in religion.
obstinately	: in a stubborn manner.

2.4 DISCUSSION

Waten's stories of his Russian-Jewish family have been critically acclaimed for their lucidity, depth of feeling, and fine sense of comedy. 'Mother', is a much anthologized story. It is about the life of an orphan girl, who is addressed as "mother". It is narrated in the first person by her son. The story is about the narrator's mother, whose name and date of birth are not clear. Her life is filled with challenges which she overcomes bravely. These challenges also bring a tremendous change in her attitude towards life; she suffers from a sense of insecurity. Her marriage does not help much, as her husband is a happy-go-lucky sort of person, who "worked in fits and starts. . . . He would return to business only when his money had just about run out." He does not believe in saving for the future, and cannot provide the security and warmth which she constantly craves. The short story 'Mother' is a fictional account of Judah Waten's own life. It shows how his mother worked hard for a better life, trying to fill their home with literature and music. Many of the Jewish immigrants in Australia and America left their homes in Europe because of persecution by the Nazis; the situation in Waten's short story is different, they have migrated in search of better economic opportunities (like the vast number of immigrants from India and the third world in the second half of the twentieth century). Of course, anti-Semitism also plays a role in the pathetic condition of the mother in her childhood:

During those early days Mother rarely looked out into the streets, for since the great pogroms few children were ever to be seen abroad. From the iron grille of the basement she saw the soles of the shoes of the passers-by and not very much more. She had never seen a tree, a flower, or a bird.

She faces discrimination as a girl child, because of the pernicious dowry system then prevalent in Russia: her father "looked with great disapproval on his offspring, who were all girls", while her widowed aunt says, "If only your dear father of blessed memory had left you just a tiny dowry it would have been such a help". The story gives us an idea of the society of the time, not through direct statements but by implication: we realize that no importance was given to the education of girls and at the age of fifteen the narrator's mother was still illiterate. She learns to read only because a visitor takes pity on her; but she is filled with a passion for knowledge, and is "convinced that her deliverance would come through books". She is "put to scrubbing floors and washing linen every day from morning till night until she dropped exhausted into her bed in the attic", but she persists with her studies and acquires a nurse's diploma.

Disappointed in her husband, her life revolves around her son and daughter, to whom she always wants to give the best. Unfortunately, most of her dreams come to naught as she realizes that even in the new land where she had hoped to make a new beginning, life is just as tough for the underprivileged as anywhere else. But she is determined that her son (the narrator) and her daughter should shine, "in medicine, in literature, in music". As Mother very feelingly says "Just because we are poor must we cease our striving?" Her efforts to secure some sort of decent education and culture for her children are doomed to failure because of lack of funds. This scenario succeeds in defeating her early optimism and at the end of the story the mother is a dejected, disheartened and demotivated soul who says ". . . I can never find my way into this life here". The only ray of hope is that her children may be able to fit in and not be swallowed up in "the smug, smooth

atmosphere” of the new country. The story portrays the anxieties and tensions which the new immigrants had to undergo while settling on the new land. Their dreams and aspirations were very often thwarted by the early settlers and they could not make a place for themselves in the new land as they had hoped to do. However, it was slightly easier for their children to adjust to their new surroundings and put down roots in the new place since they were young and thus more pliable. That is why the narrator finds it easier to call the new country “my home” and does not face many adjustment problems like his mother does.

2.5 CHARACTERS

2.5.1 Mother

The protagonist of the story is addressed throughout as mother. She has a sad face, dark brown eyes and black hair. She has a thin physique and stoops a little. Although she is gentle and soft spoken, her gestures are “measured” and at times she “functions automatically, her mind far away from her body”. As the story reveals, she has had a neglected childhood. As is reflected in “...from the iron grille of the basement she saw the soles of the shoes of the passers-by and not very much more. She had never seen a tree, a flower, or a bird.” Orphaned at the young age of fifteen, she had lived with her aunt who, “tucked her away from the prying eyes of the customers in the taprooms. Every evening her aunt would gaze at her with startled eyes as if surprised to find her among the family.” For the first time Mother finds a way to end her “present dreary life” through books; which opens “another world filled with warmth and interesting things, and in it there was surely a place for her”. Mother educates herself, which gives her courage to pursue a job in a hospital, and also finds a husband. Her married life has its own share of grief and sorrow. Her husband is all that she is not. After the initial romance is over, she fails to understand his attitude towards life, work, and family. This forces her to take the decision to migrate to Australia where she always remains consciously an outsider. Her desire to give the best to her son and daughter and her possessive love towards them, reflects the complexities that life offers.

2.5.2 Father

He is the father of the narrator of the story. He is an extrovert by nature and good looking as well. He is fashionable and wears smart and colourful clothes. “He wore bright straw hats and loud socks and fancy, buttoned-up boots”. He is friendly and “bared his heart with guileless abandon. He rarely had any secrets and there was no division in his mind between intimate and general matters”. He tries to bring some happiness into Mother’s life by taking her “to his favorite resorts, to music halls, and to tea-houses ... they danced nights away”. However, this does not gain Mother’s appreciation for too long. After the initial blissful years of marriage, his “world of commerce and speculation . . . is repugnant and frightening to her.” Their attitude towards life is opposite. While Mother is a person of ideals he is carefree; so much so that he often returns to work after he has exhausted his money though he does harbour plans of making a fortune. It is this attitude that makes her desire migration to another country hoping that that would bring stability in their lives.

2.5.3 Son

He is the narrator of the story, and so he does not talk much about himself. But we learn a lot about his character from his interaction with his mother. The child is conscious of his growing estrangement from his mother, because he quickly adjusts to the new land, while she hangs on to her old memories, "Before she was one day off the ship she wanted to go back." The child is very conscious of the fact that his mother is very different from other women; while others take pride in their "housewifely abilities", their house is always in a mess. But the child respects her love of literature, "I liked to hear Mother read." But she often creates embarrassing situations for him - he would be busy playing with other boys of his age, and she would call him in "saying she wanted to read to me and my sister." The children resent the way she takes them away from their games. The narrator turns to his father for support; he argues with the mother, asking why she spends so much time reading to the children. But his father does not take their side for long. The son also blushes at the way the mother makes them listen to music, by asking the salesman in the music shop to play gramophone records. The boy tries to reassure his mother by telling her about Benny, "who lived in our street and was always reading books and papers." But she refuses to concede the possibility of art and culture in the new land. He can argue with her successfully only when he is thirteen years old. Thus the author delineates both the characters, through description, dialogue, and incident.

2.6 BACKGROUND

Background or setting is an important element in a short story. It creates the mood as well as the psychological and physical affects appropriate to the theme of the story. The physical atmosphere describes the attitude of Mother:

"Our house always looked as if we had just moved in or were about to move out. An impermanent and impatient spirit dwelt within our walls. . ."

This is reflected upon further:

"...wherever we lived there were some cases partly unpacked, rolls of linoleum stood in a corner, only some of the windows had curtains. There were never sufficient wardrobes, so that clothes hung on hooks behind doors."

When they migrate to Australia, Mother's description is on similar lines. To her "there was an irritated superior air about the people ..., the customs officials, the cab men, the agent of the new house. Their face expressed something ironical and sympathetic, something friendly and at the same time condescending.. ."

2.7 PROSE STYLE

Though his work is based on his own experiences in Australia during the first half of the twentieth century, there is a timeless, universal quality about Waten's writing. His narrative has a vivid, bittersweet quality - though there is a touch of humour, pathos is never far away. Consider the scene in the stores, for instance; there is a comic quality to the way the mother goes to store after music store, and listens to the music, though she has no intention of buying anything, because she

does not have the money to do so. Without any comment by the author, the irony of the situation is obvious - music stores are ready to play gramophone records only for customers who plan to buy them, and these are the very people who can take the records home and listen to music. The reactions of the store managers are described very vividly:

The manager was stern, though I imagine he must have had some difficulty in keeping his serious demeanour.

“But do you ever intend to buy any records’?”

The manager repeated his first question and Mother, impatient at my hesitant tone, plunged into a long speech on our right to music and culture and in fact the rights of all men, speaking her own tongue as though the manager understood every word.

One of the most important qualities of Judah Waten’s prose style is its suggestiveness. In the passage quoted above, he never comments on the unfairness of society’s treatment of the poor, this is implied by Waten’s description of the way the storekeepers rudely rebuff them. Many examples can be found of this quality. A good example is the last line of the story, which indicates the hopelessness and poverty of the mother: “She turned away, her narrow back stooped, her gleaming black hair curled into a bun on her short, thin neck, her shoes equally down at heel on each side.”

Waten has impressive descriptive powers. Through small details, he creates a word picture of the scene. Consider the description of the house:

Wherever we lived there were some cases partly unpacked, rolls of linoleum stood in a corner, only some of the windows had curtains. There were never sufficient wardrobes, so that clothes hung on hooks behind doors. And all the time Mother’s things accumulated. She never parted with anything, no matter how old it was. A shabby green plush coat bequeathed to her by her own mother hung on a nail in her bedroom. . . . In those trunks there were bundles of old letters, two heavily underlined books on nursing, an old Hebrew Bible, three silver spoons given her by the aunt with whom she had once lived, a diploma on yellow parchment, and her collection of favourite books.

Such descriptions not only recreate the scene, they also tell us about the character of Mother, and her sense of values - she is not a brainless house-proud housewife, she values literature.

Another characteristic of Waten’s prose style in this short story is the use of dialogue. He presents incidents in a dramatic way:

“If I were a rich woman would you ask me that question? Mother replied and I repeated her words in a halting voice.

“Speak up to him,” she nudged me while I could feel my face fill with hot blood.

Waten makes good use of adjectives - “halting” voice, the boy blushing as his face fills with “hot” blood. He also supplies necessary details - the Mother refuses to learn English, and waits for the son to translate, and nudges him when he feels shy; later, she gets so emotional that she does not wait for the child to translate,

she starts “speaking her own tongue as though the manager understood every word”.

Waten’s prose is lucid, he does not use complex structures or difficult vocabulary. His powers of description and suggestion are impressive.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Write about Judah Waten’s prose style as reflected in ‘Mother’.

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- ii) Write a brief character sketch of Mother. (100 words).

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- iii) Justify the comment, “Be strong before people, only weep before God”

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

2.8 LET US SUM UP

In “Mother” Waten tells the story of a mother who bears with dignity a number of hardships throughout her life. She had her fixed notions and principles in life, and refuses to compromise with them. The story at one level is about the individual mother; on the other about relationships. Through description, dialogue and incidents, these relationships come alive.

2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- i) Judah Waten’s prose style is lucid, and effectively recreates the background and the characters. He does not comment directly – he shows us the poverty of the mother by referring to her down at heel shoes. Instead of reporting

events, he adopts the dramatic device of presenting dialogues which are in keeping with the characters- the father’s speeches are humorous, while the mother’s are full of philosophy and ideals.

- ii) The Mother had had a tough childhood; found no solace even in marriage; the new land too did nothing to contain her hardships. But she remained a striver throughout and left no stone unturned to provide for her children. In spite of material poverty she sees to it that her children are exposed to music and literature.
- iii) These words show the resilience and strength of the Mother who has always had to fight for her share. She believes that if you show your weakness to people, they would take advantage of you. This comment reveals her character - she is an introvert, who will not reach out to others for help.



UNIT 3 ‘SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT’ – GEORGE ORWELL

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 George Orwell: A Biographical Note
- 3.3 ‘Shooting an Elephant’
 - 3.3.1 Text
 - 3.3.2 Glossary
 - 3.3.3 Use of Poetic Devices
- 3.4 Comprehending the Essay
- 3.5 An Appreciation
 - 3.5.1 Varieties of Prose
 - 3.5.2 Style
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

3.0 OBJECTIVES

After having gone through this unit carefully, you will be able to:

- outline the theme of the essay, ‘Shooting an Elephant’
- identify the literary devices used in it, and
- evaluate Orwell’s prose style.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

George Orwell’s essay ‘Shooting an Elephant’ is not just about how someone shot an elephant. It is much more than that as we shall discuss in this Unit. Similarly in this Unit we do not examine Orwell’s choice of words and structure of sentences only. We try to examine the fabric of Orwell’s language from the point of view of the strategies of communication it incorporates: narrative, expository and descriptive. Then we extend the examination to an examination of the imagery, similes and metaphors used in the essay. We also get an insight into Orwell’s views about imperialism and how it was not conducive to the colonized.

3.2 GEORGE ORWELL: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

English essayist, novelist, journalist and political satirist, Orwell’s real name was Eric Arthur Blair (1903-’50). He was born at Motihari in Bihar on 23rd January, 1903. His father Richard Blair was sub-deputy opium agent in the Indian Civil Service. After his education in England he joined the Indian Imperial Police in 1922 and went to Burma. ‘Shooting an Elephant’, the essay that you are going to study, describes an event in which he participated as a police officer in Burma.

'For five years', he wrote later, 'I had been part of an oppressive system and it left me with a bad conscience..... I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate.' Orwell returned home in 1927 on a holiday and from there resigned his service in Burma. As an act of expiation he went to live among the down- and-outs in the East End of London and then in Paris. When his savings from Burma ran out, he worked as a dishwasher in Paris for about ten weeks. He described his experiences in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). Next appeared his novel *Burmese Days* (1934) based on his experiences in Burma.

Orwell was a prolific writer. From 1935 to '39 he published *A Clergyman's Daughter*, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, *Homage to Catalonia* and *Coming Up for Air*. Among his collections of essays are *Inside the Whale* (1940), *Critical Essays* (1946), and *Shooting an Elephant* (1950). However, the two works by which he is remembered more than any other are *Animal Farm* (1943) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The latter novel has been made into a film. Orwell died of tuberculosis on 21st January, 1950. Orwell, was an advocate of clarity in style because he thought that it was a product of clear thinking, which in turn was the source of political freedom and well-being of mankind.

3.3 'SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT'

After a brief introduction to the life and work of George Orwell, let us now read the essay. The glossary provides the meanings of difficult words.

3.3.1 Text

- 1) In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people – the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me. I was sub-divisional police officer of the town, and in an aimless, petty kind of way anti-European feeling was very bitter. No one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress. As a police officer I was an obvious target and was **baited** whenever it seemed safe to do so. When a nimble Burman **tripped** me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter. This happened more than once. In the end the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves. The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all. There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and **jeer at** Europeans.
- 2) All this was perplexing and upsetting. For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I **chucked up** my job and got out of it the better. Theoretically and secretly, of course I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lockups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos – all these oppressed me with an

intolerable sense of guilt. But I could get nothing into perspective. I was young and ill-educated and I had had to think out my problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East. I did not even know that the British Empire is dying, still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it. All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the Empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible. With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, *in saecula saeculorum*, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty.

- 3) One day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening. It was a tiny incident in itself, but it gave me a better glimpse than I had before of the real nature of imperialism — the real motives for which despotic governments act. Early one morning the sub-inspector at a police station town rang me up on the phone and said that an elephant was ravaging the bazaar. Would I please come and do something about it? I did not know what I could do, but I wanted to see what was happening and I got on to a pony and started out. I took my rifle, an old .44 Winchester and much too small to kill an elephant but I thought the noise might be useful *in terrorem*. Various Burmans stopped me on the way and told me about the elephant's doings. It was wild elephant, but a tame one which had gone "must". It had been chained as tame elephants always are when their attack of "**must**" is due, but on the previous night it had broken its chain and escaped. Its mahout, the only person who could manage it when it was in that state, had set out in pursuit, but had taken the wrong direction and was now twelve hours' journey away, and in the morning the elephant had suddenly reappeared in the town. The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it. It had already destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit stalls and devoured the stock; also it had met the municipal rubbish van and, when the driver jumped out and took to his heels, had turned the van over and inflicted violences upon it.
- 4) The Burmese sub-inspector and some Indian constables were waiting for me in the **quarter** where the elephant had been seen. It was a very poor quarter, a **labyrinth** of squalid bamboo huts, thatched with palm leaf, winding all over a steep hillside. I remember that it was a cloudy, stuffy morning at the beginning of the rains. We began questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone and, as usual, failed to get any definite information. That is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes. Some of the people said that the elephant had gone in one direction, some said that he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant. I had almost made up my mind that the whole story was a pack of lies, when we heard yells a little distance away. There was a loud, scandalized cry of "Go away, child! Go away this instant!" and an old woman with a **switch** in her hand came round the corner of a hut, violently **shooing** away a crowd of naked children. Some more women followed, **clicking** their tongues and exclaiming; evidently there was something that the children ought not to have seen. I rounded the hut and

saw a man's dead body **sprawling** in the mud. He was an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie, almost naked, and he could not have been dead many minutes. The people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth. This was the rainy season and the ground was soft, and his face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple of yards long. He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. His face was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony. (Never tell me, by the way, that the dead look peaceful. Most of the corpses I have seen looked devilish.) The friction of the great beast's foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit. As soon as I saw the dead man I sent an orderly to a friend's house nearby to borrow an elephant rifle. I had already sent back the pony, not wanting it to go mad with fright and throw me if it smelt the elephant.

- 5) The orderly came back in a few minutes with a rifle and five cartridges and meanwhile some Burmans had arrived and told us that the elephant was in the paddy fields below, only a few hundred yards away. As I started forward practically the whole population of the quarter flocked out of the houses and followed me. They had seen the rifle and were all shouting excitedly that I was going to shoot the elephant. They had not shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging their homes, but it was different now that he was going to be shot. It was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd; besides they wanted the meat. It made me vaguely uneasy. I had no intention of shooting the elephant — I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary — and it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you.

I marched down the hill, looking and feeling a fool, with the rifle over my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people **jostling** at my heels. At the bottom, when you got away from the huts, there was a metalled road and beyond that a miry waste of paddy fields a thousand yards across, not yet ploughed but **soggy** from the first rains and dotted with coarse grass. The elephant was standing eighty yards from the road, his left side towards us. He took not the slightest notice of the crowd's approach. He was tearing up bunches of grass, beating them against his knees to clean them and stuffing them into his mouth.

- 6) I had halted on the road. As soon as I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him. It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant — it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery — and obviously one ought not to do it if it can possibly be avoided. And at that distance, peacefully eating, the elephant looked no more dangerous than a cow. I thought then and I think now that his attack of "must" was already passing off; in which case he would merely wander harmlessly about until the mahout came back and caught him. Moreover, I did not in the least want to shoot him. I decided that I would watch him for a little while to make sure that he did not turn savage again, and then go home.
- 7) But at that moment I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me. It was an immense crowd, two thousand at least and growing every minute. It

blocked the road for a long distance on either side. I looked at the sea of yellow faces above the **garish** clothes — faces all happy and excited over this bit of fun, all certain that the elephant was going to be shot. They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching. And suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd — seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the “natives” and so in every crisis he has got to do what the “natives” expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. I had got to shoot the elephant. I had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing — no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.

- 8) But I did not want to shoot the elephant. I watched his beating the bunch of grass against his knees, with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. At that age I was not **squeamish** about killing animals, but I had never shot an elephant and never wanted to. (Somehow it always seems worse to kill a *large* animal.) Besides, there was the beast's owner to be considered. Alive, the elephant was worth hundred pounds; dead, he would only be worth the value of his tusks five pounds, possibly. But I had got to act quickly. I turned to some experienced looking Burmans who had been there when we arrived, and asked them how the elephant had been behaving. They all said the same thing; he took no notice of you if you left him alone, but he might **charge** if you went too close to him.
- 9) It was perfectly clear to me what I ought to do. I ought to walk up to within, say, twenty-five yards of the elephant and test his behaviour. If he charged; I could shoot; if he took no notice of me, it would be safe to leave him until the mahout came back. But also I knew that I was going to do no such thing. I was a poor shot with a rifle and the ground was soft mud into which one would sink at every step. If the elephant charged and I missed him, I should have about as much chance as a toad under a steamroller. But even then I was not thinking particularly of my own skin, only of the watchful yellow faces behind. For at that moment, with the crowd watching me, I was not afraid in the ordinary sense, as I would have been if I had been alone. A white man mustn't be frightened in front of “natives”, and so, in general, he isn't frightened. The sole thought in my mind was that if anything

went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do. There was only one alternative. I shoved the cartridges into the magazine and lay down on the road to get a better aim.

- 10) The crowd grew very still, and a deep, low, happy sigh, as of people who see the theatre curtain go up at last, breathed from innumerable throats. They were going to have their bit of fun after all. The rifle was a beautiful German thing with crosshair sights. I did not then know that in shooting an elephant one would shoot to cut an imaginary bar running from ear-hole to ear-hole. I ought therefore, as the elephant was sideways on, to have aimed straight at his ear-hole: actually I aimed several inches in front of this, thinking the brain would be further forward
- 11) When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the bang or feel the kick – one never does when a shot goes home – but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. In that instant, in too short a time, one would have thought, even for the bullet to get there, a mysterious terrible change had come over the elephant. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old, as though the frightful impact of the bullet had paralysed him without knocking him down. At last, after what seemed a long time – it might have been five seconds, I dare say he sagged flabbily to his knees. His mouth **slobbered**. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. One could have imagined him thousands of years old. I fired again into the same spot. At the second shot he did not collapse but climbed with desperate slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping. I fired a third time. That was the shot that did for him. You could see the agony of it jolt his whole body and knock the last remnant of strength from his legs. But in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to lower upwards like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skywards like a tree. He trumpeted for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay.
- 12) I got up. The Burmans were already racing past me across the mud. It was obvious that the elephant would never rise again, but he was not dead. He was breathing very rhythmically with long **rattling** gasps, his great mound of a side painfully arising and falling. His mouth was wide open – I could see far down into caverns of pale pink throat. I waited a long time for him to die, but his breathing did not weaken. Finally I fired my two remaining shots into the spot where I thought his heart must be. The thick blood welled out of him like red velvet, but still he did not die. His body did not even jerk when the shots hit him, the tortured breathing continued without a pause. He was dying, very slowly and in great agony, but in some world remote from me where not even a bullet could damage him further. I felt that I had got to put an end to that dreadful noise. It seemed dreadful to see the great beast lying there, powerless to move and yet powerless to die, and not even to be able to finish him. I sent back for my small rifle and poured shot after shot into his heart and down his throat. They seemed to make no impression. The tortured gasps continued as steadily as the ticking of a clock.

- 13) In the end I could not stand it any longer and went away. I heard later that it took him half an hour to die. Burmans were bringing **dahs** and baskets even before I left, and I was told they had stripped his body almost to the bone by the afternoon.
- 14) Afterwards, of course, there were endless discussions about the shooting of the elephant. The owner was furious but he was only an Indian and could do nothing. Besides, legally I had done the right thing for a mad elephant has to be killed like a mad dog, if its owner fails to control it. Among the Europeans, opinion was divided. The older men said I was right, the young men said it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie. And afterwards I was very glad that the coolie had been killed, it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.

3.3.2 Glossary

- Para 1) **baited** : to tease or torment an animal or a person intentionally
tripped : make someone stumble
jeer at : to laugh rudely (at)
- Para 2) **chucked up** : to throw (something) with a short movement of arms; here it means to give up
in saecula saeculorum (L) : for generation upon generation
- Para 3) **in terrorem (L)** : to cause terror, to frighten, as a warning
“must”: state of frenzy during the mating season
- Para 4) **quarter** : here, place or area
labyrinth : a network of narrow twisting passages or paths that meet and cross each other, through which it is difficult to find one's way
switch : a small thin stick, especially taken from a tree
shoo : (not formal) to drive away (as if) by saying “shoo”
click : a sound made by pressing two speech organs together (esp. the tongue against the roof of the mouth) and then moving them rapidly apart thus drawing air into the mouth
sprawl : to spread ungracefully; to stretch out (oneself or one's limbs) awkwardly while lying or sitting
- Para 5) **jostle** : to knock or push against (someone)
soggy : completely wet; heavy and usually unpleasant with wetness
- Para 7) **garish** : unpleasantly bright
- Para 8) **squeamish** : one who feels sick easily
charge : to rush in or as if in an attack
- Para 11) **slobbered** : let saliva run down
- Para 12) **rattle** : a lot of quick little noises
- Para 13) **dah** : knife with a blade about 18 inches long, narrow at the handle, broad and square at the tip

3.3.3 Use of Poetic Devices

'Shooting an Elephant' –
George Orwell

You must have noticed that Orwell's language is very clear and lucid. Clarity in style, Orwell believed, came from clarity in thought which was a necessary precondition of defending political freedom. Orwell's use of poetic devices such as irony, simile and alliteration only serve to highlight and communicate his thoughts more clearly. Let's explore these with the help of some exercises. We hope that the following questions will help you in locating some of the examples of literary devices in the essay. Answers are given at the end of the Unit.

Check Your Progress 1

Pick out examples from the text of the essay.

- i) Irony in the first paragraph.

.....

.....

.....

- ii) Metaphor in paragraph 7.

.....

.....

.....

.....

- iii) Similes in paragraphs 9, 10 and 12.

.....

.....

.....

.....

- iv) Alliteration in paragraph 11.

.....

.....

.....

.....

(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

3.4 COMPREHENDING THE ESSAY

Now that you have read the essay you may like to answer some of the questions on it. In case you find it difficult to recall the relevant facts from the essay you may read it again with a view to finding the answers. We have provided you with the answers to the question but don't read them until you have attempted to write the answer in your own words in the space provided for the purpose.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Describe in your own words the life of the English in Orwell's Burma.

.....

.....

.....

.....

- ii) What do you learn about the Burmese from the essay?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- iii) Should Orwell have killed the elephant? State in your own words the responses of the following on the incident:

- a) the natives
- b) the English and
- c) Orwell himself

.....

.....

.....

.....

(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

3.5 AN APPRECIATION

As you know already, Orwell served in Burma, between 1922-'27. 'Shooting an Elephant' was written about a decade after he left that country, in 1936. Before he wrote this essay he wrote a novel called *Burmese Days* (1934) and a significant

essay called 'A Hanging' (1931) in which he used Burma as the background of the events described. We are not sure if he wrote all these purely from memory or on the basis of the notes and diaries written while in Burma. J.R. Hammond, considers 'Shooting an Elephant' a 'literary recreation, as an artefact consciously shaped to point a moral rather than as a piece of reportage'. We need to examine Hammond's point of view more closely. It will obviously require an examination of the language of the essay as a means of communication.

3.5.1 Varieties of Prose

You have read in the first Block of this course, about narrative, descriptive and expository prose. We notice that Orwell succeeds in making a profound impact on our minds because he employs all the three varieties that we have already spoken about.

The Narrative Mode

'Shooting an Elephant' has a strong narrative element in it. The third sentence of the third paragraph of 'Shooting' begins thus:

Early one morning the sub-inspector at a police station.....

And with this begins the story. He immediately establishes a rapport with the reader. From this point onward we are ever discovering new facts of the story.

The Expository Mode

'Shooting', quite overtly seeks to drive a message home. The point is, that imperialism is evil. In this sense we can say that 'Shooting' is an expository essay without Orwell adopting the argumentative mode. Notice the message stated quite explicitly:

... imperialism was an evil thing (2nd paragraph)

... I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors the British (2nd paragraph).

Orwell's point of view is very clearly stated and effectively argued in the whole of the second paragraph and it is continued in the first two sentences of the third paragraph. According to him the narrative would expose the real motives 'behind the actions of the despotic governments'.

While the narrative is in progress, Orwell does not forget his case. Almost one third down the seventh paragraph he begins his analysis of the nature of imperialism, 'the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East'. His decision to shoot the runaway but then pacified elephant was guided not by his clear intellect but by the crowd that expected him to kill the elephant whether that was right or wrong. The role of a 'fearless white man' thrust upon him by imperialism takes over and the sensitive young man is for the moment, rendered subdued and helpless. 'I perceived' he concludes, 'in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys.' This conclusion, however, goes beyond the narrow, well-defined aims of an expository essay suggested by titles like, 'Socialism is the Best Form of Government', or 'Equal Pay for Women'.

The Descriptive Mode

In a way 'Shooting an Elephant' has the qualities of a good reportage. It has a point of view, and it is rich in descriptive details. We need to remind ourselves that Orwell was also a journalist and two of his major works, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) were commissioned by their publishers and he became the literary editor of the *Tribune*. 'Shooting' is visually very rich and powerfully descriptive. Obviously the most powerful is the section in which he describes the elephant (Paragraphs 8 through 12). We see in our mind's eye the elephant 'beating the bunch of grass against his knees' with a 'preoccupied grandmotherly air'. We see it 'suddenly, stricken, shrunken, immensely old' after it has been shot for the first time. We see its mouth slobber with senility 'settling upon him'. Orwell presents a graphic picture of the animal after every shot. After the fifth one we see its blood pouring out of its heart and spreading like 'red velvet'. Orwell compares the regular gasps of the dying animal with the ticking of a clock. But the comparison does more. It conveys a sense of stillness in which the man and elephant seem to be alone. We know that the Burmese are already rushing towards the dying beast and it is clear that much activity was afoot. However, at that moment, Orwell is only aware of the dying beast and he has conveyed this by his reference to the 'ticking of a clock', a sound heard only in silence. The effect here is a stroke of genius of a master artist.

Similes, Metaphors and Imagery

Apart from the elaborate brush strokes of description Orwell makes a visual appeal through novel comparisons expressed in the telling imagery of his similes and metaphors. We cannot forget the elephant had stripped the skin from the back of the dead Indian in the puddle 'as nearly as one skins a rabbit'. Similarly, the poor chances of Orwell's survival, if the elephant had charged, conveyed through the image of 'a toad under a steamroller', is unforgettable. In paragraph seven Orwell wishes to convey how the act of imperial rule distorts the lives and habits of the ruling elite. About the ruler and his agents collectively he says:

He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it.

What he wants to convey is that he does things—as Orwell was to shoot the elephant — that are not guided by the reason and common sense of the doer but by considerations of what he would be "expected" to do by the impoverished and illiterate crowd. The metaphor of the wearer of a mask presents this idea succinctly and powerfully.

3.5.2 Style

The language of 'Shooting an Elephant' is clear and transparent like a window-pane and does not draw attention to itself. Orwell made a life-long effort to achieve a nakedness of style. 'What is above all needed' he wrote, 'is to let the meaning choose the word.' Orwell's language modulates itself according to the need of the occasion, so much so that we cannot separate the language from the meaning and in a sense, the artist from his creation. Orwell is a committed artist. He writes not because he wishes to entertain others but because he has something urgent to say and he thinks that the world should be better than what it is. Orwell generally uses common English words. However, there are two instances in this essay of his use of Latin tags. His sentences are short; sometimes almost bare, of which there are many instances, some of which are given below:

His mouth slobbered.

I fired a third time.

I got up.

That would never do.

Let us look at the last six sentences of paragraph nine.

A white man mustn't be frightened in front of "natives"; and so in general he isn't frightened.

This is an axiom(an established or accepted statement). It has two parts that are balanced. "Mustn't" vaguely echoes 'isn't and frightened is repeated twice, once in both parts. These subtle sound effects leave behind them an apprehension of balance on the auditory level. This balance is mirrored at the level of understanding.

After Orwell has brought about order on the level of understanding he goes on to examine his own condition in the next sentence. The variety and multiplicity of the real world finds expression in a sentence much longer than the one that precedes it and another that follows. The sentence that begins with the words 'The sole thought in my mind' has 35 words. It comprehends variety. The next sentence is one in which Orwell examines his own situation, enmeshed as he was, in the event. Then comes Orwell's decision in a short sentence, that expresses in a way, the crux of response to the challenge that the situation had thrown before him. 'That would never do.'

From this point of extreme self centredness Orwell's vision again expands and so do the lengths of the sentences, until Orwell becomes a part of the confusion which he initially wanted to oppose but felt incapable of doing so in the event. This is just one instance of the language of the essay that pulsates like a living, breathing animal.

The style in fact grows so near to the subject that we do not think of it as a style. The words acquire the tone of a living, oral language. Compare the use of the word 'guts' in the first and second paragraphs. You almost hear it spoken. Notice the recreation, even a parody, of the rampage of the elephant, as described by the natives:

..... also it had met the municipal rubbish van, and when, the driver jumped out and took to his heels, had turned the van over and inflicted violences upon it.

Orwell achieves this immediacy also because he gives information about himself to the reader which is very personal. Here are some examples:

- As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear.
- I was young and ill-educated
- Never tell me, by the way, that the dead look peaceful. Most of the corpses I have seen looked devilish.

These intimate asides, as it were, bind us in a community of friendship with the author. They also indicate a kind of honesty and self-knowledge that one can

admire. 'Shooting an Elephant' lays bare the promptings in a human heart that are ordinary and universal and if appropriately responded to can make a better human being of us.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we examined what Orwell had to say about his experience of shooting an elephant in Burma while he was in service there as a police officer. Besides this, you learnt about many other things – Orwell's views on imperialism, the condition of the Europeans and the English, Indians and Burmese in Burma. We also examined Orwell's style.

3.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) In Moulenein happen to me. (The first sentence)
- ii) the sea of yellow faces.
..... their two thousand wills pressing me forward. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it.
- iii) as much chance as a toad under a steamroller.
..... as a people who see the theatre.
..... like red velvet
..... gasps continued as steadily as the ticking of a clock.
- iv) Senility seemed settled.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) The Europeans in general and the English in particular were hated by the Burmese. If a European woman went alone through the market, she was sure to be humiliated. The Burmese would spit betel juice over her dress. An Englishman tripped by a Burman on the play-ground and deliberately ignored by the umpire always evoked uproarious laughter among the natives. The police were teased whenever the natives thought they could do that with impunity. The result was that the Europeans also hated the natives. The 'greatest joy in the world' wrote Orwell about himself in Burma 'would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts', as the priests were the most fanatic of all and never lost the chance to jeer at the Europeans. This was a typical reaction of a European in Burma. One usually assumed that the imperial masters were in an enviable position in the colonies. However, after reading Orwell's account, one becomes aware of their predicament.
- ii) The picture of the Burmese that emerges is that of a poor people under foreign domination. The children who are being shooed away by an old lady with a stick in her hand, are naked. The houses in which they live are made of palm leaves and the people have to live in slums. The fact that they bring their knives and baskets for the elephant's flesh even before it is dead speaks about their poverty. The Burmese population, says Orwell, 'had no weapons and were quite helpless against it. This was obviously a result of the decision of the English rulers to disarm the natives.

The appearance of so many priests is also indirectly an indicator of the poverty of the Burmans under British rule. Apparently Indian workers were encouraged by the British to work in Burma. Given the fact that the Burmans were poor themselves, that was undesirable. Perhaps the British did that because they did not trust the natives and expected the immigrant Indian workers in Burma to be more loyal to them.

However, it is also clear that the Burmese are a brave and self-respecting people as they resisted the British in whatever way they could. While the British hated both the Indians and the Burmans, Orwell goes on to show that imperialism as an institution was rotten to the core.

- iii) It is clear from the essay that Orwell should not have killed the runaway elephant because it had only briefly run amok owing to an upsurge of the sexual instinct. At the time it was shot it was quietly eating the plants in a paddy field.
- a) The natives, however, still wanted Orwell to kill it because that would have been great spectacle for them. Besides this they were also interested in eating its flesh.
 - b) The older people among the Europeans thought that Orwell did the right thing in killing the elephant that had gone wild. It had killed a coolie. The younger officers thought that that should not have been done because it was such a useful and impressive animal and after all it had killed just an ordinary Indian labourer.
 - c) Orwell's own reactions, as recorded in the essay, are much more complex. He found out on the basis of his queries from the people on the site that the elephant had only temporarily run amok and that his master had gone in search of him in some other direction. So he thought that there was no point in killing the animal.

However, not to have killed the elephant would have meant so far as the Burmans were concerned, that Orwell was afraid and it would mean losing face. Hence in order to be seen as a fearless white man he had to shoot the elephant though he thought that there was no valour involved in killing it. After he had killed the elephant Orwell's thoughts went to the idea of his own defence in a court of law. The fact that it had killed a coolie provided a justification for the shooting and because the elephant belonged to an Indian who could do nothing beyond expressing his anger, Orwell knew that he could get away with it. However, the incident convinced him that imperialism was evil because it made the rulers inhuman and because it caused incalculable pain to the ruled. The elephant had been shot by Orwell merely to avoid losing face. But the introspection that then followed, helped a young British police officer to understand the evils of imperialism.

UNIT 4 ‘ON SEEING ENGLAND FOR THE FIRST TIME’ – JAMAICA KINCAID

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Jamaica Kincaid: A Biographical Note
- 4.3 ‘On Seeing England for the First Time’
 - 4.3.1 Text
 - 4.3.2 Glossary
- 4.4 Theme
- 4.5 Prose Style
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will

- appreciate that this is an essay and not a travelogue which the title seems to suggest;
- relate the essay to the author’s major theme in her writings;
- identify examples of:
 - 1) sarcasm
 - 2) irony
 - 3) pathos

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Jamaica Kincaid’s essay is personal and reveals the author’s passionate indignation, characteristic of a colonized person against her colonizer. This essay is in keeping with Samuel Johnson’s definition of an essay as ‘a loose sally of the mind’ and is limited in its range as it reflects the writer’s anger against the English who had colonized her country.

As we are all aware, when the Europeans began carving up the world, they paid no attention to the indigenous people. Systematically the natives (born to the land) were made to lose their cultural and spiritual heritage by imposition of White ways- religion, culture and education. This led to painful consequences as entire indigenous populations disappeared and civilization and cultures were destroyed. Free people became slaves and their lands and natural resources were snatched by the colonisers for themselves. Gold and other wealth was carried away and European education and languages were imposed.

Colonization, therefore, involved destroying or marginalizing the economy, as well as the political, administrative and economic structures of the colonized country. In order to co-opt the colonized people and rule over them, it was

imperative to control their mind. This was achieved by showing that their language, history, culture, religion were inferior.

‘On Seeing England for the First Time’ –Jamaica Kincaid

This is what Jamaica Kincaid is rebelling against in this essay.

4.2 JAMAICA KINCAID: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The Black writer Jamaica Kincaid was born in 1949 as Elaine Potter Richardson in the Caribbean island of Antigua, and did her schooling there. Although she was very intelligent, her education was interrupted when her third brother was born, as her stepmother was sick and could no longer support them. She went to the United States at the age of seventeen; she was supposed to be the bread winner for the family, but refused to send the money home, and instead tried to get an education. She studied photography at the New York School of Social Research, and attended Franconia College in New Hampshire for some time. In 1973, she changed her name to Jamaica Kincaid because her family disapproved of her writing, and she did not want them to know about it. She began writing articles and short stories, and took up a job with the magazine *The New Yorker*, where she worked as a staff writer from 1976 to 1995. She married Allen Shawn, the son of William Shawn, *The New Yorker's* longtime editor. Jamaica Kincaid is the author of novels, short stories, and non-fiction works. She is a visiting professor and teaches creative writing at Harvard University.

Issue of race, gender, class and colonialism dominate her writing, and the mother-daughter relationship is a recurrent theme. Her first work, *At the Bottom of the River* (1983) was a volume of short stories based on childhood in the Caribbean. Her first novel, *Annie John* (1985) set in Antigua, explores the fierce ups and downs of a daughter; love for her mother and her motherland. Other novels include *A Small Place* (1988), *Lucy* (1990), which begins with a girl leaving Antigua for America (as Jamaica Kincaid herself did) and *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1995), a first person narrative in which a woman looks back on her troubled life. The essay, ‘On Seeing England for the First Time’ was first published in Harper’s Magazine in 1991.

Speaking about her major theme in all her writings, she said: “I was always being told I should be something, and then my whole upbringing was something I was not: it was English”.

After you finish reading the essay, you will understand the essence of the above statement made by Jamaica Kincaid

4.3 ‘ON SEEING ENGLAND FOR THE FIRST TIME’

As is evident from its title, the essay was written after Kincaid’s first visit to England. In this Unit, we shall examine both the subject matter and the manner of presentation in the essay, and also take note of the various literary devices used by Kincaid to express her personal feelings on being colonized.

4.3.1 Text

When I saw England for the first time, I was a child in school sitting at a desk.

The England I was looking at was laid out on a map gently, beautifully, delicately, a very special jewel; it lay on a bed of sky blue – the background of the map – its yellow form mysterious, because though it looked like a leg of mutton, it could not really look like anything so familiar as a leg of mutton because it was England – with shadings of pink and green, unlike any shadings of pink and green I had seen before, **squiggly veins** of red running in every direction. England was a special jewel all right, and only special people got to wear it. The people who got to wear England were English people. They wore it well and they wore it everywhere: in jungles, in deserts, on plains, on top of the highest mountains, on all the oceans, on all the seas. When my teacher had pinned this map up on the blackboard, she said, “This is England” – and she said it with authority, seriousness, and **adoration**, and we all sat up. It was as if she had said, “This is Jerusalem, the place you will go to when you die but only if you have been good.” We understood then – we were meant to understand then – that England was to be our source of **myth** and the source from which we got our sense of reality, our sense of what was meaningful, our sense of what was meaningless – and much about our own lives and much about the very idea of us headed that last list.

At the time I was a child sitting at my desk seeing England for the first time, I was already very familiar with the greatness of it. Each morning before I left for school, I ate a breakfast of half a grapefruit, an egg, bread and butter and a slice of cheese, and a cup of cocoa; or half a grapefruit, a bowl of oat **porridge**, bread and butter and a slice of a cheese, and a cup of cocoa. The can of cocoa was often left on the table in front of me. It had written on it the name of the company, the year the company was established, and the words “Made in England.” Those words, “Made in England,” were written on the box the oats came in too. They would also have been written on the box the shoes I was wearing, came in; the **bolt** of gray linen cloth lying on the shelf of a store from which my mother had bought three yards to make the uniform that I was wearing had written along its edge those three words. The shoes I wore were made in England; so were my socks and cotton undergarments and the satin ribbons I wore tied at the end of two plaits of my hair. My father, who might have sat next to me at breakfast, was a carpenter and **cabinet** maker. The shoes he wore to work would have been made in England, as were his khaki shirt and trousers, his underpants and undershirt, his socks, and brown **felt hat**. Felt was not the proper material from which a hat that was expected to provide shade from the hot sun should have been made, but my father must have seen and admired a picture of an Englishman wearing such a hat in England, and this picture that he saw must have been so **compelling** that it caused him to wear the wrong hat for a hot climate most of his long life. And this hat - a brown felt hat - became so central to his character that it was the first thing he put on in the morning as he stepped out of bed and the last thing he took off before he stepped back into bed at night. As we sat at breakfast, a car might go by. The car, a Hillman or a Zephyr, was made in England. The very idea of the meal itself, breakfast, and its substantial quality and quantity, was an idea from England; we somehow knew that in England they began the day with this meal called breakfast, and a proper breakfast was a big breakfast. No one I knew liked eating so much food so early in the day; it made us feel sleepy, tired. But this breakfast business was “Made in England” like almost everything else that surrounded us, the exceptions being the sea, the sky, and the air we breathed.

At the time I saw this map - seeing England for the first time - I did not say to myself, "Ah, so that's what it looks like", because there was no longing in me to put a shape to those three words that ran through every part of my life no matter how small: for me to have had such a longing would have meant that I lived in a certain atmosphere, an atmosphere in which those three words were felt as a burden. But I did not live in such an atmosphere. When my teacher showed us the map, she asked us to study it carefully, because no test we would ever take would be complete without this statement: "Draw a map of England." I did not know then that the statement "Draw a map of England was something far worse than a declaration of war, for a flat-out declaration of war would have put me on alert. In fact, there was no need for war – I had long ago been conquered. I did not know then that this statement was part of a process that would result in my **erasure** – not my physical erasure, but my erasure all the same. I did not know then that this statement was meant to make me feel **awe** and small whenever I heard the word "England": awe at the power of its existence, small because I was not from it.

After that there were many times of seeing England for the first time. I saw England in history. I knew the names of all the kings of England. I knew the names of their children, their wives, their disappointments, their triumphs, the names of people who betrayed them. I knew the dates on which they were born and the dates they died. I knew their conquests and was made to feel good if I figured in them; I knew their defeats.

This view – the naming of the kings, their deeds, their disappointments – was the **vivid** view, the forceful view. There were other views, **subtler** ones, softer, almost not there – but these softer views were the ones that made the most lasting impression on me, the ones that made me really feel like nothing. "When morning touched the sky" was one phrase, for no morning touched the sky where I lived. The morning where I lived came on abruptly, with a shock of heat and loud noises. "Evening approaches" was another. But the evenings where I lived did not approach; in fact, I had no evening – I had night and I had day, and they came and went in a mechanical way: on, off, on, off. And then there were gentle mountains and low blue skies and moors over which people took walks for nothing but pleasure, when where I lived a walk was an act of labour, a burden, something only death or the automobile could relieve. And the weather there was so remarkable because the rain fell gently always, and the wind blew in gusts that were sometimes deep, and the air was various shades of gray, each an appealing shade for a dress to be worn when a portrait was being painted; and when it rained at twilight, wonderful things happened: People bumped into each other unexpectedly and that would lead to all sorts of turns of events – a plot, the mere weather caused plots.

The reality of my life, the life I led at the time I was being shown these views of England for the first time, for the second time, for the one hundred millionth time, was this: The sun shone with what sometimes seemed to be a deliberate cruelty; we must have done something to deserve that. My dresses did not rustle in the evening air as I strolled to the theatre (I had no evening, I had no theatre; my dresses were made of a cheap cotton, the weave of which would give way after not too many washings). I got up in the morning, I did my chores (fetched water from the public pipe for my mother, swept the yard), I washed myself, I went to a woman to have my hair combed freshly every day (because before we

were allowed into our classroom our teachers would inspect us, and children who had not bathed that day, or had dirt under their fingernails, or whose hair had not been combed **anew** that day might not be allowed to attend class). I ate that breakfast. I walked to school. At school we gathered in an auditorium and sang a hymn, “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” and looking down on us as we sang were portraits of the queen of England and her husband; they wore jewels and medals and they smiled. I was a Brownie. At each meeting we would form a little group around a flagpole, and after raising the Union Jack, we would say, “I promise to do my best, to do my duty to God and the queen, to help other people every day and obey the **scouts’ law**.”

But who were these people and why had I never seen them? I mean, really seen them, in the place where they lived? I had never been to England. England! I had seen England’s representatives. I had seen the governor-general at the public grounds at a ceremony celebrating the queen’s birthday. I had seen an old princess and I had seen a young princess. They had both been extremely not beautiful, but who among us would have told them that? I had never seen England, really seen it. I had only met a representative, seen a picture, read books, memorized its history. I had never set foot, my own foot, in it.

The space between the idea of something and its reality is always wide and deep and dark. The longer they are kept apart – idea of thing, reality of thing – the wider the width, the deeper the depth, the thicker and darker the darkness. This space starts out empty, there is nothing in it, but it rapidly becomes filled up with **obsession** or desire or hatred or love – sometimes all of these things, sometimes some of these things. That the idea of something and its reality are often two completely different things is something no one ever remembers; and so when they meet and find that they are not compatible, the weaker of the two, idea or reality, dies.

And so finally, when I was a grown-up woman, the mother of two children, and wife of someone, a person who resides in a powerful country that takes up more than its fair share of a continent, the owner of a house with many rooms in it and of two automobiles, with the desire and will (which I very much act upon) to take from the world more than I give back to it, more than I deserve, more than I need, finally then, I saw England, the real England, not a picture, not a painting, not through a story in a book, but England, for the first time. In me, the space between the idea of it and its reality had become filled with hatred, and so when at last I saw it I wanted to take it into my hands and tear it into little pieces and then crumble it up as if it were clay, child’s clay. That was impossible, and so I could only indulge in not-favourable opinions.

If I had told an English person what I thought, that I find England ugly, that I hate England; the weather is like a jail sentence; the English are a very ugly people; the food in England is like a jail sentence; the hair of English people is so straight, so dead-looking; the English have an unbearable smell so different from the smell of people I know, real people, of course, I would have been told that I was a person full of **prejudice**. Apart from the fact that it is I – that is, the people who look like me – who would make that English person aware of the unpleasantness of such a thing, the idea of such a thing, prejudice, that person would have been only partly right, sort of right: I may be capable of prejudice, but my prejudices have no weight to them, my prejudices have no force behind them, my prejudices remain opinions, my prejudices remain my personal opinion.

And a great feeling of rage and disappointment came over me as I looked at England, my head full of personal opinions that could not have public, my public, approval. The people I come from are powerless to do evil on a grand scale.

‘On Seeing England for the First Time’ –Jamaica Kincaid

The moment I wished every sentence, everything I knew, that began with England would end with “and then it all died, we don’t know how, it just all died” was when I saw the white cliffs of Dover. I had sung hymns and recited poems that were about a longing to see the white cliffs of Dover again. At the time I sang the hymns and recited the poems, I could not really long to see them again, because I had never seen them at all, nor had anyone around me at the time. But there we were, groups of people longing for something we had never seen. And so there they were, the white cliffs, but they were not that pearly, majestic thing I used to sing about, that thing that created such a feeling in these people that when they died in the place where I lived they had themselves buried facing a direction that would allow them to see the white cliffs of Dover when they were resurrected, as surely they would be. The white cliffs of Dover, when finally I saw them, were cliffs, but they were not white; you could only call them that if the word “white” meant something special to you; they were steep; they were so steep, the correct height from which all my views of England, starting with the map before me in my classroom and ending with the trip I had just taken, should jump and die and disappear forever.

4.3.2 Glossary

squiggly:	a line with twists and loops.
vein:	a narrow strip of a different colour in a map. (‘Squiggly veins’ suggest the red lines running through the map of England).
adoration:	great love or worship.
myth:	a story that originated in ancient times; something that is imaginary and not true.
porridge:	eaten at breakfast – a soft food made by boiling a cereal in water or milk.
bolt:	a quantity of cloth, wound in a roll.
cabinet:	a piece of furniture with drawer or shelves for storing or displaying things.
felt (hat):	wool, hair or fur rolled flat into a thick cloth.
compelling:	extremely interesting and exciting, so that one has to pay attention.
erasure:	the action of erasing(removing), rubbing out.
awe:	feeling of respect combined with fear or wonder.
vivid:	producing strong, clear pictures in the mind.
subtler:	difficult to detect or describe, not obvious.
anew:	in a new or different way; again.
scouts’ law:	laws of the Scout Association which aim to develop boys’ characters through discipline, outdoor activities and public service.
obsession:	a fixed idea that fills the mind.

prejudice: dislike or distrust of a person, group or custom that is based on fear or false information rather than on reason or experience, and that influences one's attitude or behaviour towards them.

4.4 THEME

A good essay is a cohesive unit and there has to be a continuous flow in which you discern the running theme or the subject of the author's thoughts. Let us see what is the main thought that links the first two paragraphs of the essay?

The first paragraph of the essay describes Kincaid's impressions of England as seen from a map in school. She found the shape of England resembling a leg of mutton, but quickly erased the comparison because: she had been conditioned to think of England as a great land which could not be compared with familiar objects like a leg of mutton. She thought of England as a precious jewel that only the English had the right to wear. For the Antiguans, England was a distant land, a holy land, like Jerusalem. In short, under their colonial masters, Antiguans had no existence of their own except what the English imposed on them.

In the second paragraph, the author tells us that the Antiguans had nothing they could call their own. As a child, Kincaid had realized that everything from breakfast cereal to school uniforms, from shoes to hats and cars plying on the streets of Antigua, were made in England. Thus, the second paragraph takes off from the first and reiterates that Antigua was nothing except what England gave it to exist as a British colony.

Let us analyse why Kincaid feels anguished at her plight. Kincaid's statement: "I had long ago been conquered" is full of anguish. She feels that she had no identity of her own and that she had been erased completely. The only thing that mattered was the compulsion to know about England and feel a sense of awe at its might and a sense of smallness because she was not English by birth, although her upbringing was English. She was pained at the thought that, like her, all other Antiguans were 'nobodies'; they could never be 'something'; they were just 'nothing'. And this was because the English colonizers had imposed their own culture on the natives

The children were taught only British history in the schools. The views children heard about the weather or the natural scenery, were views about the English weather and the English natural scenery. The exotic and picturesque beauty of England was totally alien to the children's imagination because the reality in Antigua was quite the opposite. There was also the compulsory singing of English hymns and paying obeisance to the English flag, with duty to the British Queen and the British people whom the children had never seen. This reveals how far the colonized Antiguans were forced to live an English life which was alien to their native culture. The literature they read did not relate to the Caribbean islands.

However, the opinion that Kincaid forms of England when she first visits it is completely different. She forms a very poor opinion of England. There is nothing in it that appeals to her. She dislikes England, its food, its weather and its people. Even the white cliffs of Dover that she had read about at school were a disappointment when she saw them. Kincaid knows that all her views about England, starting with the map and ending with her trip, will remain within her because colonized people were powerless to exert or express any opinion on the

mighty English. She is sure that her opinions, if expressed, will be contemptuously dismissed as irrational prejudices by the English. Therefore she cannot express her opinions.

‘On Seeing England for the First Time’ –Jamaica Kincaid

Check Your Progress 1

Briefly answer the following questions in your own words before you turn to the answers at the end of the Unit:

- i) How was Kincaid familiar with the greatness of England, as a child?

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- ii) Relate the essay to the phrase “Made in England”.

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- iii) How does the writer experience the space between the idea of England and the real England?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

4.5 PROSE STYLE

Style is the writer’s manner of presenting his/her theme, and involves a skilful use of language and literary devices. Jamaica Kincaid’s major theme in all her writings, including the present essay, is to show how the colonized people find themselves at a disadvantage in becoming something in life because they are forced to live an English life alien to their native culture. In expressing her personal indignation against the English who had colonized her native home, Antigua, Kincaid is at times sarcastic in her expression and at others, ironical. However, there is a rare degree of pathos that underlies both her sarcasm and her irony. Sarcasm refers to remarks that imply the opposite of what they appear to mean

and are intended to mock. In other words, sarcasm is a bitter sneer or a satirical remark in scorn or contempt. For instance, when the author says that everything in Antigua had the 'Made in England' label on it, she sarcastically points out that the only exceptions were "the sea, the sky, and the air we breathed that were not made in England".

Irony is another literary device used by Kincaid to present her thoughts. Irony is also the expression of one's meaning by saying the opposite of what one is thinking, and is often used to be amusing. One example of an ironical expression in the essay is when the author compares her situation with that of the English people. She says: "My dresses did not rustle in the evening air as I strolled to the theatre.. ." The remark is ironical because she neither had fine dresses, nor took an evening stroll, nor went to any theatre. In her own words: "I had no evening, I had no theatre; my dresses were made of cheap cotton, the weave of which would give way after not too many washings."

Pathos in literature implies a condition that excites a feeling of pity or sadness. In paragraph three, the author sums up the compulsion faced by the Antiguan to know all about England, in the statement: "Draw a map of England". Her remark excites pity at the Antiguan situation under the English domination: 'I did not know then that this statement was part of a process that would result in my erasure – not my physical erasure, but my erasure all the same. I did not know then that this statement was meant to make me feel awe and small whenever I heard the word "England": awe at the power of its existence, small because I was not from it'.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Pick up an example of sarcasm from the essay that has not been mentioned in the discussion above.

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- ii) Which paragraphs in the essay show a striking contrast between the: English situation and the Antiguan reality?

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- iii) Explain the pathos contained in the following statement occurring in paragraph two: ‘And this hat – a brown felt hat – became so central to his character that it was the first thing he put on in the morning as he stepped out of bed and the last thing he took off before he stepped back into bed at night.’

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have:

- examined Jamaica Kincaid’s essay ‘On Seeing England for the First Time’ as a personal essay that reveals her anger against the English in a very candid manner;
- gathered that the essay does not present an account of travel but is an attempt to give expression to the author’s thoughts as they occur to her; and
- noticed that the essay is heavily laced with sarcasm and irony, with a thread of pathos running throughout.

4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) As a child, Kincaid was already familiar with the greatness of England as everything she and her family used came from England, right from the breakfast cereal they ate each morning, to the clothes and shoes they wore. The child also knew of England’s greatness from what she read of its history at school, or from what she had read about it in a book or seen in a picture.
- ii) The essay is expressive of the indignation felt by the colonized people against their colonizers. Antigua, being a British colony, was in awe of its colonizers. As a child, Kincaid realized that her upbringing was totally English, with nothing of the native culture in it. All the things used by her and her family, like their breakfast and the clothes and shoes they wore, had “Made in England” written on them. This made her feel as if England had taken over her life and erased her very identity. It made her feel very small and insignificant, a ‘nobody’ who could never be ‘something’ in life.
- iii) The writer experiences the space between the idea of England and the real England when she first takes a trip to that country. This space had previously been filled with hatred, so that when she first sets foot in England, she feels like tearing everything into pieces. She finds everything about it and its

people ugly. Even the chalk-white cliffs of Dover do not appear white to her at all and she wonders why the English in Antigua had considered them so majestic and romantic.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) The author, as a schoolgirl, finds the map of England resembling a leg of mutton but remarks sarcastically that anything so great like England should not be compared to an ordinary object like a leg of mutton.
- ii) Paragraphs five and six.
- iii) The author's father had perhaps seen and admired a picture of an Englishman wearing a felt hat in England. Felt was right for a cold climate but not the right material for a hat that had to be used in the hot Antiguan climate. Kincaid's remark about her father's hat is more pathetic than sarcastic. It arouses a sense of pity in us for her father who wore "the wrong hat for a hot climate most of his long life" just because he admired the English way of life. The extent to which the colonizers had taken hold of the native mind arouses our pity for the native situation.

