

Block

3**POETRY**

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EXPERTS COMMITTEE

Prof. Satyakam
PVC, IGNOU

Prof. Yasmin Lukmani
Formerly University of Mumbai

Dr. Hema Raghavan
Formerly at Gargi College
University of Delhi

Dr. Anand Prakash
Formerly at Hans Raj College
University of Delhi

Dr. Rajnish K. Mishra
Special Centre for Sanskrit Studies
JNU, New Delhi

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Indira Gandhi University
Meerpur, Rewari

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Hindu College
University of Delhi

Dr. Tasneem Shahnaaz
Sri Aurobindo College
University of Delhi

School of Humanities IGNOU
Prof. Malati Mathur
Director (SOH)

English Faculty, IGNOU
Prof. Neera Singh
Prof. Nandini Sahu
Prof. Parmod Kumar
Dr. Pema Eden Samdup
Ms. Mridula Rashmi Kindo
Dr. Malathy A

Course Coordination and Editing

Prof. Neera Singh
Faculty of English
IGNOU

Course Preparation

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This Block has been adapted from existing IGNOU course material.

Secretarial Assistance

Ms. Monika Syal
AE, DP (SOH)

PRINT PRODUCTION

Mr. Y.N. Sharma
Assistant Registrar (Publication)
MPDD, IGNOU, New Delhi

Mr. Sudhir Kumar
Section Officer (Publication)
MPDD, IGNOU, New Delhi

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

In this Block i.e. **Block 3**, we will take up four Indian poets, writing in English. They are: **Sarojini Naidu, Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das and A.K. Ramanujan**. We shall be taking up two or three poems each by these six poets.

The beginnings in Indo Anglian poetry were made under adverse circumstances—adverse in the sense that the country was still groaning under the burden of a foreign government. The British had subjugated India. During this time three significant factors emerged and acted as a solvent of the doubts and perplexities of the situation. They were 1) the new intellectualism and renascent nationalism among the Indians, as symbolized by Raja Ram Mohan Roy; 2) the perseverance of the Christian missionaries; 3) the persuasiveness and metallic clarity of Macaulay's prose style. These factors went a long way in defining the course of Education in India.

English came to be regarded as the official language and many Indians accepted it as a medium of expression. Those who were gifted began to use it creatively in their prose and poetry. Indian poetry in English may be said to have emerged under unfavorable conditions but as conditions changed, this brand of poetry became more and more homely, indigenous and patriotic.

However, for an Indian writing in English, there were at least two problems and, sooner or later, he had to come to terms with them. The first was the quality of experience he would like to express in English. The Indian who used the English language felt, to some extent alienated. His development as a poet was irregular. The second was the difference in the idiom he used. There has always been a time-lag between the adoption of the living, creative idiom of the English speaking peoples and the Indians writing in English in India. Although this time-lag has not diminished completely, it has today considerably narrowed down.

An important characteristic of Indian verse in English in the mid-twentieth century has been its emergence from the mainstream of English literature and its appearance as part of Indian literature. It has been said that it is Indian in sensibility and content, and English in language. It is rooted in and stems from the Indian environment, and reflects its moves, often ironically.

In **Unit 1**, we will take up 'The Bird of Time', 'Bangle Sellers' and 'Palanquin Bearers' by Sarojini Naidu.

In **Unit 2** we will do 'Night of the Scorpion' and 'Enterprise' by Nissim Ezekiel.

In **Unit 3** 'My Grandmother's House' and 'Blood' by Kamala Das are the two poems that we will be discussing.

In **Unit 4** we will do 'Looking for a Cousin on a Swing' and 'A River' by A.K. Ramanujan.

Obviously we would have liked to include more than a couple of poems by each one of the above; and many more poets apart from the ones we have selected. But we have constraints of time and space. We hope nonetheless, that after having studied this Block, you will be interested enough to study poetry insightfully and be able to enjoy reading it.

We hope you find this course interesting and enjoy studying it!



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UNIT 1 SAROJINI NAIDU

Structure

- 1.1 Aims and Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction: Genesis of Indian Poetry in English
- 1.3 Sarojini Naidu
- 1.4 'Palanquin Bearers'
 - 1.4.1 Interpretation
 - 1.4.2 Images
- 1.5 'The Bird of Time'
 - 1.5.1 Interpretation
- 1.6 'Bangle Sellers'
 - 1.6.1 Interpretation
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

1.1 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This is the first Unit which deals with Indian Poets writing in English. The poet that we intend to discuss in this unit is Sarojini Naidu.

Our aim through this Unit is to:

- provide you with a background to the beginnings of Indian English in our country;
- introduce you to three poems of Sarojini Naidu;
- examine the development of imagery in the poems; and
- establish a link between the different parts of the poems.

By the end of this unit you should be able to understand, the poems taught in this unit and also to have a fair understanding of Sarojini Naidu as a poet. You should also be able to read her poems and appreciate their language, imagery and form. You should also be fairly proficient in tracing the development of Indian English poetry.

1.2 INTRODUCTION: GENESIS OF INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH

How did Indians suddenly begin to write poetry in English, which was a foreign language? This question cannot but strike anyone who goes looking for the origins of Indian English poetry. Today, in the second decade of the 21st century, English seems to have a very stable, even natural, place in India's social and cultural life. But even today, when we step out of our cities and go deep into the interiors of the hinterland, the foreignness of English at once becomes clear. Hardly anyone can really understand the

language and if a few do, their command over it is questionable. That is why the English, Americans and other native speakers of English continue to speak loudly, haltingly, or through interpreters when they are in India. But about 200 years ago, when the British were far from established in India, when the sight of Englishmen was a great novelty in the streets of Indian cities, the English language was very much a foreign tongue. Yet, the fact remains that nearly a quarter of a century before English education was institutionalized or the first Indian universities were founded, there was already a growing crop of Indians who chose English to write their poetry in. How or why did this happen?

Indian English poetry was the product of a large cultural or civilizational encounter between Britain and India. Let us try to understand this encounter in some depth before we focus more directly on Indian English poetry.

British imperialism started by concentrating on trade. It had a policy of non-interference with the religious and cultural traditions of the people it conquered. Conquest itself was not the aim to begin with but was almost thrust upon the East India Company in its fight to protect its trade interests. The volatile political situation after the fall of the Mughal empire gave John Company (as the East India Company was popularly known) a unique opportunity to meddle in the affairs of the warring Indian princes. The Company used its leverage as a seemingly neutral outsider to its advantage. After its trading settlements in Surat and Hoogly were attacked, it began to fortify them and to arm itself. It raised an army mostly by recruiting local mercenaries and training them in modern, European methods of warfare. In the Battle of Plassey in 1757 a small but well trained army of Indians, led by a small band of British officers under Robert Clive, defeated the huge but divided army of Siraj-ud-Daula, the Nawab of Bengal. The model of this battle can be seen in that uniquely Indian tribute to the Raj, the Victoria Memorial, in Calcutta. The Battle of Plassey inaugurated a series of military victories for the British, culminating in an almost unprecedented paramouncy over the whole of the Indian sub-continent.

It was through this conquest that India bore the full brunt of Western or, more properly, modern culture. This impact was extensive and thorough going so as to entirely transform Indian society. Such an upheaval, perhaps, had no parallel in Indian history. Even the impact of Muslim rule in India had arguably been less far-reaching. It is not for us to analyse or describe this impact in great detail. That would not only be outside the scope of such a course, but also somewhat tangential to our central concern, which is with Indian English poetry. It is only important to bear in mind that the British rule in India was not only oppressive, but also highly exploitative. It was a system in which India's wealth was systematically extracted and expropriated by Britain.

But on the flip side the British also built the railways and developed the post and telegraph system. They built canals and developed Indian infrastructure in some areas. Indians began to access the rich trove of knowledge, both in the humanities and social sciences and in science and technology, which the West had through their access to English education. English had been introduced by the British as an aid to establishing the empire by the famous Minute of Macaulay in 1835.

Macaulay truly believed that English could do for India what the revival of classical learning did for Europe during the Renaissance or what the languages of Western Europe did for Russia. For him, the English had a civilizing and modernizing mission in India. Macaulay was already aware of the growing power and spread of the English language and almost anticipated its present eminence. He also observed that Indians seemed to have a special affinity for English, a language they mastered more easily than other Europeans themselves. He hoped that the new education system would “form a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, morals, and in intellect.” Macaulay, despite his imperial agenda, in fact had a good deal of support from Indians themselves. Rammohun Roy, one of the leading intellectuals and social reformers, had helped establish an Association to promote European learning and science as far back as 1816.

In 1857 the three universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, one in each of the three presidencies of the Empire, were established. With that, English education became deeply entrenched in India. As Macaulay had desired, a new class of Indians was created who were perfectly at home both in the English language and English culture. Naturally, it was from this class that Indian English writers came.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What is your understanding of the origin of Indian English poetry?

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1.3 SAROJINI NAIDU

Sarojini Naidu also known as *Bharatiya Kokila* (The nightingale of India) was more than a poet. She was one of the most illustrious Indians who contributed to the cultural, political and social advancement of the nation in numerous ways.

Naidu was born on February 13, 1879. Her father Aghoranath Chattopadhyaya was a scientist and philosopher. He was the founder of the Nizam College Hyderabad. Sarojini Naidu's mother Barada Sundari Devi was a poetess and used to write poetry in Bengali. Sarojini Naidu was the eldest among the eight siblings. One of her brothers Birendranath was a revolutionary and her other brother Harindranath was a poet, dramatist, and actor.

Sarojini Naidu was a brilliant student. She was proficient in Urdu, Telugu, English, Bengali, and Persian. At the age of twelve, Sarojini Naidu attained national fame when she topped the matriculation examination at Madras University. Her father wanted her to become a mathematician or scientist but Sarojini Naidu was interested in poetry. She started writing poems in English. Impressed by her poetry, the Nizam of Hyderabad, gave her a scholarship to study abroad. At the age of 16, she traveled to England. There she met

famous laureates of her time such as Arthur Simon and Edmond Gosse. It was the poet and critic Edmund Gosse who implored Sarojini Naidu to reveal “the heart of India” in her poems. Her earlier compositions were entirely “Western in feeling and imagery”, and “totally without individuality”.

He convinced Sarojini to stick to Indian themes – India’s great mountains, rivers, temples, social milieu, to express her poetry.

Sarojini Naidu took his advice seriously and consequently her three volumes of poetry *The Golden Threshold*, *The Bird of Time* and *The Broken Wing*, are essentially Indian in tenor and tone. and have attracted huge Indian and English readership.

At the age of 15, she met Dr. Govindarajulu Naidu and fell in love with him. He was a non-brahmin, and a doctor by profession. After finishing her studies at the age of 19, she married him during the time when inter-caste marriages were not allowed. It was a revolutionary step but Sarojini’s father fully supported her and Sarojini Naidu led a happily married life and had four children.

Sarojini Naidu joined the Indian national movement in the wake of the partition of Bengal in 1905. She came into contact with Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Rabindranath Tagore, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Annie Besant, C.P.Rama Swami Iyer, Gandhiji and Jawaharlal Nehru. She awakened the women of India. She brought them out of the kitchen. She traveled from state to state, city after city and asked for the rights of the women. She re-established self-esteem in the women of India.

In 1925, Sarojini Naidu presided over the annual session of Indian National Congress at Kanpur. She played a leading role during the Civil Disobedience Movement and was jailed along with Gandhiji and other leaders. In 1942, Sarojini Naidu was arrested during the “Quit India” movement and was jailed for 21 months with Gandhiji. She shared a very warm relationship with Gandhiji and used to call him “Mickey Mouse”. After Independence, Sarojini Naidu became the Governor of Uttar Pradesh. She was India’s first woman governor. Sarojini Naidu died in office on March 2, 1949.

Sarojini Naidu wrote poetry where images and metaphors came readily out of her imagination. Her poetry is intensely emotional and passionate. The influence of the British Romantic poets can be perceived in her poetry, but what makes it interesting and relevant to the Indian tradition is the sustenance from the twin indigenous sources. Her poetry continues to delight the readers by its sheer simplicity and sweetness.

Sarojini Naidu’s poetry presents a kaleidoscope of Indian scenes, sights, sounds and experiences transmuted into a fantastic vision of colour and rhythm. Her themes are mostly familiar and even insignificant. But they are vivified through the magic glass of her imagination. There are in her poetry, Indian dancers, wandering singers, fishermen, palanquin bearers and bangle-sellers and snake-charmers to mention only a few.

Her poems are available in 4 volumes-*The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912), *The Broken Wing* (1917) and *The Feather of Dawn* (1961)(posthumously).

1.4 'PALANQUIN BEARERS'

Let us take the 'Palanquin Bearers'. First of all let us read the poem.

Lightly O lightly, we bear her along,
 She **sways** like a flower in the wind of our song;
 She **skims** like a bird on the foam of a stream,
 She floats like a laugh from the lips of a dream
 Gaily, o gaily we glide and we sing,
 We bear her along like a pearl on a string.

Softly, o softly we bear her along,
 She hangs like a star in the dew of our song;
 She **springs** like a **beam** on the **brow** of the tide,
 She falls like a tear from the eyes of a bride.
 Lightly, o lightly we glide and we sing,
 We bear her along like a pearl on a string.

Glossary

Sways: lean or swing from side to side.

Skims: moving fast just above the surface.

Springs: bounces

Beam: ray of light

Brow: the top part

1.4.1 Interpretation

'Palanquin Bearers' is the first poem in the first section of *The Golden Threshold* which has three sections i.e. Folk Songs, Songs for Music and Poems.

'Palanquin Bearers' was composed on Aug. 7, 1903, as is borne out by the facsimile of the poem in Sarojini Naidu's handwriting. This characteristically Indian poem takes us back to the India of the beginning of the twentieth century, when palanquins were a common sight in the Indian Streets. The streets of Sarojini's home-town Hyderabad must have been full of them at that time. One can even today go to remote Indian villages, far removed from the modern means of conveyance, and observe the palanquin-bearers carrying in the *palki* a young lady most probably to her husband's house. The palanquin-bearers usually sing songs in rhythmic harmony with their footsteps.

The whole setting of this poem is romantic. The movement of the poem suggests the rhythmic march of the palanquin-bearers through the streets. The bearers sing gaily of the beauty of the lady. A soft music leaps up in the air as the palanquin-bearers bear the blooming beauty along. The tone here is in complete rapport with the heart beats of the beauty inside. The palanquin, the bearers, the inmate inside, the song and the springy movement all fuse into one another.

The poem consists of 2 stanzas, each of six rhymed lines. The first and the fifth lines in each stanza serve as a refrain. The rhythm is of comparatively swift movement corresponding with the swaying movement of the palanquin,

and the rise and fall (the stressed and unstressed sound) of the bearers' footsteps.

1.4.2 Images

'Palanquin Bearers' gains richness through the images which lie inherent in the native consciousness. It explodes with lovely romantic images. The quick succession of images shows the Shellyan impact. No fewer than seven similes emphasize her beauty, she "sways like a flower", "skims like a bird", "floats like a laugh", "hangs like a star", "springs like a beam" and "falls like a tear"; the bearers of her palanquin bear her along like a "pearl on a string".

Here we have both concrete and abstract images. There are vivid and concrete images executed with gnomic terseness like skimming on the foam of a stream, a beam springing on the tide and tear falling from the eyes of a bride.

There are also some vague images in the manner of the pre-Raphaelites, like a laugh from the lips of a dream, swinging like a flower in the wind of a song and hanging like a star in the dew of a song.

The image "She falls....bride" is highly imaginative and suggestive. It embodies the age-old story of an Indian bride's sadness, whatever be the cause—separation from the parents etc.

The tune and the movement go together in this song, where we have what is rhetorically called, the kinesthetic image, or the image of felt motion 'swaying', 'skimming', 'floating'. It may sound nostalgic but it is very true to the Indian experience.

The images indicate a lightness of touch, a buoyancy, and create a dream like atmosphere.

J.H. Cousins remarks that "there is not a thought" in this poem, "Yet its charm is instantaneous and complete". The poem can thus be enjoyed for the sake of words and its swiny movement and perpetual music.

Even though the setting of the poem 'Palanquin Bearers' is specifically Indian, it acquires its appeal from a certain exoticism of setting or certain ideals or emotions which inspire them. The emotions which suffuse 'Palanquin Bearers' are not confined to India alone. The sadness of a departing bride and the joy of those escorting her to her new home, like divine agents, the stages of the inexorable march of human life, is expressed through a rocking rhythm and cosmic imagery.

The poem seems to be an allegory on the movement of time gleefully carrying man towards an unknown but inevitable destiny, which can either be "like a laugh from the lips of a dream" or "like a tear from the eyes of a bride". Possibly both.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Is the poem 'Palanquin Bearers' an allegory?

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- 2) Pick out a few images from the poem that you find suggestive and imaginative.

Sarojini Naidu

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1.5 'THE BIRD OF TIME'

Now let us take up the second poem 'The Bird of Time'.

O Bird of Time, on your fuitful **bough**

What are the songs you sing?....

Songs of the glory and gladness of life,

Of **poignant** sorrow and **passionate strife**,

And the **tilting** joy of the spring;

Of hope that **sows** for the years unborn,

And faith that dreams of **tarrying** morn,

The **fragrant** peace of the twilight's breath,

And the **mystic** silence that men call death.

O Bird of Time, say where do you learn

The changing **measures** you sing?

In blowing forests and breaking tides

In the happy laughter of new made brides,

And the nests of the new-born spring;

In the dawn that **thrills** to a mother's prayer,

In the dawn that shelter's a heart's **despair**

In the sight of pity, the sole of hate,

And the pride of a soul that has conquered fate.

Glossary

Bough	: branches
poignant	: deeply felt distress
passionate	: very strong beliefs or feelings
strife	: conflict, disagreement
tilting	: influencing
sows	: means to cause it to begin or develop
tarrying	: delay leaving
fragrant	: pleasant, sweet (smell)
mystic	: involving religious or spiritual powers
measures	: songs/themes
thrills	: a feeling of great pleasure or excitement
despair	: feeling of hopelessness

1.5.1 Interpretation

After *The Golden Threshold* (1905) Sarojini Naidu's second publication, *The Bird of Time* appeared in 1912. The 107 pages of this volume contain 46 poems. In poetical terms it is a more mature book filled with philosophical reflections and thoughts. In this poem Sarojini calls herself figuratively the Bird of Time. The poem is important in so far as Sarojini indicates the subject matter of her poetry and the source where from she has learnt the changing measure of her songs. Asked about the nature of her songs, the Bird of Time replies that her songs deal with life's glory and gladness, sorrow and conflict, joy and hope — faith, twilight and death.

The poem 'The Bird of Time' rings with melody throughout, and suggests the totality of life wherein pleasure and pain hold an even scale. The poem consists of two stanzas of nine lines each.

In the first stanza, the Bird of Time has been addressed and asked about the subject matter of her songs. The reply is that the songs are about the varied emotions of human life i.e. joys, sorrows, troubles, fights, hopes, faith, peace and death.

In the second stanza, she has been asked to disclose the location where she learned the "changing measures" of her song. And the reply that comes is: that almost any situation has been able to evoke and inspire the Bird of Time to sing. It may have been the forest or the waves at the sea-side. It could have been the laughter and happiness of a new bride. It may have been the dawn of hope or the dawn of despair; or the emotions of pity, hate or pride. Therefore, any situation or emotion has been capable of inspiring the songs of the bird of Time.

The poetry of Sarojini Naidu embodies her bold defiance of fate. Eternal joy can be experienced only by those who have strength and courage to defeat the deceptive designs of fate. In this poem, when the poetess asks the bird about the sources of its profound joy its delightful music, it points to the precious possession emanating from the triumph over fate.

The desire to escape from the hard realities of life does not touch the valiant souls that aspire to defy and defeat fate. They learn to pass through the moments of failure and frustration easily and to extract peace and joy from them. Sarojini herself lived a life of this type. She continually suffered from ill health and gloom and often longed for peace and poise, but soon her indomitable spirit would come out of such a state of despondency triumphantly and she would rush to the joyful realm of dreams and hope. The variety of emotions that goad the bird in the poem to burst in spontaneous music make it a typical Indian bird.

Sarojini Naidu is a gifted artist who shows in all her poetry a great flair for ornamental and highly sophisticated style which abounds in lovely similes, metaphors, images and symbols.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) How does the poem 'The Bird of Time' reflect Naidu's optimistic nature?

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1.6 'BANGLE SELLERS'

And finally, let us take up the last and third poem by Sarojini Naidu:

Bangle-seller are we who bear
 Our shining loads to the temple **fair**
 Who will buy these delicate, bright
Rainbow-tinted circle of lights?
 Lustrous tokens of **radiant** lines,
 for happy daughters and happy wives.

Some are **meet** for a **maiden's** wrist,
 Silver and blue as the mountain-mist,
 Some are **flushed** like the buds that dream
 On the **tranquil** brow of a woodland stream;
 Some are **aglow** with the **bloom** that **cleaves**
 To the **limpid** glory of new-born leaves.

Some are like fields of sunlit corn,
 Meet for a bride on her bridal morn;
 Some, like the flame of her marriage fire;
 Or rich with the **hue** of her heart's desire,
 Tinkling, **luminous** tender, and clear
 Like her bridal laughter and bridal tear.

Some are purple a gold-flocked grey,
 For her who has journeyed through life midway,
 Whose hands have cherished, whose love has blest
 And cradled fair sons on the faithful breast,
 Who serves her house-hold in fruitful pride,
 And worships the Gods at her husband's side.

Glossary

fair	: fete
rainbow tinted	: multi-coloured like a rainbow
circles of light	: brightly shining
radiant	: glowing brightly with joy
meet	: fit
maiden	: young unmarried girl
flushed	: blush—to go red in the face
tranquil	: peaceful
aglow	: glowing
bloom	: healthy/fresh appearance
cleaves	: sticking together
limpid	: clear
hue	: colour/shade
luminous	: glowing with light

1.6.1 Interpretation

‘Bangle-Sellers’ as you can see is a poem of 4 stanzas of 6 lines each rhyming aa bb cc.

This poem throws light on Sarojini Naidu’s conception of Indian womanhood. According to her, the lives of women should be radiant, the lustrous token of which are the delicate bright rainbow-tinted bangles. The first duty of a woman is to be happy, since her happiness radiates happiness to those who come into contact with her. To be a happy daughter and wife is the goal to which Indian women ought to aspire. Marriage to an Indian woman means much more than to a man since the woman is in most cases economically dependent. It is, therefore, a turning point in her life.

Sarojini symbolizes the heart’s desire of a bride with the rich red colour of her bangles. The would-be bride responds to the laughter of the intimate companions of her girlhood as they tease her about her coming marriage. She sheds tears as she leaves her father’s house for her husband’s. Hence Sarojini Naidu speaks of the bridal laughter and the bridal tears which like the bangles she wears are, “Tinkling, luminous, tender and clear”.

‘Bangle Sellers’ confines itself to the different stages in a woman’s life, relating each stage to the bangles appropriate to it. Thus the “rainbow-tinted circles of light” carried by the bangle sellers to the temple fare are ‘Lustrous tokens of radiant lives/for happy daughters and happy wives’.

The focus here is only on the radiance and not on the desolation at all. Sarojini Naidu mingles description with reflection in ‘Bangle Sellers’. It is beautifully executed and shows her descriptive skill with sustained thought.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) How does the poem “The Bangle Sellers” throw light on Sarojini Naidu’s conception of Indian Women?

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have

- given you a brief background to the beginnings of Indian English poetry
- introduced you to the Indian poet Sarojini Naidu
- interpreted three poems by her

1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) English education was introduced in India by the British. Macaulay’s Minute formally sealed the pact of introducing English. Macaulay

believed that the use of this language would “form a class of persons who were Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinions and intellect.”

Sarojini Naidu

Check Your Progress 2

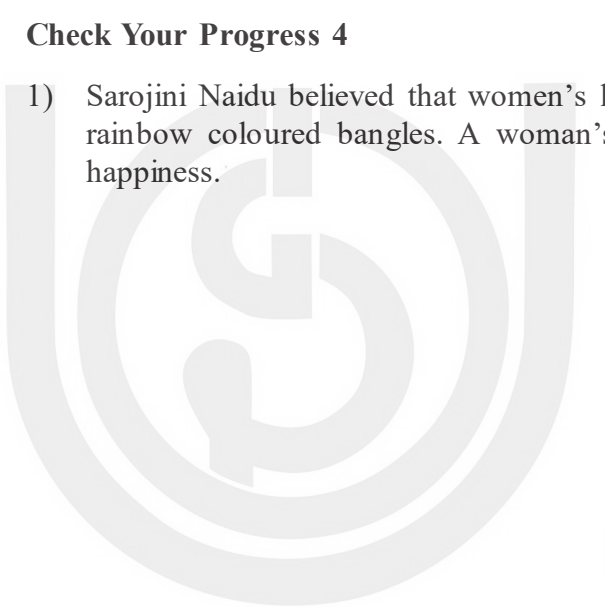
- 1) The poem is an allegory on the movements of time which is carrying man towards his ultimate destiny.
- 2) Sways like a flower, skims like a bird, floats like a laugh, hangs like a star, springs like a beam and falls like a tear, are some very suggestive images.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) ‘The Bird of Time’ reflects Naidu’s optimism, because inspite of a variety of emotions like joy, sorrow and conflict, the bird still bursts into joyful song. Sarojini Naidu herself suffered from ill health and gloom but her indomitable spirit would spring out of despair and despondency and rush into the happy realms of hope and dreams.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Sarojini Naidu believed that women’s lives should be radiant like the rainbow coloured bangles. A woman’s first duty was to aspire for happiness.

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UNIT 2 NISSIM EZEKIEL

Structure

- 2.1 Aims and Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Nissim Ezekiel
- 2.4 'Night of the Scorpion'
 - 2.4.1 Introduction
 - 2.4.2 Text
 - 2.4.3 Interpretation
 - 2.4.4 Irony
 - 2.4.5 Indian Colour
 - 2.4.6 Style and Technique
- 2.5 'Enterprise'
 - 2.5.1 Introduction
 - 2.5.2 Text
 - 2.5.3 Interpretation
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

2.1 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This is the second Unit of this Block. The poet that we intend to discuss in this Unit is Nissim Ezekiel.

In this Unit we will interpret two poems by Nissim Ezekiel and comment upon the development of imagery in the poems. We will also try and establish a link between their different parts.

By the end of this unit you should be able to understand the poems taught in this unit and also have a fair understanding of Nissim Ezekiel as a poet. You should also be able to read his poems with an understanding of their use of language, imagery and form.

2.2 INTRODUCTION

We begin this unit with a study of two poems by Nissim Ezekiel. We will follow the usual pattern of learning something about his life and career before studying individual poems in detail.

The comprehension exercises given in this unit will add to your indepth understanding of the poet and the poems. The difficult words have been explained in the glossary after every poem.

Nissim has often been called the father of modern Indian English poetry. Bruce King says: "Of the group of poets attempting to create a modern English poetry in India, Nissim Ezekiel soon emerged as the leader who advised others, set standards and created places of publication" (Modern Indian Poetry in English, p.91).

Perhaps, what distinguishes the Indian English modernists from their predecessors is their precise use of language, especially of well-crafted images, and their largely ironic stance. The modernist also brought a whole new range of subject matter into their poetry. Nissim's poetry, for example, focuses on life in Bombay, with all its difficulties, on human sexuality, on typically modern problems of alienation and identity, without giving up on a more traditional desire to find an answer to these problems. The recurring theme of sexuality and of the male-female relationship is also an important element in modern poetry. The earlier poets did not address these issues in quite so direct and blunt a fashion. Ezekiel's poetry displays a variety of styles and themes, but his strength is clearly the introspective, ironic, somewhat humorous poems of self-exploration and self-formation.

2.3 NISSIM EZEKIEL

Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004) is one of the most distinguished contemporary Indian poets in English. He has written some of the most difficult and obscure poems and also some of the most stirring and accessible ones. But there is hardly a poem where he does not pursue his own temperament. Ezekiel does not believe in total credits or ideologies. He is one of the most personal and intimate of all Indian poets.

Ezekiel was born on 16 December 1924 in Mumbai (Maharashtra). His father was a professor of Botany at Wilson College, and his mother was Principal of her own school. The Ezekiels belonged to Mumbai's Marathi-speaking Jewish community.

In 1947, Ezekiel got a BA in Literature from Wilson College, University of Mumbai. In 1947-48, he taught English literature and published literary articles. After dabbling in radical politics for a while, he went to England in November 1948. He studied philosophy at Birkbeck College, London. After a three and a half years stay, Ezekiel worked his way home as a deck-scrubber aboard a ship carrying arms to Indochina.

He married Daisy Jacob in 1952. In the same year, Fortune Press published his first collection poetry, *The Bad Day*. He joined the *Illustrated Weekly of India* as an assistant editor in 1953 for two years. Soon after he published his second book of verse entitled *Ten Poems*. For the next 10 years, he worked as a broadcaster on Art and Literature for All India Radio.

After working as an advertising copywriter and general manager of a picture frame company (1954–59), he co-founded the literary monthly *Jumpo*, in 1961. From 1961 to 1972, he headed the English department of Mithibai College, Bombay. The *Exact Name*, his fifth book of poetry was published in 1965. During this period he held short-term tenure as visiting professor at the University of Leeds (1964) and University of Pondicherry (1967). In 1976, he translated Jawaharlal Nehru's poetry from English to Marathi, in collaboration with Vrinda Nabar, and co-edited a fiction and poetry anthology

An artist who is willing to take pains, to cultivate reticence, to pursue the profession of poetry with a sense of commitment, Ezekiel's poems are as a rule lucid and are splendidly evocative and satisfyingly sensuous. Ezekiel's poetry is both the instrument and the outcome of his attempt as a man to come to terms with himself. One finds in the poems the imprint of a keen, analytical mind trying to explore and communicate, on a personal level,

feelings of loss and deprivation. “Scores of my poems”, he says, “are obviously written for personal therapeutic purposes.” This is why he described the happenings of his own life very frequently. His poetry demonstrates his personal images, symbols, his feelings towards his friends, and fellow human beings, the cultural ethos and the heritage of India.

The two poems we are going to take up in details are: ‘Enterprise’ from *The Unfinished Man* and ‘Night of the Scorpion’ from *The Exact Name*.

2.4 ‘NIGHT OF THE SCORPION’

2.4.1 Introduction

A poem of human interest, ‘Night of the Scorpion’ has a delicate family situation as its setting. The poet’s mother stung by a scorpion is given multiple treatments, bringing in its sweep the world of magic and superstition, science and rationality and material affection. Let us begin by reading the poem.

2.4.2 Text

Night of the Scorpion

I remember the night my mother
 Was stung by a scorpion. Ten hours
 Of steady rain had driven him
 To crawl beneath a sack of rice.
 Parting with his poison-flash
 of **diabolic tail** in the dark room-
 he risked the rain again.
 The peasants came like **swarms** of flies
 And buzzed the **name of God a hundred times**
 To paralyze the Evil One.
 With candles and with lanterns
 Throwing **giant scorpion shadows**
 On the sun-baked walls
 They searched for him: he was not found
 They **clicked their tongues**.
 With every movement that the scorpion made
 His poison moved in mother’s blood, they said.
 May he sit still, they said.
 May the sins of your previous birth
 Be burned away tonight, they said.
 May your suffering decrease
 The misfortunes of your next birth, they said.
 May the sum of evil
 Balanced in this unreal world
 Against the sum of good
 Become diminished by your pain, they said.
 May the poison purify your flesh
 Of desire, and your spirit of ambition,

They said, and they sat around
 On the floor with my mother in the centre,
 The peace of **understanding on each face**.
 More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,
 More candles, more lanterns, more neighbours,
 More insects, and the endless rain.
 My mother twisted through and through
 Groaning on a mat.
 My father, **sceptic, rationalist**
 Trying every curse and blessing,
 Powder, mixture **herb and hybrid**.
 He even poured a little **paraffin**
 Upon the bitten toe and put a match to it.
 I watched the flame feeding on my mother.
 I watched the holy man perform his rites
 To tame the poison with an **incantation**.
 After twenty hours
 It lost its sting.
 My mother only said
 Thank God the scorpion picked on me
 And spared my children.

Glossary

diabolic tail	: the sting of the scorpion which is devilish and wicked.
risked the....again	: again disappeared in the rain scared perhaps by the presence of enemies around.
swarms	: groups
name of God....Evil one	: the peasants started chanting the name of God to drive away the evil represented by the scorpion.
paralyze	: make immobile; kill.
giant scorpion shadows	: the shadows of the peasants in the dim light of the candles and lanterns.
clicked their tongues	: felt defeated
understanding on each face	: exhibiting an understanding of the situation; a wisdom par excellence.
sceptic	: doubting attitude
rationalist	: a person who believes in the doctrine that all knowledge is expressible; the doctrine of human reason.
herbs	: plant of medicinal value.
hybrid	: a mixture of medicines drawn from different sources.
paraffin	: kerosene
incantation	: chanting of words having magical powers.

2.4.3 Interpretation

Though Ezekiel is a poet of the city, in this poem he gives a living truthful rural picture. The scene of a mother stung by a scorpion on a rainy night in the village brings in its wake the two worlds of superstition and scientific temperament into focus. The neighbours swarming like flies and trying to mitigate her pain by various methods reveal the essence of community life. The father embodies the skeptic, rational approach. A telling effect is achieved in the last lines when the mother heaves a sigh of relief on her children being spared. The experience is distinctly Indian and the imagery vivid and sensitive. The neighbours concern for a speedy recovery is expressed through lines that are incantatory in effect.

‘Night of the Scorpion’ evokes superstitious practices we haven’t still outgrown. It enacts an impressive ritual in which the mother’s reaction, towards the end, to her own suffering ironically cancels out earlier responses, both primitive and sophisticated. The interrelationship between the domestic tragedy and the surrounding community is unobtrusively established. The poem also demonstrates the effective use of parallelism.

2.4.4 Irony

‘Night of the Scorpion’, in which Ezekiel evokes the rural milieu, illustrates the operation of a kind of irony. Here we have a situation in which the speaker moves among other characters. For all the humour at the expense of the peasants, there is also an involvement in the situation on the part of the speaker. He is moved. The “I” is fully realized as a participant observer: Two kinds of irony are seen to operate in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel: one closely allied to satire, where the poet stands at a distance from the object looked at; the other, closely allied to compassion where the poet examines the experience as if from within. Examples of the first kind are more numerous among his early writings; they are less common in the later period. In the middle poems, the two kinds of irony appear to co-exist.

There is also a touch of compassion. It provides a fitting finale to the narrative.

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.

The shift from the speaker to the mother is significant. The return to the mother is a celebration of the liberation from foreign influence.

May he sit still....next birth they said.

2.4.5 Indian Colour

In his poem Nissim Ezekiel has done a tremendous job in depicting the Indian milieu. In many of his poems we come across a criticism of the Indian way of life. ‘Night of the Scorpion’ involves one entire community in a case of scorpion biting. The mother is senseless. A big preparation goes on. Each one in his manner prepares to cure “the Evil one”. The methods of superstitious practices are the main aim of the poet. But the poet never forgets to describe the plight of the victim. “My mother twisted.....” However the mother’s statement cannot be overlooked. Being a typically Indian mother she wishes all kinds of problems off from her children. “Thank God....children”.

In the poem, Evil is represented by 'Flash/of....room'. Then the world of ritualistic incantation performed by the holy man to tame the poison is brilliantly evoked in the following lines. "He even poured a little paraffin... match to it".

Thus we see a kind of faithful description of the immediate situation by Ezekiel. He has an eye for details and paints them without distortion. With his simple diction Nissim Ezekiel gives stress on his ironical statements. It is difficult to miss the Indian smell and the concealed statements in his poetry.

2.4.6 Style and Technique

The engrossing narration and description of the poem are made effective also through free verse. This poem is much more relaxed and open-worked than Ezekiel's formal poetry, with a new quality of natural colloquialism in diction and tone:

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

We notice in the poem the dramatic casualness of the recalled crisis, the long paragraph set off abruptly from the three-line climax, all of which give 'Night of the Scorpion', a new feel, a new appearance, a sense of unhurried lucid progression through time. And yet the poet is only partially able to escape old habits. On closer inspection we hear behind the arras of free verse regular iambic lines insisting upon their own pattern. The casual flow of the newly-loosened sound is several times violated and made awkward as the metrical pulse appears and tries to assert itself:

They clicked their tongues.
With every movement that the scorpion made
His poison moved in mother's blood, they said.

OR

I watched the holy man perform his rites
To tame the poison with an incantation.

Of forty-eight lines, fifteen are fairly regular tetrameters and seven are pentameters. Now Ezekiel achieves the maturity to allow the regular iambic metre to remain only in the form of an undercurrent. "Night of the Scorpion" is an interesting poem, containing a fascinating tension between personal crisis and mocking social observation. The poem finds a happy conclusion in the last lines where the typical Indian mother expresses satisfaction in the fact that her children were spared.

My mother only said
Thank God the scorpion picked on me
And spared my children.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What is the theme of the poem “Night of the Scorpion”?

- 2) What are some of the contrasts present in the poem ‘Night of the Scorpion’?

2.5 ‘ENTERPRISE’

2.5.1 Introduction

The second poem of Nissim Ezekiel which we will take up for detailed analysis is called ‘Enterprise’. It appears in the volume *The Unfinished Man* containing just 10 poems written in 1959 and appearing in 1960. Reminiscent of Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi”, this poem is about the inevitable disillusionment which greets the conclusion of any grand enterprise.

2.5.2 Text

Enterprise

It started as a **pilgrimage**,
Exalting minds and making all
 The burdens light. The second stage
Explored but did not test the call.
 The Sun beat down to match our **rage**.

We stood it very well, I thought,
 Observed and put down **copious** notes
 On things the peasants sold and bought,
 The way of serpents and of goats,
 Three cities where a **sage** had taught

But when the differences arose
 On how to cross a desert patch,
 We lost a friend whose stylish prose
 Was quite the best of all our batch.
 A shadow falls on us and grows.

Another phase was reached when we
 Were twice attacked, and lost our way.
 A section claimed its **liberty**
 To leave the group. I tried to pray.
 Our leader said he smelt the sea.

We noticed nothing as we went,
 A **straggling** crowd of little hope,

Ignoring what the thunder meant,
 Deprived of common needs like soap.
 Some were broken, some merely bent.
 When, finally, we reached the place,
 We hardly knew why we were there.
 The trip had darkened every face,
 Our deeds were neither great nor rare.
 Home is where we have to gather grace.

Glossary

enterprise	: something new, difficult and important that one does or tires to do.
pilgrimage	: a journey someone makes to a holy place for a religious reason.
exalting	: raising to a higher position by an intense feeling of joy and happiness.
explored	: tentatively assess.
rage	: intense anger/frenzy
copious	: detailed/in large number
sage	: wise knowledgeable man
liberty	: freedom
straggling	: wandering away from the path when they are walking along with a group.

2.5.3 Interpretation

The poem 'Enterprise' is one of the more serious poems of Ezekiel and is moulded out of the fallouts of frustration in a barbaric city. 'Enterprise' is an allegory of the pilgrimage theme with a suggestion of futility. The journey from the city to the hinterland is a metaphor for contrived change from frustration to fulfillment. Even here a 'shadow falls' on the group because.

Differences arose

On how to cross a desert patch

The group ignores the thunder which is nothing but the inner voice of man. It should have guided the group. Man deprived of the inner voice or insensitive to the call of his own soul invariably rushes into impediments.

At the end of the journey there is complete disillusionment. Was the journey worth undertaking? Instead of bringing any sense of fulfillment, the 'trip had only darkened every face'. The pilgrims here are like the Magi in Eliot's poem. . The futility of the whole enterprise, the struggles on the way, the deprivations the group undergoes and the failure to compromise the intention of the journey with its end are succinctly brought out in the final clinching line of the poem:

Home is where we have to gather grace.

The interpretation of the poem hinges on the meaning of "enterprise." What enterprise is being referred to in the poem? It seems to me that the word has a vast symbolic potential. It could refer to something as broad as the independence of India or it could even be a critique of romantic idealism.

There is a gradual progression of moods in the poem, from hope, almost to despair at the end, but what gives the poem both coherence and strength is the detached realism of the speaker's voice. As the observer, witness, and narrator, he retains a grim commitment to the truth of the moment, never letting himself slide into rage or self-pity.

The poem is also a rewriting of the ancient Biblical story of the Exodus. In this poem, too the journey is to a promised land across deserts, but after all the travails and hardships, it isn't all that fulfilling at the end. Indeed, a question mark is placed on the very value of such ventures. The poet concludes: "Home is where we have to earn our grace." This longer line has a lot of narrative weight in it, coming as it does at the very conclusion of the poem. The attitude that the poet encourages then, may be called "stay at home"—remain where you are and all things will come to you. No need to embark upon ambitious enterprises. So the poem also criticizes all those who, like the great imperialists and colonialists, sought their fortunes upon distant shores. Or else, this is an interrogation of all grand narratives with their false promises.

Like other modern poems, there is a certain lack of clarity regarding the "plot" of the poem. Who are these people? Where are they going? What is their goal? Such questions are not answered precisely but enough information is provided to give us a sense of what they are about. It would be a good idea to make a careful inventory of all the information that is offered in the poem. How is this information controlled? What sort of gaps exist? How do these gaps enhance the richness of the text? As a modern poem, "Enterprise" offers rich dividends to the sort of close reading that New Critics recommend.

While many poets are satisfied with just a glimpse of the truth, Ezekiel probes the feelings of the personal loss and deprivation till ultimately he reaches the core of truth. This is one of his main characteristics. Scores of his poems are obviously written for personal and therapeutic purposes.

In this poem a situation is viewed with an ironic angle with a hope that it would offer some consolation, a still point or some momentary stay against the feelings of loss and deprivation. The enterprise which was started as a pilgrimage ultimately filled a sense of loss in the group members. 'Some were broken, some merely bent' Ezekiel says. The concluding stanza throws light on the whole event.

This is the tragedy of modern humanity where every enterprise ends in futility. Life is like a pathless wood and there is no purpose in taking up any enterprise. The Vedic man according to Nissim Ezekiel's philosophy moved from darkness to light. Hence this enterprise was meaningful. But the modern man is simply a misfit for noble missions. Like Eliot's Prufrock or Auden's 'hero' he wastes a valuable life afflicted by fear in trivial acts.

The pilgrims in the 'Enterprise' ignore the call of conscience and consequently some are broken, some bent. The poet makes an emotive use of language and through that emotive use of language he reaches the conclusion, "Home is where we gather grace". Like a Frost poem, 'Enterprise', begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The delight is in taking up the enterprise, in taking up the action. Without action no human being can live. Wisdom constitutes in the darkened faces and in their discovery that there was nothing unique about them.

The poem can be meaningfully related to Lord Krishna's conception of Karma Yoga which expects us to remain active and to submit ourselves to law and duty.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Explain the last line of the poem "Home is where we have to gather grace."

.....

2.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we took up two poems by Nissim Ezekiel and explained how a completely Indian situation in 'Night of the Scorpion' has been presented in a very universal manner by his poetic style. The second poem 'Enterprise' is a more philosophical poem and expresses the tragedy of the human situation where every enterprise ends in futility

2.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) On the surface, it is a narrative revolving around an incident of the poet's own childhood. The poem relates the episode of his mother stung by a scorpion one rainy night in a village in his childhood. Oppressed by ten hours of continuous downpour, the scorpion had been driven "to crawl beneath a sack of rice" where he stung the persona's mother in the toe.

At the deeper level, however, it is quite a serious criticism of contemporary life on the Indian subcontinent. One of the potent themes of the poem appears to be the clash of values—the deep, traditional widespread superstition of the illiterate rural folk and the half-baked, urban educated, rational element represented by the father of the persona and the muted tongue-in-cheek, sarcastic attitude of the persona himself. The compact emotion of the last three lines voices the powerful theme of intense feeling: that of maternal affection and readiness to suffer and sacrifice for the sake of one's children, so close to the folk tradition in our country. It is couched in the consciousness of the persona-narrator, held long after the hurly-burly of scorpion sting and ministrations to relieve the pain, were over.

- 2) The contrasts range round the treatment of the scorpion-stung mother.

The contrast that is somewhat central to the poem, is that between the superstitious, village peasants and the town bred, rational, skeptic father, who tries everything, rational and irrational alike, in a frantic bid to alleviate the suffering of his spouse. This contrast is even more powerfully voiced in the implicit comment of the narrator-persona, who is even more of a rational-skeptic. He belongs to the next generation of the post-independence intelligentsia. Yet one more contrast that is put into the last three lines that follow the description of the father's frantic efforts is between the maneuverings of the rational-skeptic and those of

the holy man, both matched objectively by the tongue-in-cheek narrator-persona who is also the son of the scorpion's victim.

Thus we see that the poem is mostly built on a series of contrasts, one piled on the other. The compact emotion of the last three lines voices another powerful theme of intense feeling: that of maternal affection and readiness to suffer and sacrifice for the sake of one's children, so close to the folk tradition in our country. It is couched in the consciousness of the persona-narrator, held long after the hurly-burly of scorpion sting and ministrations to relieve the pain were over.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) This final line reminds the readers that sometimes the most important answers and truth reside at "home". The metaphor of the journey is used to express the ways in which people go searching for answers outside themselves, when actually they need to look inward to find the answers.



UNIT 3 A. K. RAMANUJAN

Structure

- 3.1 Aims and Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 A.K. Ramanujan
- 3.4 'Looking for a Cousin on a Swing'
 - 3.4.1 Interpretation
 - 3.4.2 Imagery
 - 3.4.3 Versification
- 3.5 'A River'
 - 3.5.1 Interpretation
 - 3.5.2 Style
 - 3.5.3 Imagery
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

3.1 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This unit is the third one of this Block on poetry. The poet that we will take up for detailed discussion in this Unit is A.K. Ramanujan.

In this Unit we will be discussing two poems by A.K. Ramanujan. We will also teach you to appreciate the development of imagery in the poems, and establish the links between their different parts.

By the end of this unit you should be able to understand the poems taught in this Unit and also have a fair understanding of A.K. Ramanujan as a poet. You should also be able to read his poems with an understanding of their use of language, imagery and form.

3.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous three units you studied an assortment of poems by two Indian poets writing in English i.e. Sarojini Naidu, and Nissim Ezekiel. You have also read a brief outline of Indian Writing in English.

In this unit we will take up A.K. Ramanujan and his two poems – 'Looking for a Cousin on a Swing' and 'A River'.

Having been a Professor of Linguistics, Ramanujan remained scrupulous about the fine and subtle use of language and expressions. He successfully forged an oblique, elliptical style of his own. In his creative use of the English language, he has been able to extend its resources and add a peculiar pungency to it by Indianising it at places.

The two poems that we have chosen for detailed analysis are:

- 1) "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing"
- 2) "A River"

However, before taking up the poems, let us briefly take a look at Ramanujan's biography.

3.3 A.K. RAMANUJAN

Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan (16 March 1929 – 13 July 1993) also known as A. K. Ramanujan was a poet and scholar of Indian literature who wrote in both English and Kannada. Ramanujan was a poet, scholar, a philologist, folklorist, translator, and playwright. His academic research ranged across five languages: English, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, and Sanskrit. He published works on both classical and modern variants of literature and argued strongly for giving local, non-standard dialects their due.

Ramanujan was born into an Iyengar Brahmin family in Mysore City on 16 March 1929. His father, Attipat Asuri Krishnaswami, a professor of Mathematics at Mysore University and an astronomer, had a study crammed, with books in English, Kannada and Sanskrit. The house was alive with ideas. On summer nights, the children gathered on the third floor terrace while their father pointed out and explained the constellations. Sometimes at dinner, the children listened intently as their father translated for their mother the stories of Shakespeare and other Western classics into Tamil. Ramanujan's mother was an orthodox Brahmin woman of her time, limited by custom in the scope of her movement and control. In this way she was a typical housewife. Though she was no intellectual practitioner, she was neither typical nor limited in her learning and imagination. She was widely read in Tamil and Kannada, and comfortable in the world of ideas. By the time his father died, when Ramanujan was only twenty, the older man had already helped shape his son's devotion to an intellectual life.

Ramanujan was educated at Marimallapp's High School and Maharaja College of Mysore. He was a fellow of Deccan College, Pune in 1958-59 and Fulbright Scholar at Indiana University in 1959-62. He was educated in English at the Mysore University and received his Ph.D. in Linguistics from Indiana University.

Having been a lecturer in English at Quilon and Belgaum; he later taught at the Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda for about eight years. In 1962, he joined the University of Chicago as an assistant professor, where he was affiliated throughout his career, teaching in several departments. However, he taught at other US universities at times, including Harvard University, University of Wisconsin, University of Michigan, University of California at Berkeley, and Carleton College. At the University of Chicago, Ramanujan was instrumental in shaping the South Asian Studies program. He worked in the departments of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, Linguistics, and with the Committee on Social Thought.

In 1976, the government of India awarded him the honorific title Padma Shri. As an Indo-American writer Ramanujan had the experience of the native milieu as well as of the foreign milieu. His poems like the "Conventions of Despair" reflected his views on the cultures and conventions of the east and the west.

A.K. Ramanujan died in Chicago, on July 13, 1993 as result of adverse reaction to anesthesia during preparation for surgery.

While English is the language of his creative works, Tamil and Kannada are the mediums of his translation. He has two volumes of verse: *The Striders* (1966) and *Relations: Poems* (1971). The former immediately establishes

Ramanujan as a poet of striking imagery and perfect language. His poetic voice tends to be vigorous and his sensibility remains essentially modern. His poetry shows a marked sophistication born of an urban surrounding.

After having looked into Ramanujan's biography it is pertinent to take stock of two of his best poems in order to see the poet at practice. The selection of these poems here does not indicate in any way that Ramanujan's other poems are not worthy of attention; on the contrary this merely indicates that these selected ones are definitely his gems.

The two poems chosen for detailed analysis are:

1. 'Looking for a Cousin on a Swing'
2. 'A River'

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Give a biographical sketch of A.K. Ramanujan.

.....

.....

.....

3.4 'LOOKING FOR A COUSIN ON A SWING'

Let us first read the poem "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing"

Looking for a Cousin on a Swing

When she was four or five
 She sat on a village swing
 And her cousin, six or seven,
 Sat himself against her;
 With every **lunge** of the swing
 She felt him
 In the lunging **pits**
 Of her feeling;

And afterwards
 We climbed a tree, she said,
 Not very tall, but full of leaves
 Like those of a **fig** tree,
 And we were very innocent
 about it.
 Now she looks for the swing
 In cities with fifteen **suburbs**
 And tries to be innocent
 About it

Not only on the crotch of a tree
 That looked as if it would burst
 Under every leaf

Into a **brood** of **scarlet** figs
If someone suddenly sneezed.

Glossary

lunge	: swinging movement
pits	: deep feeling that one sometimes experiences in the area around the stomach
fig	: soft sweet fruit
suburbs	: area of a town or city which is not close to the centre
crotch	: the part of the body between the top of the legs
brood	: group
scarlet	: red

3.4.1 Interpretation

“Looking for a Cousin on a Swing” is a short piece of barely 23 lines. It is notable for its simple diction and unadorned style. The poem, is an irregular metre. There are two characters in this poem, a boy and his female cousin. And there is the narrator, who is most probably the boy himself. As in many memory poems, there is a “then” and “now”, a “before” and “after” in this poem as well. A scene is described when the boy is six or seven and his cousin four or five. They are on a village swing, sitting against or facing each other, but this is probably “innocent” as the poet says. It tells us about the peculiar sensation felt by the premature girl and the little older boy. After this sensation, they climb a tree which is not very tall, and which is ‘full of leaves’. They were innocent about all that they did on the tree. The poet remembers events from his past in India, while located abroad. He tries to reconstruct these events, to make sense of them, to rearrange them in such a manner as to help consolidate his present identity. But, in the process, his attitude to his past is revealed to be neither sentimental nor nostalgic, but coolly aloof and ironic. The impact of the poem comes from what’s happened to the cousin, the little girl who was “innocent” about feeling her cousin or climbing up a tree. The poet says that the girl, now a grown woman is still looking for that experience, but its innocence is all gone. There is an air of disapproval in the poet’s tone as he describes her forays in “cities with fifteen suburbs” and the clearly ironic repetition of “innocent” in line seventeen. Very wittily, the poet tells us that the same girl now having grown into a mature woman lives in a city and goes on hunting for companions of her lust. She is ever ready to ‘give’ herself to anyone but for asking – if someone suddenly sneezed”. The following stanza is interesting enough to deserve comment;

Now she looks for the swing
In cities with fifteen suburbs
And tries to be innocent
About it

Evidently the girl is taken to task for trying to perpetrate her initial crime. The tone become suddenly ironical here, especially in the extract ‘and tries to be innocent/about it’.

The poem is clearly on the theme of love. But nowhere is it stated explicitly. It has the charm of understatement—‘we climbed a tree’, and implicitly ‘did the rest’ (which is missing). The poem which starts on a casual note drifts towards the laming imagery of passion at the end. The turbulence of passion in the now grown up woman is carried home through the choicest use of phrases—‘swing’, ‘crotch’, ‘burst’, ‘scarlet figs’ and ‘suddenly sneezed’.

3.4.2 Imagery

The imagery for which Ramanujan is well known is conspicuous in the lines, “Not only on the crotch”. It evokes the images of a terribly unforgettable past, of the nasty associations of childhood. It was on the ‘crotch of a tree’ that the children had met to feed their sensation in innocent days. The passion raging hard within the woman is beautifully translated into words in the subsequent lines. The last lines of the poem are strongly suggestive and evocative. The term sneezing is full of implications. On the one hand, it indicates the consummation of passion on the tree; on the other, it hints at one of the popular love-pranks in the street. Ramanujan’s verse displays the quality of indirection and suggestiveness which goes with an unusual aesthetic appeal. The lines above are rich in erotic suggestiveness.

3.4.3 Versification

Ramanujan is a deliberate writer who takes his tools into account before letting them appear on his page for the reader. He chooses monosyllabic words for the sake of effect and concentration. He employs rhyme and rhythm to enhance the charm of his art. There is no superfluous word or phrase in his poems. Terseness is the hallmark of his verse. Subtlety is his touchstone and wit and irony makes his poetry lively and delightful.

The poem is delightfully readable for its lucidity of language and for its employment of literary devices shorn of embellishments. The lines and stanzas vary in length and thereby keep monotony and roughness at bay. A stanza may be of ten lines or of only one. Clearly, this sort of variation has been a favourite device with ‘new’ poets, and Ramanujan falls in their line. He opts for free verse in place of regular rhymes, and for stress-rhythm in place of traditional syllabic rhythm. This poem is no exception to his general practice. Very deftly, he shifts the scene in this poem from a ‘village’ to ‘cities’ where one has an immense scope of sin and corruption. The swift change of years is also skillfully arranged in it. The girl has now matured in age. As a full-blooded woman, she is out to seek illicit love in cities. Adulthood has come for her not without its repercussions. Seen in this light, the poem becomes kaleidoscopic, and the total effect created by it is almost astonishing.

3.5 ‘A RIVER’

The second poem which we shall now take up for detailed discussion is “A River”. Let us first read the poem:

A River

In Maduria,

City of temple and poets

Who sang of cities and temples:

Every summer
A river dries to a **trickle**
In the sand,
Baring the sand-ribs,
Straw and women's hair
Clogging the Watergates
At the rusty bars
Under the bridges with patches
Of repair all over them,
The wet stones glistening like sleepy
Crocodiles, the dry ones
Shaven water-buffalos **lounging** in the sun.

The poets sang only of the floods.

He was there for a day
When they had the floods.
People everywhere talked
Of the inches rising,
Of the **precise** number of **cobbled** steps
Run over by the water, rising
On the bathing places,
And the way it carried off three village houses,
One pregnant woman
And a couple of cows
Named Gopi and Brinda, as usual.

The new poets still quoted
The old poets, but no one spoke
In verse
Of the pregnant woman
Drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
Kicking at blank walls
Even before birth.
He said:
The river has water enough
To be poetic
About only once a year
And then
It carries away
In the first half-hour
Three village houses,
A couple of cows

Named Gopi and Brinda
 And one pregnant woman
 Expecting identical twins
 With no **moles** on their bodies,
 With different-coloured **diapers**
 To tell them apart.

Glossary

trickle	: flowing slowly in very small amounts
baring	: exposing/laying bare
clogging	: blocking
lounging	: relaxing
precise	: exact
cobbled	: made of cobblestones which are stones used for making roads etc.
moles	: dark spot on the skin
diapers	: piece of soft towel worn by babies around their middle.

3.5.1 Interpretation

This is a slightly longer and more complicated poem. Here we see some of Ramanujan's erudition as a translator of Tamil verse. The poem is ostensibly about a river, in the ancient city of Madurai, in the heart of Tamil Nadu. Madurai is described as a "city of temples and poets", but these are poets who sing of "cities and temples." There is thus a sort of circularity to these poets and their themes. In a city of temples and poets, the poets sing of cities and temples. There is, in other words, self-absorption, and stagnation in their writing.

This poem is on the river Vaikai which flows through Madurai, a city that has, for about two thousand years been the seat of Tamil culture. As an evocation of the river the poem succeeds admirably. At the same time, the river becomes "a point of departure for ironically contrasting the relative attitudes of the old and new Tamil poets, both of whom are exposed for their callousness to suffering, when it is so obvious, as a result of the floods". (R. Parthasarthy, ed. *Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets* (1976, p. 95)

Summarily speaking, the poem consists of 39 lines in all. The first three lines tell us about the location of the river Madurai, a city of 'temples and poets'. These poets usually sang of 'cities and temples', indicating thereby that they were invariably city-bred people.

In the succeeding lines they bring out the incalculable amount of loss and havoc wrought by the devastating floods. When the river grows lean and dry during the summer, it bares to the sight the sand, ribs, straw and women's hair clogging the watergates, the bridges with patches of repair, and the wet and dry stones glistening in the sun. The poets of yore sang only of the floods, not of the ruins and ravages caused by them. These ruins and ravages are highlighted in the lines that follow (He was there....as usual).

The old poet (used in the singular to show the haphazard, unorganized mode of his visit) paid a casual visit to the river when it was in its full fury, and when the people talked of its speedy rising, submerging the 'cobbled steps'

and the ‘bathing places’, and when the stories were whispered around about the sweeping off of the ‘three village houses’ and the drowning of ‘one pregnant woman’ and ‘a couple of cows/named Gopi and Brinda’. His visit was no more than a pleasure-trip or a curiosity-trip undertaken in a sportive mood, for he remained totally indifferent towards the losses and sorrows of the people.

The same sort of attitude has also been adopted by the new poets. These poets never versified the agonies and miseries of the people—of the drowning of the pregnant woman, with perhaps twins in her belly who died before their birth, of the carrying away of the three village houses and a couple of cows. Of course, they waxed rapturous and poetic over the ruins and floods, but they had no time to think of the destroyed innocent creatures.

For one thing, this poem is a welcome attempt at showing the poet’s concern about the sufferers and the bereaved. Skillfully it shows his sympathy for them. It is, thus, a realistic portrayal of the people’s unmerited suffering at the hands of cruel and uncontrollable Doomsters, who often heap ‘travails and teens’ on humanity. The poet’s love for all creatures – not only for human beings, but also for animals—comes out clearly here.

One thing, however, seems to be clear. The poem is less about a river than about poetry itself. The river, which figures in the works of the poets of Madurai, is, to all appearances, not much to write about. It becomes a trickle during the summer, and floods rarely during the year. Instead of writing about the “reality” of the river, about its changing shape and size, of what is exposed when it dries up and what it carries away during the floods, the poets stick to literary conventions rather blindly. The new poets quote the old ones and still write only about the river in flood. But even when they do so, they don’t talk about the pregnant woman drowning or the cows carried away by the river.

This job of actually describing the river is left to the main character in the poem, the outsider, who like Ramanujan, is the dislocated poet, non-resident alien. But what does this poet achieve except a comic embellishment, which at times is suggestive of insensitivity? Isn’t there just this hint of tragedy, about what happens to the pregnant woman? Perhaps, she commits suicide because she is pregnant. Men don’t seem to drown in this river. If the woman hides her “shame” by drowning herself, it’s not very nice, is it, to joke about her unborn twins. What opinion do you form about the poet after reading this?

3.5.2 Style

The poem ‘A River’ uses a sweet and simple language. There is nothing to be read between the lines. The variation in the length of lines and stanzas is to be seen here too, as usual. The poet’s compassion is conveyed directly, without the help of imagery or symbolism. The tone is obviously ironical, particularly into the portrayal of the indifferent attitude of the old and new poets towards the destructive role of the river. They are equally to blame for being ‘poetic’ at the cost of human lives and property. The false assumptions of the poets who live in ivory towers are exposed herein. The poem hits hard at them and their vanities. Their false notions are partly due to their ignorance of the rural life and its acute problems, since they are born and bred in cities. The three village houses, the pregnant woman, the coins, and the river itself

are part and parcel of the rural life. And then, the old city of Madurai owes greatly to the river for it being the 'seat of Tamil culture'. If we keep the cultural efflorescence of many big Indian cities in mind, we shall discover that it was mainly due to the positive contributions of the rivers and the seas, which served as the real source of conveyance and transportation in those good old days.

The big cities of India like Delhi, Agra, Kanpur, Allahabad, Varanasi, Patna, Calcutta, Mumbai, Chennai, Madurai, and many others are all situated on the banks of the rivers and the sea. The attitude of the poets becomes all the more laughable and despicable when we consider these cities as the direct result of the positive role of the rivers and the seas. The poet cannot think of the sand-ribs, straw and women's hair clinging to the watergates, the rusty bars under the bridges with patches of repair all over them. They have, in fact neither time nor leisure for such things. They move about in this world like elfins or spirits, having no concern with the tragic sides of human existence. This is the sum and substance of the poem. What sets Ramanujan apart from other poets is his unique tone of voice, a feather that accounts for the characteristic style of his poetry. In ordinary speech it is the tone that expresses attitudes through the modulation of voice. Tone, therefore, expresses the speaker's attitude towards his subject and towards his audience and sometimes towards himself. The person who is speaking takes into account the particular situation and the situation determines how the thing is to be said. As in speech, so too in poetry, tone is an important factor. Instead of the expressive human voice, words perform this function in a poem. And the speaker in the poem expresses an attitude through his particular use of the language, by his choice of words, imagery and syntax. Since poetry is after all the specialization of language for the communication of attitudes, the determination of the exact shading of tone in a poem becomes important. Look at the following lines of this poem:

The new poets still quoted
The old poets, but no one spoke
In verse
Of the pregnant woman
Drowned, with perhaps twins in her,
Kicking at blank walls
Even before birth.

The reality of the floods doesn't seem to affect anyone; its havoc goes unnoticed even by the 'new' poets who, one would have thought, could be expected to be socially conscious but are not. Their claims to be new or modern are exposed. Unable to shake off the burden of the past, they only repeat what the old poets have said.

The poem is thus an oblique comment on the sterility of much of contemporary Tamil Poetry—an opinion which isn't overtly stated. It is the speaker's attitude in the poem that helps us to make this inference.

3.5.3 Imagery

Now, the poem moves to the description of the river, which is the ostensible subject of the poem. The river "dries to a trickle/in the sand," every summer. Obviously, it is not a very grand or impressive river, but what it exposes or

leaves behind when it dries up is described in great detail, in very vivid language. The river's "sand ribs" are bared, its water gates are clogged with "straw and women's hair," and the wet stones thus exposed glisten "like sleepy crocodiles," while the dry ones look like "shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun." as you can see, these images, which are fresh, original, and memorable, constitute a different sort of idiom than what the poets of Madurai are writing about.

As if to confirm this suspicion, the poet says in the very next line, which is actually a stanza set off from the earlier one, "The poets sang only of the floods." The poet goes on to add that he visited the city for a day when they actually had the floods. Again, we are given some vivid images of the rising river, of the pregnant woman being carried away, and of the almost comical pair of cows called Gopi and Brinda. Now that the floods have actually come, what do the poets of Madurai write about? "The new poets still quoted/the old poets" he says. These poets ignored what all the people were talking about, but Ramanujan, like in the earlier poem, embellishes what happened during the floods by making the pregnant woman expect twins.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What is the poet trying to convey through the poem 'A River'?

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3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we look up two poems by AK Ramanujan, an extremely talented poet, who has given us sensitive renderings of childhood experiences and remembered events. These are presented without sentimentality and nostalgia. These qualities are definitely praiseworthy in a poet.

3.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Refer to 3.3

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The poem is ostensibly about a river, but through it the poet passes his ironical judgment about other poets who stick to literary conventions blindly.

UNIT 4 KAMALA DAS

Structure

- 4.0 Aims and Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Kamala Das
- 4.3 'My Grandmother's House'
 - 4.3.1 Introduction
 - 4.3.2 Text
 - 4.3.3 Interpretation
 - 4.3.4 Imagery
- 4.4 'Blood'
 - 4.4.1 Text
 - 4.4.2 Interpretation
 - 4.4.3 Imagery
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

4.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In this last unit of our course on poetry, we will be taking up a very famous poet—Kamala Das. The two poems that we will take up for detailed study are 'My Grandmother's House' and 'Blood'. As we have been doing in the previous units, we will give you the text of the poems, provide a glossary and a detailed interpretation of the poems.

By the end of this unit you will be able to understand not only the two poems taken up in detail but also the overall contribution of Kamala Das to Indian English poetry.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Indian English Poetry has by all means, a bright future. Like the poetry being written in any other Indian language, this brand of poetry has become part and parcel of modern Indian literature. It has a distinctive taste and expresses effectively the varied colored Indian life. It embodies nationalistic sentiments and aspirations, and that is one of the strong reasons for its popularity today. Several critical studies, special numbers and anthologies that have appeared on this branch of Indian literature, in recent years, speak of its popularity and significance.

In the present context one can only recall the remarks of Rabindranath Tagore regarding Bangla's response through literature to the call of the West: "It has a future for it is quickened with life and it carries within itself a hope that one day it will become a great channel for communication of ideas between adventurous West, and the East of the immemorial tranquility."

Indian English Poetry has now come to stay on its own strength, and the prophecy of the Nobel Laureate of India has been eventually realized.

In taking up all the poems of this block we have seen to it that apart from explaining the literal meaning, the other finer points of the poems have also been taken up. Apart from these particular poets and their poems, we hope this Block will have aroused your interest enough to read other Indian poets writing in English. If you can appreciate Indian English poetry now from the point of view of theme, style tenor and vehicle and the quality of experience that they convey, then we will have every reason to feel that we have done the job commendably.

4.2 KAMALA DAS

Kamala Das was born in Malabar in Kerala in 1934. Both her mother and grandfather were Malayalam poets. Kamala Das started writing poetry while at school, but before contributing to Indian poetry in English, she had won fame as a Malayalam writer. Today she is hailed as one of our significant poets writing in English. She is pre-eminently a poet and has truly made a mark with her poems rather than her prose writing. What strikes a reader in her poems is her compelling originality and freshness as also her command over the verse technique and the English language.

Kamala Das was married at the age of fifteen and has three children. She seems to have been tied to a hollow relationship she couldn't untie, and hence her life story is touched with poignancy and strikes the reader as representative of a not so uncommon social phenomenon in India. Marriage and love are not and need not be mutually exclusive, but for Kamala Das, as she tells us repeatedly, they have proved to be so. When Kamala Das speaks of love outside marriage (as she very often does), she is not really advocating adultery and infidelity, but merely searching for a relationship which gives both love and security. Her poetry is concerned both with the external and internal world. Her response to the external world, despite her inner restlessness is marked by an admirable sense of poise.

Kamala Das has written three books of poetry; *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendents* (1967), and *The Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973). Most of the poems are confessional in tone and deal with her interior life and subjective state. Through them she reveals her feminine sensibility in her diverse roles as grand daughter, daughter, sister, mother, wife and beloved. Her poems of self-exposure however transcend personal import and acquire universal significance for they reveal the predicament of the contemporary woman beset by her encounter with the difficulties of love and sex. Walt Whitman once said of his own poems, "who so touches this book, touches a man." It would be equally appropriate to say of Kamala Das's poems of confession, "who so touches these poems, touches a woman."

Kamala Das made an instant appeal with her very first collection *Summer in Calcutta* (1965). "I must let my mind striptease/I must extrude/ autobiography," says she in "Composition" and more often than not, her poetry lives up to this expectation. In a sense it is a psychic striptease that her poetry enacts. Much poetry, is basically an expression of the sweating self.

With the change in outlook and setting forth of women's liberation, many of the modern women poets have taken recourse to frank expressions of which some striking examples are to be found in the poetry of Kamala Das.

Her frankness gives strength to her poetry. Taking her cue from the modernist movement in poetry, she believes in the sincere treatment of the material. In trying to establish an intimate tone she gives unabashed expression to her personal themes.

Kamala Das's retreat into the past is a major preoccupation with her. In essence, it is a symbolic retreat into the realms of innocence, simplicity and purity. It is by transference, an assertion of the elemental life force in her. The old dying house, grandmother, sea, window-sill, snakes, shrine, pond, parrots are symbols of undefiled purity which she left once and lost forever. This world was a reality but has now become a dream or an ideal, distant and unrealizable, which she can reach only through her imagination. "My Grandmother's House" and "Blood" besides other poems like "Composition", "Nani", "A Hot Noon at Malabar" bear ample testimony to it.

On 31 May 2009 aged 75, she died at a hospital in Pune. Her body was flown to her home state of Kerala. She was buried at the Palayam Juma Masjid at Thiruvananthapuram with full state honour.

4.3 'MY GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE'

4.3.1 Introduction

The two poems that we will take up for detailed discussion are 'My Grandmother's House' and 'Blood'. Let us take up "My Grandmother's House" first.

4.3.2 Text

My Grandmother's House

There is a house now far away where once
I received love....That woman died,
The house **withdrew** into silence, snakes moved
Among books I was then too young
To read and, my blood turned cold like the moon
How often I think of going
There to peer through blind eyes of windows or
Just listen to the frozen air,
Or in wild **despair**, pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it here to lie
Behind my bedroom door like a **brooding**
Dog....you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved...I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?

Glossary

- withdrew** : to go back into itself
despair : hopelessness
brooding : deep silent private thoughts.

4.3.3 Interpretation

This well-known poem, again from *Summer in Calcutta*, speaks of what we might call the “pre-lapsarian” stage. It harks back to the childhood of the poet, the security of a grandmother’s house, where the self of the poet attains some sort of integrity.

Kamala Das’s reminiscences of childhood are associated with Nalapat House, her family home in Malabar, and her grandmother whom she loved dearly. These recollections are always linked with feelings of nostalgia and wistfulness. In *My Story* she writes, “from every city, I have lived I have remembered the noons in Malabar with an ache growing inside me, a homesickness.” Her family home and its presiding deity—her grandmother, symbolize for the poetess “love”, “innocence”, “respectability” and “traditional values”. In this poem the house is presented with concern and pathos and the poetess expresses her poignant feelings of yearning for this house. She wishes to go back to it.

The poem, sixteen lines long, is a sustained description, and tightly knit. The main feature of the house is that the poet is loved there. In addition to love, and the security of being cared for, there is the whole world of books, suggestive of so many possibilities. The house in Malabar, thus, not only symbolizes security and integrity, but also imagination and youth. Here the poet, though somewhat lonely, is free to dream her own fantasies, to fulfill, albeit vicariously, her desires to be connected to a more interesting world.

The last part of the poem is actually an address to what might be considered the poet’s husband. The clue is not just the endearment, “Darling,” but the whole sense of explanation and justification that the poet offers. She says, can you believe that I was proud, and loved.....I who have lost/My way and beg now at strangers’ doors to/Receive love, at least in small change?” The last two lines are terribly poignant. The speaker has been reduced to begging for love in small change at strangers’ doors. What a contrast from the loved, protected, and proud child that we see in the first part of the poem.

As a critic or careful reader, however, you should never take any text at surface value. One should ask if the poet is exaggerating both the idealization of the childhood as she does the degradation of the present. That way one can begin to pry open the hidden crevices of meaning lurking beneath the surface and, perhaps, even go on to deconstruct what appears to be the “official” meaning that the poem seeks to promote.

4.3.4 Imagery

The words, “windows” and ‘air’ are qualified by the two prefixes “blind” and “frozen” respectively. There is a rich ambiguity in the phrasing which makes very real the suffering of the poetess. Her heart is itself like a dark window where the fresh air does not blow. Images work on several layers of response, and enrich the poem’s texture. One of the favourite images is that of the window where she sits and enjoys the cool refreshing breeze of the past. This recurs to the extent of becoming an obsessive image.

The image emphasizes the languishing desire of the poetess for a sentient peep into her past and a resurrection of her dreams and desires. With the

dereliction of the old house, the windows have become blind. Only the heat of the reunion with the house will melt the ice and the window will again be restored to old life. The crumbling of the old house and the death of the old woman leave their impact on the poetess also. With them crumbles her own life of innocence and the cherished values.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How does Kamala Das present the house in the poem “My Grandmother’s House” with concern and pathos?

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.....

4.4 ‘BLOOD’

This is the second poem by Kamala Das which we are taking up for detailed study. This poem appears in the collection entitled *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973). This collection contains thirty-three poems, out of which fourteen are reprints of poems which have already appeared in *Summer in Calcutta*.

All the new poems appearing in this collection continue Kamala Das’s central theme: The exploration of the true nature of love and of the extent to which the intensity of love, when achieved, is self-sufficient. Let us read the poem first.

4.4.1 Text

Blood

When we were children
 My brother and I
 And always playing on the sands
 Drawing birds and animals
 Our great grandmother said one day,
 You see this house of ours
 Now three hundred years old,
 It’s falling to little bits
 Before our very eyes
 The walls are cracked and torn
 And **moistened** by the rains,
 The **tiles** have fallen here and there
 The windows **whine** and **groan**
 And every night
 The rats come out of holes
 And **scamper** past our door.
 The snake-shrine is dark with weeds
 And all the snake-gods in the shrine
 Have **licen** on their hoods.

O it hurts me she cried,
Wiping a reddened eye
For I love this house, it hurts me much
To watch it die.
When I grow old, I said,
And very very rich
I shall rebuild the fallen walls
And make new this ancient house
My great grandmother
Touched my cheeks and smiled.
She was really simple.
Fed on God for years
All her feasts were **monotonous**
For the only dish was always God
And the rest mere **condiments**.
She told us how she rode her elephant
When she was ten or eleven
Every Monday without fail
To the Siva shrine
And back to home again
And, told us of the jewel box
And the **brocade** from the north
And the perfumes and the oils
And the **sandal** for her breasts
And her marriage to a prince
Who loved her deeply for a lovely short year
And died of fever, in her arms
She told us
That we had the oldest blood
My brother and she and I
The oldest blood in the world
A blood thin and clear and fine
While in the veins of the always poor
And in the veins
Of the new-rich men
Flowed a blood thick as **gruel**
And muddy as a ditch
Finally she lay dying
In her eighty sixth year
A woman **wearied** by **compromise**
Her legs **quilted** with **arthritis**
And with only a hard cough
For comfort

I look deep into her eyes
 Her poor **bleary** eyes
 And prayed that she would not grieve
 So much about the house.
 I had learnt by then
 Most lessons of defeat,
 Had found out that to grow rich
 Was a difficult **feat**.
 The house was **crouching**
 On its elbows then,
 It looked that night in the **pallid** moon
 So **grotesque** and alive.
 When they burnt my great grandmother
 Over logs of the mango tree
 I looked once at the house
 And then again and again

For I thought I saw the windows close
 Like the closing of the eyes
 I thought I heard the pillars groan
 And the dark rooms **heave** a sigh.
 I set forth again
 For other towns,
 Left the house with the shrine
 And the sands
 And the flowering shrubs
 And the wide **rabid** mouth of the Arabian Sea

I know the rats are running now
 Across the darkened halls
 They do not fear the dead
 I know the white ants have reached my home
 And have raised on walls
 Strange **totems** of burial.
 At night, in stillness,
 From every town I live in
 I hear the rattle of its death
 The noise of **rafters creaking**
 And the windows' whine.

I have let you down
 Old house, I seek forgiveness
 O mother mother's mother

ignou
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I have plucked your soul
Like a **pip** from a fruit
And have flung it into your **pyre**
Call me **callous**
Call me selfish
But do not blame my blood
So thin, so clear, so fine
The oldest blood in the world
That remembers as it flows
All the gems and all the gold
And all the perfumes and the oils
And the stately
Elephant ride.....

Glossary

moistened: to make wet

tiles: a flat square piece of backed clay used for covering roofs

whine: to make a long high pitched noise which sounds sad and unpleasant

groan: long sound as if one is in pain or unhappy

scamper: move with small quick steps

lichen: cluster of tiny plants which looks like moss

monotonous: dully regular pattern

condiments: substance which is added to increase the flavor

brocade: thick, heavy expensive material

sandal: sandalwood paste

gruel: cheap thick soup

wearied: tired

compromise: reach an agreement/understanding

quilled: layered

arthritis: aching joints of the body

bleary: red and watery

feat: difficult act or achievement

crouching: bending

pallid: unnaturally pale

grotesque: exaggerated in an unpleasant and ridiculous way

heavy: to give a big sigh

rabid: diseased

totems: a totem pole regarded as a symbol of respect

rafters: sloping pieces of wood that support a roof

creaking: making a squeaking sound due to age

pip: seed

pyre: pile of wood made in order to burn dead bodies

callous: cruel

4.4.2 Interpretation

Kamala Das

Blood shows an admirable restraint in tone and tautness of language. The remorse that Kamala Das feels at having failed to abide by the values associated with the old house and the grandmother is more clearly expressed in the poem “Blood” which runs at two levels literal and allegorical.

At the literal level it describes the remote ancestry and the old blood of her family of which her great grandmother was the living example. The great grandmother was deeply religious having been “fed on God for years”, and proud of the purity of her family’s blood. She was, however, greatly concerned about the threatened ruin of the old house.

The poetess promised her that she would renovate the house when she grew up and became very rich. However, as she grew up, she failed to honour her words and retrieve the house from ruin for she “had learnt by then/most lessons of defeat”. Towards the end of the poem its allegorical significance becomes apparent when the poetess substitutes the fall of the old house with the fall of her own old values and blames herself for the damage done to the proud family.

The poem is touchingly autobiographical, and her nostalgia for the old house and for the great grandmother who lived in it and gave it an everlasting character is convincingly evoked. That Kamala Das does not idealise the house and the people who are associated with it, is not only evident in the matter-of-factness of the reminiscential mood; but in the fact that the sense of the history of the house is evoked in terms of the poet’s own childhood memory of it and in the way this memory acquires a renewed but ironic significance under the pressure of the poet’s immediate poetic concern.

The poet does not attempt to reach out into the history of the house of three hundred years beyond what she herself knows of it. At present it is a decrepit house with the walls cracked and torn and moistened by the rains, and with the fallen tiles, the whining and groaning windows and the rats scampering past the door. The grandmother, ‘really simple’ and ‘fed on God for years’, and proud of her ‘oldest blood’ is portrayed with humour and detachment. The forces of disruption and decay are at work and the poet’s memory of the grandmother who is hurt to see the house die is poignant.

More than the pathos of the memory of her grandmother, it is the poet’s preoccupation with death and decay, so innocuously impaled in the image of the crumbling house which she loves so much that emerges as the dominant theme.

The lines, short and chiseled, have a solemnity of tone and a gravity of mood which comes not from melancholia but from a sense of feeling life on the tips of her senses as it were. Even when Kamala Das speaks of defeat and emptiness and the inevitable darkness which is imminent, the assured clear outline; the somber control of nerve, and poise of movement which is at once graceful and firm show that the poet is in command of herself in a moment of personal reckoning.

4.4.3 Imagery

In ‘Blood’ the great grandmother is vividly portrayed through a rich cluster of details such as her riding an elephant and visit to a Shiva temple when she was young.

The series of images portray the grandmother and, by implication serve as a memory of the days gone by. They also reveal the poet's wistful longing to have been born in those days and to have lived with full breath in the open air.

The most remarkable phenomenon about the images of Kamala Das is that they emerge from the cultural sources of the typical Indian background and they also define her identity. They have the sharp indigenous smell and their treatment is expressly individual in the specific context of emotions and feelings.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) How is "Blood" an autobiographical poem?

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4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you

- read two poems by Kamala Das,
- learnt to pick out the various characteristic elements present in each poem,
- were also told about the style and technique of the poems.

4.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Kamala Das presents the house with concern and pathos by remembering it with a great deal of nostalgia and wistfulness. She expresses her poignant feeling of yearning for this house.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) "Blood" is an autobiographical poem because it presents Kamala Das' nostalgia for her childhood house and her great grandmother. When she was young she had promised her great grandmother that she would restore the old decrepit house to its former glory. However, she could not fulfill the promise