
UNIT 21 SHORT FICTION IN GENERAL AND THE CANADIAN SHORT STORY

Structure

- 21.0 Objectives
- 21.1 Short Fiction/Story as a Literary Form
- 21.2 Main Elements of a Short Story
- 21.3 The Short Story in Canada
- 21.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 21.5 Questions

21.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to familiarize you with the genre of short fiction/story-how it evolved all over the world and what are the basic elements that constitute the short story. We shall also trace the origin of short fiction in Canada.

21.1 SHORT FICTION/STORY AS A LITERARY FORM

Throughout human history, two of the most primary and powerful impulses of man have been to give an account of his experiences and to draw a moral from it. As a social animal, it was inevitable that these two impulses should assert themselves for expression. Thus, even in the most primitive times, anecdotes of personal experiences came to be told. This began even before man had learnt to write.

It was a natural step when a clever and skilful man, in due course of time, turned these experiences into very much more interesting and instructive stories, on the way to their becoming literature. Sometimes these personal happenings were linked with mighty names like Solomon, Samson, Arthur, Ganesh, Narada and the like, to give these happenings substantial historical or mythical importance.

Gradually, by judicious selection and by skill and manipulation, man bloomed out to be a conscious artist, and shaped and formed his material to provide thousands of these stories.

There is an invaluable treasure contained in the myths, legends, folk-tales and fairy tales of almost all countries of the world - we have the *Panchtantra* and the tales of the *Jatakas*, stories from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*; the Greek bards roamed about singing the glories of their gods and heroes of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*; the Middle East gave to the world *The Arabian Nights* and Israel produced *The Bible* with its repository of great moral stories, and so on with many more countries, till Boccaccio (of Italy) succeeded in giving a clear setting and character to the short story in the *Decameron*, followed by *The Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer in England.

Only at the beginning of the 19th century, the short story as a distinct literary form began to attract attention of serious literary writers in large numbers. Almost simultaneously, in Germany (Hoffman-1814), U.S.A.(Washington Irving, 1819; E.A Poe and Hawthorne, 1832),Russia (Pushkin and Gogol, 1830's) and France (Balzac, 1830's) short stories began to appear and the above mentioned authors were the earliest short story writers. "Rip Van Winkle" by W. Irving is often taken to be the first short story in the modern sense of the term.

The name 'Short Story' stuck only late in the 19th century, as is clear by the names with which the early writers called their work; like "Sketches", "Tales", "Pictures", "Articles" etc. Why short story as a new form should have come at just this time is difficult to explain. Possibly, the Short Story could not develop until the novel itself had reached the status of serious art and some degree of maturity in the latter half of the 19th century. The widespread experimentation with new forms as part of the romantic movement at the beginning of the 19th century may also be suggested as a contributing factor. Evolution of popular magazines may also have largely contributed to its growth. In America, the novel could not be published freely due to the handicap of copyright of English writers and publishers. They were on a freer ground as far as the short story was concerned. Editors of magazines competed with each other to fill the pages of their magazines with stories, as the greatest blessing of the short story was its shortness.

E.A. Poe formulated the first set of principles for the art of the 'Short Story': "A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents - he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentences tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step."

In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect is not to the one pre-established design. R.L. Stevenson felt the short story writer must have an 'impression' or 'idea' to communicate which should engage his attention from the first to the last. In a way, he must see the end in the beginning.

W.S. Maugham wrote, "A good short story is a piece of fiction, dealing with a single incident- material or spiritual- that can be read at a sitting; it is original, it must have unity of effect or impression, it should move in an even line from its exposition to its close".

The language of the short story should be a model of economy. It requires the apt word and the telling phrase. The form of the short story does not allow stylistic elegance for its own sake.

That the short story has changed is beyond doubt. It has become all sorts of things, situations, episodes, characterization or narrative - in effect a vehicle of every man's talent. From the didactic stories of Hawthorne and tales of terror of Poe, to the scientific romances of H.G. Wells, the development is indeed exciting and marvellous. The serious short story of the 20th century might be visualized as developing in four directions:

1. Narrative Essay : W. Irving's "The legend of the sleeping hollow"
2. Unit of Local History: Mark Twain's stories.
3. Prose Drama: Hemingway's "Killers"
4. Lyric poem: James Joyce's "The Dead."

It has been largely in the 20th century that the lyric and dramatic possibilities of the short story have been explored; the similarities of short story to particularized history and expanded anecdote are traditional.

The short story is different from a novel in the following ways:

- a. It has a unity which is absolutely single and not multiple.
- b. A novel has a bigger canvas - it presents life in all its variety and complexity. A short story presents only a phase of life or a slice of life.
- c. A short story has only one plot and no subplot.
- d. It has no superfluous characters and incidents.

- e. Out of plot, character, atmosphere, generally one thing predominates. It is not so in a novel.
- f. The purpose of a short story is to intensify a small unit of life. Structurally, a short story must have a direct opening, a swift movement, a forceful climax and a satisfying ending.

Frank O' Connor finds the short story akin to Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, "Caught in a single moment of peculiar significance". Because his frame of reference can never be the totality of human life, the short story writer must be forever selecting the point at which he can approach it, and each selection he makes has the potential of a new form as well that of a complete fiasco.

21.2 MAIN ELEMENTS OF A SHORT STORY

All of you must have read or heard many stories. Stories that were funny, interesting, sad, carrying with them some gems of wisdom or some moral. In fact, all of us have grown up surrounded by stories. However when we have to examine a story critically, we have to look at it more closely. Whenever we read a piece of literature, we have to study two basic elements What has been said and How it has been said. What here refers to the theme or subject matter and How deals with the technique or techniques used to convey the particular theme or subject matter. Although the modern short story defies definition, yet it is necessary to look at some basic elements that go into the making of a short story, such as plot, characterization, narrative technique, tone, theme, literary devices and language, setting and atmosphere. We will discuss them one by one.

PLOT The organization, arrangement or the sequence of events and incidents in a literary work is called a plot. Analysing 'plot', E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* comments "We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. 'The king died and the queen died' is a story. The king died and then the queen died of grief is a plot. The time sequence is preserved but the sense of causality overshadows it or again: 'The queen died, no one knew why until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king'. This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. It suspends the time sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow". So a plot doesn't show merely what happens but also why it happens. The story writer may rearrange the sequence of events in time; he may start the story in the middle; he may relate the end first and then relate the rest of the events in a flashback; he may give us partial information to sustain our interest and dole out the rest of information in fits and starts. In short, it can be said that a plot is the design that an author imposes on a simple narrative account to give us pleasure and to signify meaning.

'Plot' is linked with 'character', as it is the actions of the characters that give movement to the plot- it is the characters who take the action forward and in the process, reveal the various facets of mankind- their hopes and fears, their expectations and disappointments, their relation with other people and reaction to situations. Henry James puts it succinctly, "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character". Plot, then, is character in action.

Another important aspect of a plot is unity- each event should grow out of the previous one. There should be a link between events, in a manner of cause and effect, which should be governed by logic- of characters and events.

CHARACTER

While discussing plot, we have already seen how plot and characters are intrinsically connected. One cannot think of a story without a character. A story may not have a

properly worked out plot, but evolution of a character is necessary. The modern short story has turned away from plot and has become less a complication resolved than a situation revealed. Characters are those who participate in the action of the story. Readers reach out to characters more readily and derive pleasure and satisfaction from such association.

Again, E.M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* makes a very useful classification - characters being of two types- 'flat' and 'round'. A 'flat' character is a static character, a stereotype built around a single idea or quality, who does not grow or develop in the story. Such a character may be detailed in just an outline and may be described in a phrase or a sentence. A 'round' character, on the other hand, is a complex character who changes and develops according to different situations and is not easy to describe. He can reveal different traits at different times and, unlike a 'flat' character, is capable of surprising us.

There are two broad methods of delineating a character- by 'showing' or by 'telling'. By 'showing' is meant a character in action - it is a dramatic method in which a writer reveals a character indirectly through action and dialogue - and the reader is free to make his own assessment. In the other method of 'telling', the writer tells directly about the character and explains his motivation and disposition. More often than not, most writers resort to both the methods to effectively bring out all the aspects of their characters.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

How does one tell a story? There is no single method of telling a story. It can be narrated in several ways. According to R.L. Stevenson, there can be three ways of narrating a story - a writer has a plot in mind and chooses suitable characters to develop the plot; or he has a character in mind and invents situations and incidents to further his plan; thirdly, an author has certain atmosphere in mind and selects characters and plot to create a design which helps him realize his instinct. We can say that narrative technique actually means the perspective that an author chooses through which he reaches his readers, or the way he wants to present characters, action, atmosphere and point of view.

Narrative technique can be broadly divided into two categories 'first person narrative' and 'third person narrative'. In the first person narrative, the narrator is a character who tells the story from his point of view. It makes the story more credible and lifelike, it gives the story a personal touch. Also, it brings the reader closer to the narrator in a manner as if he is participating in the happenings. So, this form of narration enhances intimacy and approximation.

Third person narration has a broader outreach. In this form, the narrator stands outside the story. He can be the omniscient presence, who can be all knowing and all seeing as well as can walk in and out of any situation. He can have access to the thoughts, psychology and motivation of the characters. An intrusive narrator can comment on a situation, observe a situation, analyse a psychology as well as enlighten the reader with his all knowing wisdom. The comments of an omniscient narrator have authorial authority. Whereas an intrusive narrator will 'tell', a non-intrusive narrator will 'show' characters in action without any explanatory interpolations. Because an omniscient narrator remains at a distance, he can be more objective. So, it can be seen that because he is at a distance, the third person narrator is expansive or all inclusive whereas the point of view of the first person narrative becomes limited because of his closeness and immediacy.

TONE

Tone can be defined as an 'attitude' or the manner in which the writer expresses his opinion or whatever he wants to say. Every story has a distinct tone or style which varies as per the exigencies of the situation or the attitude of the writer. The tone can be ironic, didactic, serious or comic, formal or informal, sympathetic or

condescending- in short, the permutation and combination of a range of human emotions can be subtly conveyed by the tone in which the writer chooses to write. The tone guides a reader's response about the intention of the writer. For example, a writer's attitude towards women or a class of society can be easily identified by the tone he uses in describing such subject matter.

LANGUAGE

Words are the tools of a writer's trade. The way he uses words is what distinguishes a writer from us. The effective use of words, the use of apt phrase and the telling expression not only add to the overall impression but also lends beauty and substance to his writing. The use of figures of speech, such as simile or a metaphor, imagery or symbolism, alliteration or allegory, personification or metonymy etc. helps our perception of 'how' the writer wants us to receive 'what' he wants to convey. It adds beauty and finesse to his presentation. Sometimes, language alone can entice and excite us, irrespective of the characters or situation. The subtle use of these devices enable the writer to control the reader's response.

Use of formal or informal language, use of slang or dialect introduces elements of realism and verisimilitudes as per the need of the situation or character. The writer may introduce dialogues to provide dramatic intensity to a story, or he may use monologue to provide psychological insight.

SETTING and ATMOSPHERE

The locale, the background, the geography in which the story is set lends reality and credibility to a story. The setting also helps in creating an atmosphere relevant to the theme and narration of the story. The background details in a story are an important element in the overall design of a story. A tale set in the 21st century may start with an e-mail or SMS message, whereas a story set a hundred years back would have to do with a post card or a letter. The rural background and the high-tech world of a metropolis if used as a setting will create an appropriate atmosphere. For example, Premchand's famous story "Panch Parmeshwar" is set in a village with rural ambience, in order to create an atmosphere of verisimilitude. Historical stories will have to have an appropriate setting and period atmosphere in order to appear realistic. And a romantic story will have to be set in an atmosphere which encourages soft feelings and endearing sentiments.

The modern short story, however, has been moving away from these categorizations. The 'singleness of effect', 'brevity and economy' are no more the hallmark of the short story. There are stories whose appeal lies in the interplay of several modes. Then there are stories in which the point of crisis may not be overtly achieved, it may just be hinted at. Even the sequencing of the story, i.e. having a beginning, a middle and an end, has been subverted. Chekov, the famous Russian short story writer remarked: "I Think that when one has finished writing a short story one should delete the beginning and the end"; so what remains is virtually a plotless narration. Infact, in the hands of the modern writer, the short story defies clear cut definition. However, for all practical purposes, singleness of effect, brevity & economy, plot and the moment of crisis remain the essentials of a short story, and the student should not forget the importance of these principles in evaluating a short story.

21.3 THE SHORT STORY IN CANADA

The short story has had a long and chequered history in Canada. Making a slow start around the 1830s, (with the stories of Thomas Chandler Haliburton) it picked up in the mid- nineteenth century when newspapers and magazines gave a fillip to its publication. Interestingly many of the early short story writers were women: Susanna Moodie and Rosanna Leprohon were known for early romances, Sara Jeannette Duncan's Journalistic inclinations made her look at social issues (among them being

the condition of British women in British India) and Mary Agnes Fleming was among the most prolific. However it was only in the 1880s that, for the first time a few collections of short stories made their appearance. The birth of Canada specific genre- the animal story- took place about the end of the century with the publication of G.D. Roberts "Earth's enigmas : a book of animal and nature life" (1896), and E.T. Seton's "Wild Animals I have known" (1898). Margaret Atwood, writing the 'Introduction' to "The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English" comments on the impact G.D. Roberts and E.T. Seton had on her as a child: "I read my first Canadian short stories as a child, although I didn't think of them as Canadian. Stephan Leacock was doled out in school as an example of humour and earlier I had sniffled my way through [the two writers of animal stories] both of which were filled with stories about deaths of wild animals and were therefore considered suitable as Christmas presents for small Canadian children of that generation. I will probably always associate boxes of chocolates with trapped wolves."

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the publication of an important and a very popular collection of stories, Stephan Leacock's "Sunshine Sketches of A Little Town" (1912) which consisted of a series of stories connected above all by the setting of a fictional town called Mariposa. Morley Callaghan, who became a very influential figure in the development of modern short story in Canada, had two of his collections published in 1929 & 1936 respectively: "A Native Argosy" and "Now that April's here and other stories".

The Depression and the Second World War brought a lull in the growth of short story. Although stories were being published, no collection worth its name got published till the 1960s. Sinclair Ross who was a novelist of repute also wrote stories about life in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, which were published in the 30s and 40s, but his collection of stories, "The Lamp at Noon and other stories" was published only in 1968. Similarly Ethel Wilson's stories were published in the 30s but her first collection "Mrs. Golightly and other stories" appeared only in 1961. The reason for late publication of such collections could be a lack of enthusiasm for short stories as well as the non-availability of periodicals and magazines interested in publishing them.

The period after the Second World War saw a spurt in the publication of short stories. An important post war anthology was Desmond Pacey's "A Book of Canadian Stories"(1947 and 1952) which had stories by P.K. Page, Sinclair Ross, Morley Callaghan, Ethel Wilson and W.O Mitchell, to name a few. The year 1954 is an important milestone in the development of short story in Canada. The CBC commissioned a weekly literary radio programme "Anthology" which was dedicated to the broadcast of short stories.

In the 'Introduction' to *Canadian Short Fiction: From Myth to Modern*, W.H. New writes : "[Robert] Weaver commissioned stories and helped develop subsequent CBC prize story competitions; and in print form he also produced seven anthologies and helped found the influential quarterly Tamarack Review. Radio programmes.... confirmed the literary potential of Canadian speech idiom, hence they retrieved local speech from the dustbin of "dialect" and so altered formal practice. But above all, Weaver initiated opportunities for Writers, encouraging an audience for them, and so helping to encourage the art."

In the 1950s, it was assumed, in Canada as well as in the U.S., that short story anthologies would not sell. But things changed in the 60s. Robert Weaver, writing in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* comments: "Two major commercial Publishing houses - "McClelland and Stewart" and "Macmillan of Canada"- have had numerous short story writers on their lists: McClelland and Stewart with Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Rudy Wiebe, Alistair Macleod among others; Macmillan with Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, Jack Hodgins, Guy Vanderhaeghe and others". But the real impetus has come from the small literary publishers: Oberon Press in Ottawa, The House of Anansi and Coach House Press in Toronto and Talon Books (Vancouver) have been in the forefront in publishing short stories .

The Canadian short story has been, more often than not, a tool in the hands of regional writers who recreate life in a particular locale, yet have achieved a great deal of sophistication as well as international recognition. Northrop Frye, the celebrated Canadian critic commented that as cultures mature, they tend to become more regional. He says, "I think the country we know as Canada will, in the foreseeable future, be a federation of regions culturally, rather than a single nation." Alice Munro's *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), which became very popular in the U.S., is a book of stories set in Ontario. Mordecai Richler's stories in *The Street* (1969) deal with the Jewish ghetto life in Montreal. Rudy Wiebe's "Where Is The Voice Coming From" (1974) deals with the plight of the natives and Margaret Laurence's first stories were set in Ghana.

The contemporary Canadian short story is a mosaic woven out of many strands. It left behind the sentimentality of romance and confronted life and society head on. According to W.H. New, "They [writers] looked at life not so much straight on as straight out, insisting that their readers stop avoiding the politics of the life they lived and sometimes only pretended to enjoy. During the 1970s and 1980s, Violence - and terror and anger- were to become even more traumatic and debilitating as they were for the characters of David Adams Richards, or Clark Blaise, or Bharati Mukherjee. And yet these developments did not mean that reality was without comedy, that humour was impossible." Writers like Mavis Gallant, Jack Hodgins, Ken Mitchell and Hugh Hood were, says New: "capable of writing with insight into society and with wit. The two do not exclude each other. Indeed, what came to be characteristic of the writing of these decades was an ability to control the apparent disparities between literary order and social chaos- sometimes for ironic ends, sometimes for reformative ones, and sometimes simply to amuse."

Canadian short story is, more or less, no different from the short stories written the world over. As it happens elsewhere, it also focuses either on a tiny speck of time or larger slice of life; is elaborately plotted or may be plotless, may follow the established norms of story writing or break the pattern, may be moored in the nineteenth century society or reflect modern sensibilities and issues- in short, the range and variety in Canadian short story is limitless.

A question often asked is what makes a short story specifically Canadian? As we have already mentioned, the Canadian short story developed along the same time and more or less on the same lines as it developed in other parts of the world, so are there any features that make it distinctly Canadian? Individually considered, probably nothing, feels Margaret Atwood. She opines, "The definition of 'Canadian short story' like that of 'Canadian' itself has a hard core with fuzzy edges. Nor is style an indication: Canadian short story writers are as eclectic in their approach as story writers elsewhere in the English-speaking world."

However, when the Canadian short story is considered as a body of work, certain common strands can be found. The short story becomes distinctive on the basis of geography, history, its people, culture and politics. The problems may be universal, but the setting, atmosphere, language may be land or culture specific. No author worth his salt can ignore these factors and these factors do influence his psyche and imagination. Looking at the Canadian short story, certain Canada specific features recur time and again, such as the vastness and bleakness of the land, the hostile terrain, snow covered wilderness features that were prominent in earlier stories. The contemporary stories reflect a different scenario - the focus has shifted from landscape to mindscape. These stories deal with the 'lived experience' of Canadian people within the framework of Canadian political and social structures. Marginalization, multiculturalism women's problems, the neglect of the First World people have come into focus. Commenting on the distinctiveness of Canadian short story, Robert Lynch points out that the popularity of the short story in Canada results from Canada's status as a marginalized culture and its status as a marginalized genre. This becomes clear when we look at the mixed bag that the Canadian culture represents. There are the original settlers, English and French Canadians besides plethora of communities from Asia, Europe, Africa, practically from all over the world. The desire of these multicultural groups to retain and promote their diverse

UNIT 22 'A MOTHER IN INDIA': SARA JENETTE DUNCAN

Structure

- 22.0 Objectives
- 22.1 Introduction : 'A Mother in India'
- 22.2 Sara Jeannette Duncan : Life and Works
- 22.3 'A Mother in India' : Detailed Analysis
 - 22.3.1 Critical Assessment
 - 22.3.2 Theme
 - 22.3.3 Characterization
 - 22.3.4 Narrative Technique
- 22.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 22.5 Questions

22.0 OBJECTIVES

Our aim in this unit is to examine the story, 'A Mother in India' by Sara Jeannette Duncan. The story is set outside Canada (in India).

22.1 INTRODUCTION : A MOTHER IN INDIA

Set in the backdrop of British India, Duncan portrays the existence of the Anglo-Indian women and their struggle for survival against convention in a world which annihilates ambition and distrusts individual potential. Duncan found the Anglo-Indian set of Calcutta and Simla impossibly stuffy. Still she had no difficulty with the lot of the Indian and the ethics of imperialism. What she did question was the cost to the individual Anglo of sustaining the sterile and artificial façade of British order on the fringes of the empire. Her whole experience in India becomes tinged with the regret for the loss of a more gratifying life abroad and for the waste of her youth, energies and talent in a cultural desert. The protagonist of the story 'A Mother in India' is very close to Duncan's own outlook and experience, her own frustrations and disillusionment.

The mother in this story is forced to send her infant daughter back to England because the daughter had fallen ill and the parents were very poor. After four years of separation, when the mother goes back to England the daughter is unable to recognize the mother. Interestingly the mother not only gets rattled but also becomes angry. When the daughter becomes 21 years old, the parents come to take her back to India. The mother feels no fond instincts for the daughter, and in fact, treats her almost as an adversary. The plot takes us back and forth between India and England. The mother, too sure about her daughter's incapacity for any finer feelings, totally misreads and misunderstands her, is unable to appreciate her in any way, and appears just to be doing her social duty towards the daughter. She breaks the relationship between her male friend and her daughter, only to find that daughter decides to remain unmarried and devote her time to the care of her parents. The daughter would remain with them for the rest of the time, and for this ironically, one must blame the British India.

Two discourses seem to coalesce here, her personal story and the Anglo-Indian collective history. The responsibilities of being an imperialist's wife, the no less binding dictates of Anglo-Indian social custom and the flinty, uncharitable individual personality of Mrs. Farnham, all seem to be implicated in the development

of the story. Duncan holds the circumstances responsible for the monstrosity that Helena Farnham seems to commit reflect. Behind the façade of being a victim, one senses definite Anglo-Indian instincts of being self centered and superior.

22.2 SARA JEANNETTE DUNCAN : LIFE AND WORKS

Born of Celtic stock and raised in Brantford, Sara Jeannette Duncan attended Toronto Normal School but soon abandoned teaching to take up journalism. The career provided certain unconventional opportunities for travel, and as early as 1884 she was in New Orleans, working as a freelance contributor (as, later, she was an editorial writer and reviewer) for the Washington Post. Through the 1880s using the pseudonym "Garth Grafton," she was also a columnist for the *Globe*, *The Week*, and the *Montreal Star*. A trip around the world in 1888 - her sketches of her travels appeared in fictional form as "A Social Departure" (1890)-led to her meeting Everard Cotes, a museum official in Calcutta, who went on to become a newspaper editor. She married him in 1890 and spent the rest of her life in India and England.

An acquaintance of such writers as W.D Howells, Henry James and E.M. Forster, she was not untouched by the character of their writing. A highly articulate observer of words and mores, she wrote ironic comedies of manners and politics describing in novels as *Cousin Cinderella* (1880) and *An American Girl in London* (1891) the differing role (and language) of women in Canada, Britain, and the U.S.A. Another novel, *The Imperialist* (1904), is a politically adept account of imperial Federation Movement and of late 19th century shifts in Ontario political attitudes. *The Pool in the Desert* (1903) is a collection of short stories.

While in India, Duncan wrote nine books set in India, two novels dealing with Canada and Canadians and five novels dealing with the theme of the Atlantic triangle. The fact that the Canadian Duncan wrote only two Canadian novels and nine books that deal with India goes to prove that India loomed large on her imagination. Duncan reserves her praise for the Anglo-Indian community who weather all the storms in India, yet are misunderstood in England. Whenever the British are compared with the Canadians, they come as second best. However, when compared to Indians, they emerge as far superior. She is not enamoured of the British in England, but becomes their staunch defender in India. This approach suggests that Duncan's consciousness was vertically divided. She looks at the Canadian-British relationship with one kind of spectacles and the Indo-British relationship with another kind. Her psyche is afflicted with 'Double Vision'. Consequently, she uses double standards: one for Canada and the other for India viz a viz England. Thus she can be considered as another Anglo-Indian writer. Some of her novels are: *The Burnt Offering*, *Set in Authority*; *His Royal Happiness*; *Those Delightful Americans*

22.3 A MOTHER IN INDIA : A DETAILED ANALYSIS

22.3.1 Critical Assessment

Rudyard Kipling's definition of a memsahib as frivolous, vain, flirtatious, adúlteress, heartless with a weakness for handsome subalterns had created quite a furore among the Anglo-Indian women. Maud Diver made a passionate plea for a redefinition of the memsahib as she was a helpless victim of adverse Indian circumstances who deserved sympathy, understanding and pity rather than scorn. She felt that 'random assertions' made by Kipling and his followers about the lower moral standards of the memsahibs were 'unjust and untrue'. Pat Barr in *Memsahibs* laments that unfortunately "Kipling did not broaden his canvas to include as much diversity of character among them as he developed in his male characters, because it is his stereotyped and superficial version of the Anglo-Indian woman that has remained current ever since as being truly representative of the whole species" (1978). Such a

picture of the memsahib is biased as it ignores all the positive qualities of her character. To set the record straight, Maud Diver pointed out that India's heroines and martyrs far outnumber her social sinners.

**'A Mother in
India': Sara
Janette Duncan**

The Anglo-Indian women writers had a distinct female role to play. There was one cause for which all of them campaigned unitedly - it was the women's cause. They staunchly defended the memsahibs and tried to generate some compassion for their plight and understanding of their role. This became the theme of the female discourse. Among these also there were two categories. One consisted of writers who not only took up cudgels on behalf of the Anglo-Indian women, but showed equal concern for the Indian women's exploitation and suppression. The second consisted of those writers who - true to the spirit of Anglo-Saxon superiority and British insularity - ignored the Indian women and concentrated on the hopes and miseries of Anglo-Indian women. Sara Jeannette Duncan is one such writer.

The dichotomy between the role of 'a wife' and 'a mother in exile' and the attendant problems form the background of the novella 'A Mother in India'. It exemplifies Showalter's comment that it is common in female literature that the writing can be interpreted as a "double-voiced discourse containing a 'dominant' and a 'muted story'". The amalgamation of personal experience with social drama provides breadth to the story.

"A Mother in India" deals with the unique problem of a mother who reunites with her daughter after twenty one years, but feels no maternal instincts. It is a position which would do any modern feminist proud, though it was written at the turn of the century. It is rare to find a woman at the beginning of the twentieth century bold enough to state her stand which goes contrary to the established and expected social conventions.

Even today, We are not used to reading about mothers refusing to accept their maternal responsibilities in the name of personal independence. Helena Farnham has to send her daughter to England because the Farnhams were 'sodden poor'. Right at the beginning of the story, one gets a feeling that Cecily was an unwanted child, "but we both knew that it was abnormal not to love her a great deal, more than life immediately and increasingly; and we applied ourselves honestly to do it". The lack of spontaneity and an attempt at propriety is glimpsed when the mother comments: "we were in such terror, not so much of failing in our duty towards her as towards the ideal standard of mankind". When she was just five weeks old, Cecily had fallen so sick that she had to be sent to England.

Sara Jeannette Duncan had given birth to a child in 1900, at the age of 37. Unfortunately, the child died within few days of the birth. Perhaps this late pregnancy had embarrassed Duncan and influenced the maternal ambivalence she displays, when she comments: "Since an unfortunate [perhaps because it is unwanted] infant must be brought into the world and set adrift".

Mrs. Farnham proposes to meet her daughter after four years. And, surprisingly, the milk of motherly affection flows in abundance. . Perhaps the intervening period has thawed and mellowed her. "Her four motherless years brought compunction to my heart and tears to my eyes; she should have all the compensation that could be.... My days and nights as the ship crept on were full of a long ache to possess her; the defrauded tenderness of the last four years rose up in me and sometimes caught at my throat". As she cried, she felt proud. After all, "I was her mother".

At last the reunion takes place. "The unforgettable picture of a little girl, a little girl unlike anything we had imagined, starting bravely to trot across the room...Half-way she came;...for there she stopped with a wail of terror at the strange faces, and ran straight back to the outstretched arms of her Aunt Emma". The mother strangely reacts as if she has been slapped, as if she has been denied what was her due, her expectations explode in her face. Although she comments: "The most natural thing in the world, no doubt"; but her real feelings described later on give a ring of insincerity

to this statement. If this is the most natural thing in the world, then why should the mother sit down as "a spectator, aloof and silent...sat impassive, looking at my alleged baby breaking her heart at the sight of her mother. It is not amusing even now to remember the anger that I felt. I did not touch her or speak to her; I simply sat observing my alien possession". The fear of the child is understandable, but the pique the mother displays is astonishing. What exactly has the child done to make her angry, and what exactly has Mrs. Farnham done as a mother? And when she is asked to kiss the daughter, as she lay asleep, her reply that she didn't think she could take such an advantage of her suggests not only a deep hurt but also that the milk of motherly love and kindness has suddenly dried up. "I spent an approving, unnatural week, in my farcical character, bridling my resentment and hiding my mortification with pretty phrases;... I may have been Cecily's mother in theory, but I was John's wife in fact" (6). To choose between husband and child was the tragic lot of these women, and they knew that they would have to fail either as wife or mother.

Helena's angry response is very immature. Setting aside the mother daughter relationship; if we look at the situation from the point of view of an adult-child relationship, Helena's reaction can't be accepted as natural or mature. Simone Vauthier in her article "Sara Jeannette Duncan's 'A Mother in India' asks a question. "The fiction explores various possibilities[of mother-daughter relationship] and in the last analysis interrogates us. Are we to regard Mrs. Farnham, who lacks the mother instinct, as an aberration of nature? Or a woman more or less typical of a certain kind of mother who, for varying reasons, has not acquired the experience of nurturing? The test makes a straightforward answer difficult".

It is certain that she fails to act as a mature adult - in this context, it is an aberration. Helena's anger and her going into a shell suggest a feeling of insecurity. She feels she has been rejected by the daughter. But is Helena competing for attention?

This egocentric and callous turn can best be explained from the colonial angle. The mother is the centre of authority, a centrifugal force, which is a typical colonial attitude. The daughter's crying is taken as a rejection, which hits at Helena's colonial mentality, and her exaggerated reaction verges on being petty. The obsession with self is a typical colonial trait. The colonials know now to reject others, they can't cope with the after-effect of rejection. Helena emerges from this encounter as more of a colonial and less of a mother.

When Cecily is 21 years old, Helena and her husband come to take their daughter back to India. On the voyage back, Helena comes across her old friend Dacres Tottenham. When she introduces Cecily to him, he is amazed. He comments how Helena had never mentioned her daughter, as if she were a skeleton in the closet. Dacres notices Helena's indifference towards Cecily and comments on the lack of sympathy the mother shows towards her daughter. "My dear boy", replies Helena, "I have seen her just twice in twenty-one years! You see, I've always stuck to John".

"But between mother and daughter- I may be old-fashioned but I had an idea that there was an instinct that might be depended on", persists Dacres. "Probably", retorts Helena, "Men are very slow in changing their philosophy about women. I fancy their idea of the maternal relation is firmest fixed of all".

"We see it a beatitude!" he cried.

Dacres' insistence that Cecily deserves some sympathy gets the ultimate reply from Helena: "I find the young lady very tolerable, very creditable, very nice. I find the relation atrocious... I would like to break the relation into pieces... and throw it into the sea... One grows fastidious at forty - new intimacies are only possible then on basis of temperament". How awfully rough on the girl! opines Dacres, to which Helena's answer is: "That consideration has also occurred to me... though I have perhaps been even more struck by its converse".

Helena's views once again reaffirm the first impression that her callous and cold behaviour is the result of a colonial egocentrism which makes one so absorbed in oneself so as to render one incapable of appreciating the other person's feelings or sentiments. No doubt, the situation has been rough on the mother too, but is she demanding compensation from her daughter? The daughter's show of love and affection is not accepted by the mother. She groans. A mental block seems to exist in Helena. She has her preconceived notions and refuses to budge, or even extend a hand forward for friendship or understanding. Rather, she spurns the proffered hand of her daughter in this direction. Does the mother really understand? Cecily is simpler and predictable. Does that make her a moron? Helena doesn't use the word 'moron' but one keeps getting the feeling that that's exactly what she thinks of her daughter. And yet, ironically, the daughter does not prove predictable.

Another question that this censure of Cecily raises is about being brought up in England. Cecily's aunts were foolish, her education didn't do her any good, she has no life or qualities in her - is this an indictment of life in England? It only shows growing up in England with unattached ladies is equivalent to courting disaster. Or is this an example of losing one's sense of balance in order to cater to one's preconceived notions?

Although Helena confesses she hardly knows Cecily, yet she is too sure in her assessment of her and predicts confidently "She was the kind of young person... to marry a type and be typically happy". She watches Dacres courting Cecily with amused detachment, as once again, she is sure that Dacres has more sense than to fall in love with Cecily due to compassion. Then the detachment gives way to alarm. She is sure that this union can't succeed, because Dacres is too fine a person and Cecily lacks an appreciation of finer things. She sets out to save Dacres from committing such a folly.

Helena treats her daughter almost as a rival, when she discourages Dacres by stressing Cecily's mediocrity. Though she thinks she is actuated by an unselfish motive, she unwittingly reveals more egocentric motivation when she confides that her concern for Dacres was "mingled more with anger than with sorrow". But her confession of her wish to be rid of her daughter may well seem to us to mask another feeling, another "shock" at finding herself completely displaced in her role as a queen. The image of her daughter as a double that endangers her self-integrity and freedom or as mask of herself, is much more revealing than she is aware of.

Helena is proved right in her judgement of Dacres but ironically, absolutely wrong about her daughter. Cecily turns out not to be a type who will marry typically and remain typically happy. After the Dacres affair she refuses to marry. "He had given her a standard; it might be high, but was unalterable... To know that men like Mr. Tottenham existed, and to marry any other kind would be an act of folly which she did not intend to commit"

This is an unexpected ironic twist, as the daughter applied to herself standards that her mother used *against* her on behalf of Dacres. As the mother is the narrator, the story is told from her point of view. But as she is egocentric and callous, the dice is loaded against the daughter from the beginning and an objective judgement of Cecily becomes difficult.

The story ends ironically in a final reversal of roles. Cecily, who has refused to marry, is "permanently with us" is mothering her mother, an emotion she has never received, but instinctively possesses. The irony of the reversal is one of the ways in which the text seems structurally to criticize the protagonist, while hinting at the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship. But, as the title suggests, the story is not simply an individual case history; it was common for the Anglo-Indians to send their children to England, which often led to the emotional dislocation the story explores. It was the socio-economic pressures that had initially led the Farnhams to send their daughter to England. The inherent tragedy of an English mother in India cannot, also, be ignored.

Poignancy of alienation is a favorite Anglo-Indian theme. "More painful than the initial separation is the alienation that follows". Duncan presents an individual case history framed in the Anglo-Indian socio-economic reality. The responsibilities of being an imperialist's wife the no less binding dictates of Anglo-Indian social custom and the flinty, uncharitable individual personality of Mr. Farnham all seem to be implicated in the development of this 'Mother in India'. Duncan holds the circumstances responsible for the monstrosity that Helena Farnham seem to commit or reflect. Behind the façade of being a victim, one senses definite Anglo-Indian instincts of being self-centered and superior.

22.3.2 Theme

"A Mother in India" deals with the unique problem of a mother who reunites with her daughter after twenty one years but feels no maternal instincts. The setting is British India. Such problems were peculiar for that time as some of the Britishers considered themselves to be exiles in India. The Anglo-Indian female writers made it a point to emphasize the stress under which the females lived and the sacrifices they had to make while living in India. The dichotomy between the role of 'a wife' and 'a mother in exile' and the attendant problems form the background. The Anglo-Indian female discourse (Duncan became a part of it) wanted to oppose the picture painted by Kipling of the English "Memsahib" in India, who, according to them, was a helpless victim of circumstances, who deserved sympathy, understanding and pity rather than scorn. The protagonist of the story, the mother, somehow doesn't deserve pity, because our heart, in fact, goes out for the daughter at the receiving end. In fact you will notice even Duncan's attitude towards the mother is ambivalent. Helena is portrayed as a true colonial, who wants to remain at the centre of authority. The daughter's rejection surprisingly breeds a sense of insecurity in her, as the colonials were not used to being rejected. Helena emerges from this encounter as more of a colonial and less of a mother.

22.3.3 Characterization

There are two major characters in the story - the protagonist is Helena Farnham, the mother of the title, and her daughter Cecily. As the mother is the narrator, the story is told from her point of view. She is a typical colonial character; self centred, overbearing, too sure of herself and wallowing in self pity. Duncan is ambivalent in her attitude towards Helena. On the one hand she looks at Helena as a suffering colonial, who is a victim of circumstances, who has braved some very hard times initially to bring up the daughter, and for the daughter's sake, she is sent to England. On the other hand, Helena does not show the usual motherly instincts, is too hard and harsh on her daughter, and shows a total lack of consideration and sympathy for the daughter. The role reversal at the end of the story is ironic, and makes us wonder about the real attitude of the writer towards the narrator. Helena emerges from this encounter as more of a colonial and less of a mother.

The portrait of Cecily, the daughter is very sketchy. She grew up in England among spinster aunts, never knew the love and care of a mother, and when at 21, is asked to go with her parents (whom she doesn't know) to India, she very obediently agrees. On the ship, Helena's friend Dacres finds her attractive, but the mother doesn't like it. She is very restrained and passive as a person, doesn't show much of self confidence, though towards the end she surprises us by deciding not to marry. We are surprised because the narrator, her mother had prepared us to believe the worst in her - she is simple and predictable, but that does not make her the moron the mother wants us to believe. It only shows that mother as a narrator is not dependable. Helena says with conviction that Cecily was the kind of young person to marry a type and be typically happy. If one treats one's daughter as a rival, her responses would tend to become biased and undependable. So Cecily is not exactly what she is supposed to be in her mother's eyes; True she is simple and passive, but she is also a charming and caring person, capable of thinking for herself and taking independent decisions.

Dacres doesn't have much of a role to play except to bring before us the emotions and sentiments of the narrator. Dacres' attentions when directed towards Cicely make the mother angry and expose the petty side of her nature. For all the claims of the colonials, underneath she appears as an insecure and unsure person.

**'A Mother in India': Sara
Janette Duncan**

22.3.4 Narrative Technique

The story is written in the form of first person narrative. We look at the incidents from the point of view of the narrator who is the protagonist of the story. But, interestingly, the narrator is not very dependable; she is not an objective observer of the scene. As she is very much involved in the action, which more or less, revolves around her, we get a biased picture of scenes and characters. This is especially true of the daughter who is painted in a negative manner. The narrator begins with a sense of superiority and a spirit of nonchalance, which in due course changes to a sense of alarm and anger, and towards the end, the narrator loses the centrality of her position (which is taken over by the daughter) and finds herself almost displaced. Duncan is ironic as well as ambivalent towards the narrator, but the balance, ultimately tilts in the favour of the daughter, who is not the demon she is supposed to be. If the daughter turns out to be likeable and reasonable, charming and normal then it puts a question mark on the narrator and her point of view. The scene of the meeting of the mother and daughter after a gap of four years is very dramatic and very well presented. The rest of the description is adequate, nothing exceptional or extraordinary in the narration. India hovers in the background, doesn't come in the forefront.

22.4 QUESTIONS

1. Write the character sketch of Helena Farnham.
2. With whom do you sympathize more - the mother or the daughter? Why?

UNIT 23 'SUNDAY AFTERNOON' : ALICE MUNRO 'WHERE IS THE VOICE COMING FROM' RUDY WIEBE

Structure

- 23.0 Objectives
- 23.1 Introduction : 'Sunday Afternoon'
- 23.2 Alice Munro : Life and Works
- 23.3 'Sunday Afternoon': A Detailed Analysis
 - 23.3.1 Critical Assessment
 - 23.3.2 Theme
 - 23.3.3 Characterization
 - 23.3.4 Narrative Technique
- 23.4 Introduction : 'Where is the Voice Coming From'?
- 23.5 Rudy Wiebe : Life and Works
- 23.6 'Where is the Voice Coming From?' : A detailed Analysis
 - 23.6.1 Critical Assessment
 - 23.6.2 Theme
 - 23.6.3 Characterization
 - 23.6.4 Narrative Technique
- 23.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 23.8 Questions

23.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will examine two stories; 'Sunday Afternoon' by Alice Munro and 'Where Is The Voice Coming From?' by Rudy Wiebe. Incidentally, these stories deal with different problems. 'Sunday Afternoon' focuses on the problems AND vulnerability of women in the modern society. 'Where Is the Voice Coming From?' looks at how the natives were exploited by the white man. Though these areas look disparate, there is an undercurrent linking them- both the stories deal with the problem of the marginalized. For one reason or the other, the women and the natives live on the margin of the mainstream society, how they are exploited or ignored links these stories thematically. Our aim will be to look at these stories in this manner.

23.1 INTRODUCTION : 'SUNDAY AFTERNOON'

'Sunday Afternoon' by Alice Munro deals with the problems and vulnerability of women in the modern society. Women have been the focus of Munro's works. In her very popular work "Lives of Girls and Women", she examines the process of growing up from a feminine perspective. Life is not easy for women, especially for those who are placed at the lower end of the social ladder. The present story examines the condition of Alva, a maid in a rich household: how she is ignored, yet is important enough to be exploited. Her life is contrasted with that of the rich- she has no hope, no future, only a drudgery of existence. And if she has to go up the social ladder, she should be willing to oblige. Howsoever advanced the society may consider itself to be, the basic human instinct (or should we say the male instinct) remains the same- a low class woman is not worthy of any attention except as an object of sex. The story, in a way, deals with the subject of man-woman relationship, but at a different level. It focuses on the vulnerability as well as self awakening of a woman, or rather a girl. There is not much action in the story. The account of the drab existence of a maid is spiced with physical description of things and people minutely

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observed and colourfully presented. There is a twist towards the end of the story, a certain ambivalence which lends a fascinating peculiarity and uncertainty to the ending.

'Sunday Afternoon': Alice Munro 'Where is the Voice Coming From' Rudy Wiebe

23.2 ALICE MUNRO : LIFE AND WORKS

Alice (Laidlaw) Munro was born in Wingham, Ontario and now lives in nearby Clinton. Much of her fiction records - with apparent photographic fidelity - this region of rural Ontario: its space and its restrictions, its oblique speech, many ties and close connections. Some stories, too, refer to the environment of the West Coast, and to Victoria in particular, a city Munro moved to shortly after her first marriage in 1951. Yet much of Munro's work concerns itself not with documenting the landscape at all but with the processes by which people - especially women - break free of closed worlds. They break free in fantasy, in memory, in delusion, in madness, by choice, by profession, and in art. But as so many of her stories reveal - "The Office," for example, the other stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), or the episodes of her novel *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) - the knowledge that comes from art is at once as pressureful, dangerous, and potentially isolating as experience itself, even though it can only ever approximate the empirical life to which it is related.

It is this sense of paradox and parallel, of apparent objectivity and relative understanding, which constitutes the core of Munro's work. The techniques she uses - oxymoron, irony - emphasize the meaning that derives from apparent contradictions, and delineate the kinds of uncertainty and dislocation with which people find they must live. In collections like *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974) and *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), the stories stress the processes of accommodation. The linked stories that form "Chaddeleys and Flemings" first published separately in *Chatelaine* in 1978 and *Saturday Night* in 1979, and collected in *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982) further illustrate how shifts in perspective alter facts, alter histories, until the processes of memory and the art selecting and arranging details surface as the effective shapers of the realities we accept.

23.3 SUNDAY AFTERNOON : A DETAILED ANALYSIS

23.3.1 Critical Assessment

Alice Munro is known more for her short stories than for her novels. Munro does not find large narrative structures congenial to her talent; she is the master rather of the compressed tale. But what is most remarkable about Munro's fiction is her style; in her prose the sentences are painstakingly crafted, their effects carefully balanced. Her writing has been compared to magic realist painting, for she has a remarkable eye for surface detail, for colours, shapes, textures. Often, the narrator in Munro's fiction is a young girl who carefully observes life, not making judgements but noting all the peculiarities in the world around her. That world is realized by the descriptions of setting, matters of dress, standards of conduct, mannerisms of speech etc.

Women are her subject matter. Munro's most popular work, "Lives of Girls and Women" details the story of a girl growing up in rural Ontario. It examines the process of growing up from a specifically female viewpoint. The heroine becomes aware at an early age of the socializing process where by sex distinctions determine her relations to others. Life is not easy for women especially for those at the lower end of the social ladder. In most of her Ontario stories, Munro focuses on her own past, the difficulties faced during adolescence and the problems associated with interpersonal relationships. A quote from the "Lives of Girls and Women" is self-explanatory, "There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their

connection with men. All we have had. No more lives of our own, really than domestic animals”.

The story ‘Sunday Afternoon’ also deals with the subject of man-woman relationship but at a different level. It focuses on the vulnerability and the self awakening of women. Alva, the maid in the Gannett house hold is taken for granted. Wearing ill-fitting clothes, living amongst discarded furniture, she leads a mechanical life without any expectations. Aware of the difference between herself and the guests that fill the Gannett house on Sunday afternoon’s, she doles out drinks and food till a cousin of Mrs. Gannett walks to her nonchalantly and kisses her passionately. Suddenly Alva becomes confident, realizing, that after all, there is not that much difference between her and them. But then has the difference been bridged or has she been used just as an object of sex? This ambivalence lends a fascinating peculiarity to the ending.

A party is going on at the Gannett house on Sunday afternoon. Mrs. Gannett comes into the kitchen to inspect things where Alva, the maid, is washing glasses. Alva notes that the guests were the usual people, she had seen most of them before although she had been working with Mrs. Gannett only for three weeks. There was Mrs. Gannett’s brother and his wife, the Vances and the Frederick’s and Mrs. Gannett’s parents had also come for a short while bringing with them a young nephew, or cousin, who stayed back when they went home. Alva found Mrs. Gannett cranky and aloof as the women in Alva’s own family would have been with a maid.

When Mrs. Gannett told Alva that lunch should be laid, instead of saying “yes, madam”, she said, “All right”. Alva was not rude, but a country high-school girl couldn’t be expected to have the manners of a trained maid. Alva was still quite clumsy in her work, and used to admire the elegance and superiority of Mrs. Gannett’s demeanor.

Filling themselves with food and drinks, people would become excited as well as relaxed. But it was not allowed for Alva to show a little relaxation or excitement. Of course, she was not drinking, except from the bottom of glasses when they were brought back. But the feeling of unreality, of alternate apathy and recklessness, became very strong in the house by the middle of the afternoon. Alva would compare the large spacious rooms of the house with her own small, over crowded rooms. She also felt a bit out of touch with reality.

As she carried the dishes Alva wanted to look presentable before the high society guests. The guests would carry their dessert plates and coffee-cups back to the kitchen. Mrs. Vance praised the potato salad and Mr. Vance, quite drunk, just kept repeating lovely, lovely. He stood right behind Alva at the sink, so very close she felt his breath quite touch her. “Going up north, Alva, upto Georgian Bay?” Mr. Vance said, and Mrs. Vance said, “oh you’ll love it, the Gannetts have a lovely place,” and Mr. Vance said, ‘Get some sun on you up there, oh?’ and then they went away.

Mr. Gannett felt concerned about Alva, he felt a responsibility for her and seriously asked her whether she was getting enough to eat. Alva reassured him flushing with annoyance; was she a heifer? She said she was going to the den to get some book to read. Mr. Gannett, trying to be helpful asked her which book would she like, and Alva, in order to impress him asked for ‘king Lear’. She thought, “A man would be more impressed by ‘King Lear’ than a woman. Nothing could make any difference to Mrs. Gannett; a maid was a maid.”

The difference between the male and the female attitudes was a major area of attention, for Munro looked at this aspect in ‘Lives of Girls and Women’, in which the heroine Del Jordan is expected to be gentle in her behaviour, submissive to authority, and modest about her accomplishments. The difficulty in being a young woman for Del arises over the matter of intelligence. Society honours a boy who shows intellectual promise, but an intelligent girl is considered suspect. However, in the incident mentioned above, Alva mentions ‘King Lear’ in order to impress Mr. Gannett with her knowledge and interests.

But in her room above the garage, she did not want to read. She looked out at the elegant street, big bungalows with manicured gardens, everything looked hard and glittering, exact and perfect. There was no haphazard thing in sight. Her room was full of unwanted furniture, the only place in house where one could find things unmatched, unrelated to each other. Sitting in the midst of such things, the suggestion of how unimportant Alva was becomes apparent. She began to write a letter to her family: ... houses are just tremendous, mostly quite modern. There isn't a weed in the lawns,... Don't worry about me being lonesome and down trodden and all that maid sort of a thing... I don't feel lonesome, why should I? I just observe and am interested. Mother, of course I can't eat with them... Also I prefer to eat alone... In a week we will be leaving for Georgian Bay and of course I am looking forward to that." Her feeling of loneliness and wretchedness is scarcely concealed though, typically, she wants to reassure her family of her well being.

Alva goes to Mrs. Gannett's fourteen year old daughter Margaret's room who had spread all her clothes on the bed, unable to decide which one's to carry to Georgia Bay. Alva touched the fine clothes, feeling a great delight in their colours and shapes, but was not envious, as she was well aware that Margaret's world was different from hers. While collecting used glasses and doing other chores, Alva was thinking of the Island. A whole Island they owned, nothing in sight that was not theirs. She could visualize the rocks, the sun, the trees and the deep cold water of the Bay. What would she do there, What did the maids do? She would go swimming at odd hours, go for walks by herself, and sometimes... perhaps- she would go along in the boat. There would not be so much work to do as there was here, Mrs. Gannett had said. She said the maids always enjoyed it. Alva thought of other maids, more talented, perhaps more accommodating girls; did they really enjoy it. What kind of freedom or content had they found, that she had not. Munro not only establishes the gap that exists between the upper class society and a maid like Alva, but also suggests, very subtly, that unless you are accommodating, you may not be able to enjoy. Another point to note is that there is not much action in the story. The account of the drab existence of a maid is spiced with physical description of things and people minutely observed and colourfully presented.

While washing glasses, suddenly Alva felt heavy, tired uncaring and lonely- it was other people's lives, nothing much for her. And then something happens. Mrs. Gannett's cousin came in the kitchen to hand over his glass. He stayed on in the kitchen. "She waited, her back to the counter, and Mrs. Gannett's cousin took hold of her lightly, as in a familiar game, [a familiar game only for him] and spent some time kissing her mouth." This was most unexpected but not unwelcome. "This stranger's touch had cased her; her body was simply grateful and expectant, and she felt a lightness and confidence she had not known in this house. So there were things she had not taken into account about herself, about them, and ways of living with them that were not so unreal. She would not mind thinking of the island now... She saw it differently now". For the first time, in a long time, Alva felt wanted, in some sense equal to them, and felt exhilarated and excited. She has something to look forward to. She may, after all, be able to enjoy the visit to the island. She may not feel lonely and unwanted.

The kiss has changed her whole attitude, has given her confidence and identity. But the last sentence of the story gives a further twist to the situation by introducing an element of doubt: "But things always came together, there was something she would not explore yet - a tender spot, a new and still mysterious humiliation." Has the difference been really bridged or has she been used just as an object of sex, to be used and dropped later on. Alva is not dwelling on this aspect yet, but this ambivalence lends a fascinating peculiarity and uncertainty to the ending. The awakening may just be a mirage, a flash in the pan, as man is wont to use the woman as a play thing and then is known to discard her at his convenience.

23.3.2 Theme

The story deals with the process of growing up of a girl and the problems she faces in an unequal world. The story is written from a female perspective. It focuses on the

vulnerability and self awakening of the maid, who is at the lower rung of the social ladder. Ignored most of the time, she leads a mechanical life, without any hope of any future. She is not a trained maid and at times finds herself a misfit in the job. People would eat and drink at the Sunday afternoon party, and as a result would become rockless. Alva would look at them with a feeling of unreality. When she compared this world with her own, she also felt a bit out of touch with reality.

The difference between male and female attitudes is brought to the fore when Alva, to impress Mr. Gannett, asks him to take out 'King Lear' for her. She knew that a man would be more impressed by 'King Lear' than a woman, but nothing would make a difference to Mrs. Gannett; for her, a maid was just a maid, nothing more.

Suddenly everything is changed. Mrs. Gannett's cousin came in the kitchen and kissed her on the mouth. He treats her as a woman-not as a maid. She feels grateful and confident. The barrier between the higher echelons of society and the lower strata has been eclipsed. After all, there was not much difference between her and them. At the basic instinct level, at the level of sex, they were equal. This small act leads to a sea change in her attitude. She felt wanted and accepted, exhilarated and excited. But Munro introduces an element of doubt at the end - has she really been accepted, or is it another example of man using a woman as a plaything.

23.3.3 Characterization

Most of the characters in the story are stereotypical, playing the part assigned to them in the society. Mrs. Gannett is the mistress of the house, fussy and cranky, trying to be nice to the maid, without actually caring for her. She goes through the motions expected of a woman of high society. Taking care of small niceties, trying to help and guide the maid, taking care of the guests and their needs. Mr. Gannett, who makes a small appearance feels responsible for the maid, and tries to take care of her by making polite enquires. Mr. Frederick is a typical male, goes very close to Alva, so very close she could feel his breath and sense the position of his hands, but doesn't have the courage to touch her; though one feels he is capable of doing so in safer circumstances.

Alva is the picture of a neglected girl, one amongst many, who work in the houses of rich people to make a living. She is diffident, awe-struck. Unhappy with her situations. By putting her in a room together with unwanted furniture, Munro states her status in the house of the Gannett's. In between her work, she suffered from bouts of tiredness, heaviness and loneliness- it was other people's life, nothing much for her. And then the incident occurs and changes her thinking completely. She suddenly felt confident, light, excited and full of hope. The transition is very natural and suggests how naïve and basically simple Alva is. She starts nurturing hope, thinks and makes plans for the future, and feels as if all her problems have been solved. She doesn't realize that this may be just a flash in the pan, it may not translate into a caring attitude. Munro wants to warn her, yet doesn't want to spoil her bliss. In the process, she shows how vulnerable such women are, a little care or concern and they are bowled over, start dreaming- but how will it all end. The world, in fact, doesn't change in this way. So Alva, after all, is immature, ignorant of the ways of the world.

23.3.4 Narrative Technique

The story is told in the form of third person narrative. This form of narration gives the author a lot of freedom to go back and forth and be an omniscient presence. The author in this form is able to objectively analyse the characters and situations help to and guide the reader's response. This is best exemplified the way Munro handles the ending of the story. Alva's reactions and assessment are different from those of the narrator. The narrator informs the readers of different possibilities, and she is so sympathetic to Alva, she doesn't want to interfere in her bliss, she doesn't want to prick the bubble of her happiness. But is it really a bubble; the narrator is not hundred percent sure so she introduces a touch of ambivalence; both the possibilities are presented before the readers. The readers are free to make their own choice.

Throughout the story, the narrator describes as well as comments. As she is a disinterested spectator of the scene, her assessments are objective and the readers can safely depend on them. Then she has an eye for detail- the setting, the household, the colour and dresses, the discrepancies between this social life and Alva's meaningless existence- all these are minutely observed and correctly detailed. When Alva goes to Margaret's room, all her colourful and expensive clothes are spread on the bed, the narrator informs us that she doesn't feel envious of Margaret's possessions, but is well aware of the fact that Margaret's world is different from hers.

When she is unexpectedly kissed, her reaction, feelings and thoughts are very beautifully and realistically presented. These would be the reactions of a neglected person who suddenly feels wanted. And does she overreact- well yes and no; it depends upon how you read the situation. This kind of open endedness adds a lot of charm to the narration. All in all, as you must have become aware by now, Munro does a very competent job in first choosing the third person narrative technique and then doing full justice to it by describing and side by side commenting as the situation develops. The ambivalence at the end, as has already been mentioned, but can still bear reiteration, lends a fascinating peculiarity, charm as well as uncertainty to the ending. The ending in this manner, in a way, becomes a beginning- we begin to think of the possibilities that lie ahead and the pitfalls Alva should be careful about.

23.4 INTRODUCTION : 'WHERE IS THE VOICE COMING FROM?'

Though not a Mennonite Indian himself Rudy Wiebe lived and grew up with them, and when he started writing, he became their Voice - a Voice asking for recognition and justice, recreating a lost past, a forgotten culture, an ignored tradition. Better known for novels retelling prairie history, obsessed with gaining perspective, with seeing all sides of a story, Wiebe uses his short meditative narratives to capture a vanished voice in history - that of the Plains Indians. Making free use of data and documentation, Wiebe seeks to go beyond the message of history to liberate a voice that is visionary in its origin. This is a voice coming from the past, wanting to be heard, telling its own story- which may be different from the official story like the voice of a subaltern.

The present story tries to recreate the legend of a famous Indian - Almighty Voice. Almighty Voice (1874-97), a Cree Indian was arrested in 1895 for slaughtering a cow on a reserve near Duck Lake, North West Territories. He escaped, shot and killed a North West Mounted Police officer who was pursuing him, and became a hero to the Crees before he was finally killed by the police.

23.5 RUDY WIEBE : LIFE AND WORKS

Rudy Wiebe was born on the family farm - to parents who had emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1930- in a Mennonite community near Fairholme, Saskatchewan. Educated at the University of Alberta and at Tübingen, Germany, he has taught at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College and Goshen College, and he currently teaches creative writing at the University of Alberta. In their compulsion to explore the sources of moral behaviour, his stories *Where Is the Voice Coming From?* (1974); *The Angel of the Tar Sands and Other Stories* (1982) and seven novels all draw on his Mennonite commitment to both independence and community. *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962) most directly portrays Mennonite life; with more structural and linguistic complexity, *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970) traces the history of Mennonite wanderings during the 20th century and the recurrent tensions between visionary quest and social integration. Wiebe's fascination with the power of belief

and the dimensions of private choice have also taken him into oral history and into an attempt to adapt the art of oral narrative to the telling of a novel, as in *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973).

The story *Where Is Voice Coming From?* also draws on this distinction between the life of speech and art and the sterility of fact and record. Technically, it contrasts passive voice with active voice, as a way of contrasting historical artifact and documentary with art, belief, and vision. Given facts, we discover logical contradictions, Wiebe writes; if art and belief have the power to transcend them, how does this happen, and why? His story at once enacts the distinction and steps back from it, in order to invite the reader to reflect on the limits of fact and illusion, and on the fundamental difficulties of cross-cultural comprehension.

23.6 WHERE IS THE VOICE COMING FROM? A DETAILED ANALYSIS

23.6.1 Critical Assessment

Rudy Wiebe begins the story by presenting a problem before us- "The problem is to make a story." It is very difficult to make a story from bits and pieces of information; it is more like making a jigsaw puzzle, trying to fit in different pieces of information till it presents a complete and comprehensive picture. As the story is seventy five years old, Wiebe doesn't know where or how to begin. "Sometimes it would seem that it would be enough- perhaps more than enough - to hear the names only". And such fascinating names at that; the grandfather One Arrow; the mother Spotted Calf; the father Sounding Sky; the wife Pale Face; the cousin Going-up- To-Sky; the brother-in-law Dublin. Then there are the names of the police and other important government officials. In this manner, Wiebe very cleverly introduces all the dramatic personae. He ends the list with, "And of course himself in the award proclamation named "Jean-Baptiste" but otherwise known only as Almighty Voice. Then Wiebe gives the proclamation in which an award of Five hundred dollars is announced for any person who will give such information as well lead to the arrest of Almighty Voice.

With such bits and pieces of information, Wiebe tries to weave the past events into a comprehensible pattern for a more meaningful understanding of events than official history suggests. The narrator is looking at the display in a Museum, where a piece of bone, purporting to be part of Almighty Voice's skull, is on display. The bone is very small, from one eighth to one quarter of an inch thick and "Precision is difficult since the glass showcase is at least thirteen inches deep and therefore an eye cannot be brought as close as the minute inspection of such a small though certainly quite adequate, sample of skull would normally require". Again, very cleverly, Wiebe introduces an element of uncertainty about the reliability of the official claim.

Then the focus is shifted to the seven pounder cannon, displayed close-by, which was used first in the 1885 rebellion and then on Saturday, May 29, 1897 (the day Almighty Voice was killed). Also preserved, though not with same care, was one 44 calibre 1866 model Winchester rifle which was apparently found in the pit where Almighty Voice had taken shelter. Even the police guardroom at Duck Lake in 1895 can be seen (from where presumably Almighty Voice made his escape) which had been subsequently moved from its original place. When the narrator looks at the small rectangular box like guardroom, he is transported into the past and seems to hear the threats that the police had used to frighten Almighty Voice: "

"Hey Injun you'll get hung for stealing that steer Hey Injun for killing that government cow you'll get three weeks on the woodpile". So bit by bit, piece by small piece, the legend of Almighty Voice unfolds before the reader. The landscape has changed, the place named Kinistino seems to have disappeared from the map but the Minnechinass Hills have not. The landscape wears a changed look but the poplar

bluff where Almighty Voice made his last stand has, of course, disappeared. (It has perhaps been made to disappear).

The policemen he shot and killed are easily located in various cemeteries. The suggestion being made here is that the memory of the bravery of the policemen has been carefully preserved, whereas, there seems to be a deliberate attempt to obliterate anything associated with Almighty Voice

The burial place of Dublin and Going-Up- To-Sky is unknown as is the grave of Almighty Voice. With this bit of information we come to know that Almighty Voice was not alone in his stand against the police - all three warriors fought form the pit-an uneven fight as they were totally and completely outnumbered. It is said that a Metis named Henry Smith lifted the latter's body from the pit in the bluff and gave it to Spotted Calf. Wiebe is at his ironic best when he juxtaposes the Indian version with the official one: "The place of burial is not, of course, of ultimate significance. A gravestone is always less evidence than a triangular piece of skull, provided it is large enough". In other words, the official version is supposedly the correct version, though it is not a fact.

Rest of the evidence can be gathered from pictures. There are numberless pictures of policemen in the case but the only one with direct bearing is one of Sgt. Colebrook , who perhaps got killed in his attempt to arrest Almighty Voice. But the picture of constable Dickson, into whose charge Almighty Voice was apparently committed in the guardroom, and who later on was convicted of negligence, does not seem to be available. "There are no pictures to be found of either Dublin(killed early by rifle fire) or Going-Up-The-Sky(killed in the pit), the two teenage boys who gave their ultimate fealty to Almighty Voice". There is however, one said to be of Almighty Voice-Junior - born in the period his father was a fugitive (two hundred and twenty one days to be precise). Several pictures of Almighty Voice's family members are duly available.

There is one final picture - that of Almighty Voice himself - it lies in the same showcase, as a matter of fact immediately beside that triangular piece of skull. "Both are unequivocally labelled, and it must be assumed that a police force with a world-wide reputation would not label *such* evidence incorrectly". But here emerges an ultimate problem in making the story. There are two official descriptions of Almighty Voice , and the nexus of the problem appears when these supposed official descriptions are compared to the supposed official picture." The repetition of the word 'supposed' clearly indicates doubts in the mind of the narrator about the accuracy of the official claims. The main objection is to the term "feminine appearance". The narrator seems exasperated and angry at this deliberate distortion to denigrate the legendary hero of the Indians. He says, " any face of history, and believed face that the world acknowledges as *man*- Socrates, Jesus, Attila, Genghis Khan, Mahatma Gandhi, Joseph Stalin - no believed face is more *man* than this face." He further adds that even in this watered-down reproduction of unending reproductions of that original, a steady look into those eyes cannot be endured. It is a face like an axe.

The narrator, or the story teller has got so involved in recreating the real scenario that claims he is "no longer a *spectator* of what *has* happened or what *may* happen: I am become *element* in what is happenning at this very moment." The narrator has become part of the event, so the element of doubt will be erased. He can see(or imagine) the bluff that sheltered Almighty Voice and his two friends he - can hear the sound of constable Dickens threatening Almighty Voice; the voice reverberates, the past resurfaces. The words that moved the boy to defiance come alive. His mind's eye can visualize what the official version has tried to hide - and the authenticity of this vision cannot be questioned. The siege had continued for three days. "Twenty seven policemen and five civilians stand in cordon at thirty yard intervals and a body also lies in the shelter of a gully. Only a voice rises from the bluff:

We have fought well
You have died like braves

'Sunday
Afternoon': Alice
Munro 'Where is
the Voice Coming
From' Rudy Wiebe

I have worked hard and am hungry
Give me food
But nothing moves.

The bluff is surrounded by a vast police force, watched by a large number of whites astride their horses, standing up in their carts, and there are "unnumbered Indians squatting silent along the higher ridges of the hills, motionless mounds, faceless" as passive helpless victims. "A crow is falling out of the sky into the bluff, its feathers sprayed as by an explosion" and the firing starts from all around. Nothing moves. But then an incredible voice rises from among the poplar trees, from among the dead somewhere lying there a voice that rises above the smoke and thunder of guns, "a voice so high and clear, so unbelievably high and strong in its unending wordless cry."

The narrator calls it a "Wordless cry" because he doesn't understand Cree, so is not in a position to interpret it properly. And he doesn't want to make a guess - that would tantamount to being inauthentic, and that is something he can't afford to do because one of his aims is to object to the inauthentic official version of the events detailed above. Thus the story presents a powerful and sophisticated narration of the White man's brutality and ruthlessness in his dealings with the native Canadians. The marginalization of the native, both in life and literature is evoked with rare control and clever contrast.

In CBC radio programme broadcast on 7th December, 1974, Rudy Wiebe was interviewed by Eli Mandel, the distinguished poet and critic. Mandel asked him whether he was recreating a history of these people, bringing them back into the land, to which Wiebe replied, "I'd always sort of thought that here where I walk is the first time anyone has ever walked here. But of course, this is not true. I suddenly discovered that many, many years before, 70 & 80 years before, there had already been dramatic historical events taking place here in connection with the Riel Rebellion, but I'd never heard of it. And this is what made me angry. And it was out of this, I suppose, indignation that I began to write... It's just the sense of somehow being deprived of knowing about your own place while you were a child when it would have been useful to you".

Discussing *Where Is the Voice Coming From?* Mandel commented that there is one voice speaking marvelously in the short stories. In one story there is one voice, in another story, there's another voice. But the question is where is this voice coming from-for you? Wiebe answered, "Well, I think that is what the writers in this country have to discover... I think that what we're going to have to do is get close to and try to get to the genuine voice of those people... discover those things again... and unearth them you know shove away the ignorance about it and look at them..."

Next, Mandel asked whether he had any moral concern in his writings, to which Wiebe replied in the affirmative. It is very easy to write about petty bedroom problems that small people have. On the other hand, there are also great people who think in great, large and superhuman terms. And they need to be explored too. "But I do believe in human greatness, and I do believe that at our best moments we should explore it".

Mandel asked, "Is that the driving force too in, say, *Almighty Voice*? That great cry at the end... When he's trapped... and when he's about to die, is some sort of affirmation, some human affirmation". Wiebe, "That's different, because *Almighty Voice* is in many ways a petty human being. He's proud, petty... he's a kid. But I think he becomes great in that little pit among the trees, there in that bluff, when a hundred men are shooting at him, and a couple of cannons, you know... I think he becomes great... in a kind of terrible last desperate moment... because for an instant he regains the greatness that was his people... in his defiance of the police... because for 20 years before *Almighty Voice* did that, his people had been voiceless. It's a fantastic name, isn't it? *Almighty Voice*. That's the thing that hooked me first on him.

when I didn't know what he was about. But a name like Almighty Voice, which in the cree means "the voice of the great spirit".

23.6.2 Theme

In this story Wiebe tries to resurrect the lost past of native Indians in Canada. History doesn't record properly the exploitation and the humiliation of native Indians at the hands of White settlers. Wiebe becomes the voice of the natives, their historian, who would like to put the record straight. Using bits and pieces of information, he reconstructs history as seen from the point of view of natives. The year 1857 is very important in our history, it is described as a mutiny by the Britishers, but we call it the 'first war of independence' - the same event is described so differently - it depends on which side you are on. Wiebe also attempts to present the history of the native Indian people of Canada, juxtaposing it with the official version and thus questioning the veracity of the official version. The way Wiebe reconstructs the events fills us with doubts about the white man's version. By showing the bravery of Almighty Voice and his two relatives against an overwhelming superior White police force, Wiebe is able to establish the Indians as heroes. Using irony as a weapon Wiebe exposes several of the White man's claim as hollow. By contradicting the official version, by juxtaposing his own finding against the official claims, Wiebe is successful in introducing an element of uncertainty about the reliability of official claims.

The bias of the Whiteman is exposed when Wiebe finds out that the policemen Almighty Voice shot and killed are easily located, but the graves of the three Indian heroes are unknown. The grave which the Indians believe belongs to Almighty Voice is not accepted as such by the whites. So, in recreating the history of the Almighty Voice, Wiebe is trying to establish the history of the Indians, which has been 'white' washed. The Voice that the title refers to is coming from the past, it is the collective voice of a people which has been hitherto suppressed- only now it is getting an opportunity to be heard and recognized.

23.6.3 Characterization

The main character in the story is Almighty Voice. But more important than a simple character is the collective character of the people - of the natives. Wiebe tries to recreate and restore a people, who have vanished from the pages of history, and from the memory of the modern generation. In the beginning of the story, when Wiebe says he doesn't know from where to begin - he feels it may be more than enough to hear the names only and such beautiful names such as One Arrow Spotted Calf, Sounding Sky, Pale Face, Going-up-To-Sky, and Dublin - such fascinating names. Just by naming names Wiebe weaves almost a magical spell- we are indeed impressed by the names which are very pictorial and meaningful, they have a lot of character in them. As against these, Wiebe juxtaposes the designations of policemen and important government officials- Corporal, Sergeant, Assistant Commissioner; Sir John Hamilton Gordon, etc. these names and ranks appear extremely pedestrian before the names of natives. Their very names have character.

It is very slowly and gradually that Wiebe builds the character of Almighty Voice. Initially the picture is hazy, then by adding bits of information as available in museum display and the photographs, Wiebe introduces clarity and flesh to the picture. And when we come to know the overwhelming odds that the three Indians in the pit faced, fifty six policemen and thirty five volunteers, besides their rifles- two pieces of cannon were also used, we realize the greatness of Almighty Voice and his two companions, Dublin and Going - Up - To-Sky. So, in this story, in the shape of Almighty Voice, we see the character of a people, a nation.

23.6.4 Narrative Technique

The story is told in the third person narrative. The third person narrator acts as a historian who is trying to recreate the past of a lost people, a vanished tribe. Using whatever little data that is available, he records the past glory of the original inhabitants of Canada, and in the process, questions the veracity and reliability of

'Sunday
Afternoon': Alice
Munro 'Where is
the Voice Coming
From' Rudy Wiebe

recorded history. The narrator wants to tell a story, the problem is how to make a story in the absence of documents and facts. The narration, based on bits and pieces of information, is akin to making a jigsaw puzzle, trying to fit in different pieces till it presents a complete and comprehensive picture. Gathering facts from a museum display, deciphering photographs for their real value and meaning, using irony as a weapon to expose the falsity of the official position, the narrator performs a very difficult task in piecing together disparate bits of information to weave the past events into a comprehensive pattern for a more meaningful understanding of events than official history suggests. After looking at the Museum display of a piece of Almighty Voice's skull, the narrator introduces an element of doubt about the reliability of the official claims. Then the attention is shifted to the cannons and rifles used in the fight against Almighty Voice and his two companions. The narrator is transported into the past where he can hear the threats the police had used to terrify Almighty Voice. Thus, bit by bit, piece by small piece, the legend of Almighty Voice unfolds before us.

The narrator then questions the official claim about Almighty Voice's grave, using irony very effectively. "The place of burial is not of course of ultimate significance. A gravestone is always less evidence than a triangular piece of skull, provided it is large enough."

Then the narrative shifts to the pictures and the narrator is extremely vehement in protesting the official version which claims Almighty Voice's looks to be feminine. The narrator has become so involved in recreating the real events, that he claims he is no more a spectator, but has become an element in what is happening, so in his version, there can be no element of doubt. In his imagination, he can see the version of the great fight, his mind's eyes can visualize what the official version has tried to hide and recreates before us the reality of this piece of history. The voice that issues from among the poplar trees is the voice of history. In this manner, the story presents a powerful and sophisticated narration of the white man's brutality and ruthlessness towards the natives.

23.7 LET US SUM UP

On the face of it, the two stories appear different. 'Sunday Afternoon' focuses on the condition of women at the lower strata of society, and how they are exploited ignored and disgraced. 'Where Is Voice Coming From' looks at how the natives in Canada were systematically exploited, hounded and demoralized by the Whiteman. As you must have noticed, both the stories deal with the fact of exploitation of one class of people by another class- which is more powerful and thus acts as superior. This exploitation links the two stories. Both women and natives lived a marginalized existence, both have suffered at the hands of socially superior forces. And both the writers protest this irrational and inhuman treatment meted out to this section of society. Both Munro and Wiebe use subtly and irony to expose the different forms of exploitation. The women and the natives have raised their voice and they have become a force to reckon with not only Canada but all over the world. Both these stories, as you must have realized, achieve their objectives, poignantly and forcefully,

23.8 QUESTIONS

1. Can you term 'Sunday Afternoon' as a story written from a feminist point of view? Discuss
2. Comment on the ending of the story.
3. Wiebe projected the suppression of the Natives adequately in "Where Is Voice Coming From"? Discuss
4. What devices does Wiebe use to question the official claims about Almighty Voice's legend?
5. Is there anything common between the two stories? Discuss

UNIT 24 'SWIMMING LESSONS' ROHINTON MISTRY 'THE DOOR IS SHUT BEHIND ME' : UMA PARAMESWARAN

Structure

- 24.0 Objectives
- 24.1 Introduction: 'Swimming Lessons'
- 24.2 Rohinton Mistry: Life and works
- 24.3 'Swimming Lessons': A Detailed Analysis
 - 24.3.1 Critical Assessment
 - 24.3.2 Theme
 - 24.3.3 Characterization
 - 24.3.4 Narrative Technique
- 24.4 Introduction: 'The Door I Shut Behind Me'
- 24.5 Uma Parameswaran: Life and Works
- 24.6 'The Door I Shut Behind Me': A Detailed Analysis
 - 24.6.1 Critical Assessment
 - 24.6.2 Theme
 - 24.6.3 Characterization
 - 24.6.4 Narrative Technique
- 24.7 Summing Up
- 24.8 Questions

24.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to introduce you to the writings of Indians living in Canada. The two stories will make you aware of the problems that Indian immigrants face in Canada. The stories will also make you familiar with the fears, hopes, desires, ambitions as well as the tension that immigrants face in the country of their residence. The nostalgia of the past, their roots within their mother country, the dilemma of acceptance and assimilation, the problem of safe guarding their identity, and the mixture of pain, trauma and pleasure of their new-existence is brought out poignantly. Mercifully, the stories chosen do not focus much on lament, a favourite theme with immigrant writers. Both Mistry and Parameswaran dwell more on the positive side- they point out that the struggle is there, but the problems are not insurmountable, and with a positive frame of mind, one can overcome them and look forward to a happy future in the country they have decided to come to- the country of their choice.

24.1 INTRODUCTION: 'SWIMMING LESSONS'

Life is a web of intricate choices, more so if you happen to be an immigrant. The immigrant sensibility has traditionally revolved around nostalgia and lament. Caught between conflicting cultures, the immigrant writers often dwell upon the themes of dislocation, survival and loss of identity. The feeling of nostalgia is heightened if the writer happens to be a coloured immigrant in a predominately white society. Rohinton Mistry has lived in the multicultural society of Canada since 1975, has written about his past as well as his present, without becoming unduly sentimental. The immigrants do have their problems, but which society doesn't have problems? In the case of immigrants the chasm between the two cultures leads to alienation. Mistry in his story 'Swimming Lessons' portrays the superficiality of living together

without actually knowing each other, and thus projects the typical tension between wanting to belong and wanting to retain one's identity. It becomes a fluid identity.

24.2 ROHINTON MISTRY : LIFE AND WORKS

Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay in 1952. In 1975 he moved to Toronto and has lived there ever since. While at the university of Toronto, he won two Hart House literary prizes (for 'One Sunday' and 'Auspicious Occasion') and in 1985 was awarded the 'Canadian Fiction' contributor's prize. His collection of short stories 'Tales from Firozsha Baag', was short listed for Governor General's Award in 1988. His most celebrated work is *Such A Long Journey*, which is set in Bombay and got rave reviews everywhere. It was short listed for the Booker Prize; won the Governor General's Award; won the Commonwealth writer's prize for "Best Book of the year", and Smith Books/Books in Canada First Novel Award. The novel has since been made into a film.

Rohinton Mistry's 'Tales from Firozsha Baag' is a series of connected short stories, all dealing with Parsi life in a cluttered & bourgeois apartment building in Bombay-the Firozsha Baag. Out of a riot of colourful yet eccentric characters, emerges a hero of sorts, Kersi Boyce, who exists on the fringe of the stories, until he decides to migrate to Canada, near the end of the collection. "Swimming Lessons" is the final story in the collection, in which he tries to come to terms with a different culture, a different life. These stories have a large dose of autobiographical element in them.

24.3 SWIMMING LESSONS : A DETAILED ANALYSIS

24.3.1 Critical Assessment

In "Swimming Lessons" the narrator (Kersi Boyce) describes his life in Canada as well as connects with his past and parents living in Bombay. The story begins with the narrator's encounter with an old invalid man living in his building, who reminds the narrator of his own grandfather, another invalid. Both the old people were immobile, and both found it difficult to pass their time. The Portuguese woman across the hall is the inquisitive type, who disseminates information about people living in the building to anyone who will care to listen. She had informed the narrator that the old man's daughter was taking care of him.

The narration goes back and forth in time and space, as the narrator dwells on the sick man in Toronto and his Grandpa in Bombay. He remembers how his mother used to take good care of grandpa too, till things became very complicated and he had to be taken to a hospital. He remembers even the minutest details of his Grandpa's illness, and the straggle that his mother had to undergo single handed-changing dressings, handling bedpans etc. The narrator also helped, but didn't go to the hospital as often as he should have. And Grandpa ultimately died in the hospital.

The narration of the story in Toronto is intersected by his parent's reactions in Bombay to his letters, and these reactions are given throughout in italics, making it a sub-text tagged along with the main narrative. Kersi is alone in Toronto, writing a book of stories about his life in India, and taking swimming lessons, finding the chlorinated water of the local pool as foreign an element as the suburban life around him. Mistry cleverly includes within this story a commentary on and a critique of his own writing. Kersi has sent his book home to be read by proud but uncomprehending parents; their discussion about its contents, focus and certain omissions provides an interleaved sub-text on the story as well as the whole collection (Tales from Firozsha Baag). Mistry thus unites two traditions in the short story: the conservative, semi-autobiographical mode that specializes in connected stories of childhood; and

the newer self-reflexive mode in which the function of the story is to comment on itself.

The postman rang the bell for so long that the narrator's mother wanted to give him a piece of her mind, but she was afraid of the postman's vengeance, because after the Shiv Sena agitation about Maharashtra for Maharashtrians, bus drives, conductors and such other workers were at their worst behaviour. But when she saw the letter from Canada, from her son, she gave him some baksheesh, kissed the envelope and ran to tell her husband. He told her not to get excited because he knew the kind of letters he wrote - a few lines of empty words. When the mother read the letter, her enthusiasm vanished - the letter described the weather more than anything else. The father commented, "everything about his life is locked in silence and secrecy".

The narrative shifts back to present, to Toronto. Two women were sunbathing on the stretch of a patchy lawn. Both look luscious and gleaming, and the narrator fantasizes about their bodies and breasts. He runs down to have a closer look at them, and finds, to his disappointment, wrinkled skin, aging hands and sagging bottoms.

He goes for his first swimming lesson. When he had gone for registration, the woman at the desk asks him "Is swimming not encouraged in India." On the contrary, most Indians swim like a fish, only he is an exception, replies the narrator. Then he remembers how he failed to learn swimming because the deep blue sea of Chaupatty beach was grey and murky with garbage, too filthy to swim in.

He examines his swimming trunks, which are a little tight and starts fantasizing about how a gorgeous woman in the class of non-swimmers could become interested and may come home "to taste the pleasures of my delectable Asian brown body whose strangeness has intrigued her and unleashed uncontrollable surges of passion inside her throughout the duration of the swimming lesson". His fantasies suggest that the narrator has a very strong imagination and to a large extent, lives on dreams.

The scene shifts back to Bombay. Mother decides to reply because father did not want to write as all his previous questions remain unanswered. But after mother started the letter he looked over her shoulder, and gave suggestions of how the narrator should work during the day and then take some courses at the night school; without hardwork, there can be no success. Mother took the letter to the post office herself.

The first swimming lesson was hopeless. The water terrified him. Swimming here becomes a sort of metaphor for acceptability. First an instruction sheet is handed over to them. As he enters the showers three young boys call him 'Paki Paki' and comment that soon all the water was going to taste like curry. Mistry only describes, doesn't comment on this racial taunt.

It was a mixed class but the gorgeous woman of his fantasy was missing. He has to settle for a thirty five year old woman wearing a pink one piece suit with brown hair and bit of a stomach. The instructor Ron gives them pep talk and demonstrates floating on the back. When he asks for a volunteer, the pink one-piece suit wades forward. She does very well. He notices some of her pubic hair coming out and dwells on them to a great extent. Then they are told to paddle. And when Ron wanted a volunteer, unmindfully the narrator went forward. To his horror, he leads the class to the deep end, where he almost drowned. The narrator becomes so frightened that he decides not to come next week.

On his way back, he encounters the old man again in the lobby, who tells him how he used to swim a lot when he was young. The thought of going for the next lesson frightens him, but he vision of the straying pubic hair of the woman beckon him. However, the next time, he is afraid of even venturing into the shallow end. But when he does get in, he is in for disappointment, the hair have been neatly tucked in, they are not straying any more. He feels betrayed. One feels an innocent naivette in such reactions of the narrator. This makes swimming even more difficult to learn. He

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decides not to go again. The total loss is one fantasy plus thirty dollars - fifteen for swimming trunks and fifteen for swimming lessons.

Back in Bombay, the postman brought a parcel instead of a letter. Both the parents are surprised and pleased to find a book of stories written by their son. Now they understand what their son had been doing all the time, and the father had thought he was just clerking away in an insurance company. Father opened the book and started reading it, but the mother thought it was unfair as she would have to wait, and they agreed that he would read the first story, then give it to her so she could also read it, and they would take turns in that manner.

The weather is changing in Toronto, it is fall now and leaves have started to fall. Bertha, the building superintendent, is raking in the leaves. There is a commotion outside, and the narrator looks down the window to see the old man being taken for a drive by his son who has brought a big car for this purpose.

Mother and father read the first five stories, and the mother was very sad, she said he must be so unhappy there, all his stories were about Bombay, she thought he must have been missing his home. But father did not agree; he said it did not mean he was unhappy, "all writers worked in the same way, they used their memories and experiences and made stories out of them, changing some things, adding some, imagining some, all writers were very good at remembering details of their lives." But mother is not convinced, "how can you be sure that he is remembering because he's a writer, or he started to write because he is unhappy and thinks of his past, and wants to save it all by making stories of it."

It has become quite cold in Toronto. The old radiators do not function properly and the writer complains to Bertha. She mischievously replies that if the radiators don't work, he can always come to her, she will keep him warm, and she opens her arms wide, laughing.

The old man is staring outside, at the flakes of falling snow. "What thoughts is he thinking as he watches them?" It finally happened. The heat went out-completely. Everything becomes stone cold. The narrator goes down where several people have already gathered and Bertha announced that she has telephoned the office, they are sending a man. As he walked down the long hallway, he found something different, something missing. The Portuguese woman opened the door and informed him that the old man had another stroke yesterday, and was taken to the hospital. Then, the narrator immediately realized, that it was the medicinal smell that was missing from the hallway.

The stories in the book were all about poor or middle class Parsi families and the stories were picked from the sufferings of their own lives; but there should have been something positive about Parsis, there was so much to be proud of: the Tatas, Dadabhai Naoroji, Sir Dinshaw Petit were some of the great names. "What would people reading these stories think, those who did not know about Parsis - that the whole community was full of cranky, bigoted people; and in reality it was the richest, most advanced and philanthropic community in India, and he did not need to tell his own son that Parsis had a reputation for being generous and family oriented." But mother was happy that he remembered everything. Father hoped that there will be some story based on his Canadian experience, that way they will come to know about their son's life there, if not through his letters. Mother is puzzled as to why he doesn't write some stories about Toronto, especially since father had maintained that writers use their own experience to make stories. Father explains that he was probably not using his Toronto experience because it was too early. It takes about ten years time after an experience before a writer is able to use it in his writing because, "according to the theory he is writing of these things because they are far enough in the past for him to deal with objectively, he is able to achieve what critics call artistic distance, without emotions interfering." In this manner Mistry undertakes the exercise of self critiquing his own work.

After reading the whole book, the parents felt that they had come to know their son better. They wished there were many more stories. The last story they liked best because it had the most in it about Canada (incidentally the book is 'Tales from Ferozsha Baag' and the last story is 'Swimming Lessons') "and father said if he continues to write about such things he will become popular because I am sure they are interested there in reading about life through the eyes of an immigrant, it provides a different viewpoint; the only danger is if he changes and becomes so much like them that he will write like one of them and lose the important difference."

The winter drags on. The medicinal smell is back in the hall, the narrator looks forward to meeting the old man.

The narrator has spoken so often to the old man, but doesn't know his name. He decides to look it up in the apartment directory, and then surprise him by calling him by his name. He prepares to have his bath. For the first time, he fills the tub and soaks in it. Earlier he had only been taking a shower. He immerses in the water up to the neck. He feels good. This is the way the Canadians bathe. Suddenly, on an impulse, fighting his fear, he dunks his head in, holding his breath. He does it again, and then again and realizes that the fear of water had vanished. This gives him a lot of confidence and he decides to re-register for swimming lessons. He feels closer to the Canadians.

The winter is almost over, the snow banks are melting. The narrator goes to the board where are listed the names of all the residents. But before apartment 201, in which the old man lived, there is no name, just a blank. That's odd, but the narrator decides that next time, he would introduce himself, and then ask his name. As he walks the corridor, the Portuguese woman stops him and says, "you know the old man died last night." The narrator is stunned. "Did you know his name", he asks, but she leaves without answering. An example of the kind of superficial life the narrator was leading. He was living with them but was not one of them.

The best thing the mother liked in the last story was about Grandpa, how she had told her son to get the blessing of the elders. "Are you sure, said father, that you really told him so, because you said yourself the other day that he changes and adds and alters things." But she wants to believe that she said these things to him. The father told her not to confuse fiction with facts. "You must not confuse what really happened with what the story says happened. You must not lose your grasp on reality, that way madness lies." Then the mother stopped listening as she had told father so often, she was not very fond of theories, and she took out her writing pad and started a letter to her son. Father said write to him that they were very proud of him. The fluctuating sentiments expressed by the father symbolize the hopes and fears that the near and dear ones undergo for those who have left them and gone abroad.

24.3.2 Theme

The story deals with the problems of adjustment and acceptability for migrants. Immigrants living in their adopted country face a typical dilemma about their sense of belonging. The chasm between the two cultures leads to a sense of alienation. In 'Swimming Lessons', as you must have already noticed, Mistry portrays the superficial existence of the immigrants, who live in Canada without actually knowing the Canadians. The tension between wanting to belong and wanting to retain one's identity is very well delineated in this story. The narrator's present is continuously affected by the narrator's past, between his memory of his parents and the present life of loneliness. This life in Canada becomes more meaningful when compared or contrasted with his life in Bombay. The old and invalid man living in his building reminds the narrator of his own grandfather. He also remembers how his mother used to take very good care of his grandpa, comparing it with the care being meted out to the invalid. The narrator knows the old man quite well, has talked to him many times, but one day suddenly realizes that he doesn't even know his name. And the old man dies before the narrator gets an opportunity to ask him his name.

Swimming in this story becomes a metaphor for acceptability. If he wants to assimilate with the Canadians, he must know swimming, otherwise he would remain on the fringe. This becomes very clear when he goes for his first swimming lesson, finding the chlorinated water of the local pool as foreign an element as the suburban life around him. In almost an autobiographical mood, Mistry points out the difficulties he faced in Canada; he was unable to swim with the tide and how learning swimming reflect the difficulties he faced as an immigrant. Once he learns to swim, that would symbolize his overcoming the problems of being an immigrant, he would become one with the Canadians, though, not necessarily their equal. There are sexual overtones to many of the narrator's dreams, which are handled very realistically as well as ironically- it is but natural for a young man living alone to have voyeuristic dreams.

24.3.3 Characterization

The story revolves around four characters- the protagonist who is the narrator and the old invalid man in Toronto, and the narrator's parents in Bombay. Without giving details but with a few deft strokes, the author presents before us the narrator, and the three others who, in fact, add to our understanding of the narrator. The parents' reactions and comments not only help us understand their attitudes and preferences, but also enrich our understanding of the narrator. The diffidence and lack of assurance shown by the narrator makes him a typical immigrant trying to find his way in the maze of a new society, a new culture, or for that matter a whole new world. The difference of opinion between his parents' approach towards him also clarify certain traits in them. The father sure of his opinion doesn't look forward to the letters that the narrator writes because these don't reveal anything about the kind of life the narrator is leading in Toronto. Yet he is curious anxious and ready with his advice. The mother is more sentimental, more concerned and quite effusive in her love for her son. It is she who writes back to the son, who appreciates his stories and is happy that he remembers his days in Bombay. Though skeptical at first about his son's ability, the father, towards the end of the story feels proud of his son's achievement - he has become a writer. An interesting observation is that after reading the whole book, the parents felt that they had come to know their son better. In this way, their comments complement our understanding of the narrator, who is struggling to find his feet in a new culture, a new society as well as a new country. Mistry has very successfully given us a portrait of not only a struggling immigrant, but also of a struggling writer, as the story to a large extent, is autobiographical.

24.3.4 Narrative Technique

The story is written in the intimate first person narrative form, yet is unique and quite interesting. The narrator describes his life in Toronto as well as connects with his past and parents living in Bombay. As already mentioned, the narration of the story goes back and forth in time and space, as the life of his parents in Bombay, their reactions and expectations intersect the narration of his life in Toronto. It revolves around his present life and memories of his past. When he looks at the sick man in his building, he remembers his sick grandpa in Bombay and how his mother used to take good care of him till things became very complicated and he had to be removed to the hospital. When the narrator goes for registration for swimming lessons, he remembers how he failed to learn swimming because the deep blue sea of Chaupatty beach was grey and murky with garbage, too filthy to swim in.

The narration of the story in Toronto is intersected by his parents reactions to his letters in Bombay. These reactions are given throughout in italics, making it a sub-text tagged along with the main narrative. Kersi has sent his book home to be read by his parents; their discussion about its contents, focus and certain omissions provides own interleaved sub-text on the story as well as the whole collection. These intersections are very cleverly handled and the most interesting aspect of the discussion between mother and father is the minimal use of punctuation, the sentences run along very fluidly, presenting a kind of unbroken continuity. The Direct is mixed with the Indirect. The sentences are inordinately long, providing a

feeling of breathless excitement. One sentence covers a full paragraph, such is the flow of the language and emotion. Thus, Mistry cleverly includes within this story a commentary on and a critique of his own writing. He unites two traditions in the short story: the conservative, semi-autobiographical mode that specializes in connected stories of childhood; and the newer self-reflexive mode in which the function of the story is to comment on itself. The story thus gains in stature and becomes an excellent example of a complex yet effective narrative technique which achieves a double purpose.

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24.4 INTRODUCTION : 'THE DOOR I SHUT BEHIND ME'

Have you heard about the myth of 'Trishanku'? He was a king who wanted to go to heaven with his body. He performed 'tapsya' and got a boon to fulfil his wish. But nobody can go to heaven with his body - it is only the soul that goes beyond the physical realm. So when he was on his way up, he was stopped midway by the God above. He was not allowed to go up and he couldn't go down - so he kept hanging in the sky - he was neither in heavens nor on earth. So Trishanku is one who is neither here nor there, he doesn't belong anywhere. This is the symbol that Uma Parameswaran uses to describe the immigrants, they neither belong fully to the country of their adoption nor can they forget their roots- links with their mother country. This is the dilemma that Uma Parameswaran projects in this story. Like the mythological king Trishanku the immigrants stand suspended between two worlds unable to enter either, and making a heaven of their own.

24.5 UMA PARAMESWARAN : LIFE AND WORKS

Uma Parameswaran was born in Madras and raised in Nagpur and Jabalpur. She had her schooling and university education in India. In 1963, she went to USA on Fulbright scholarship and got her Ph.D from Michigan State University. In 1966, she moved to Winnipeg in Canada where she continues to teach and write.

She blends modern experience with traditional myths and stories. One of her most famous work is *Trishanku* (1988). Another important work is *Selected Fiction, Poetry and Drama* (1990). She is the founder of PALI (Performing Arts and Literature of India) which organizes formal dance instruction.

She is also a notable critic. Her main critical publications are : *A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists* and *The Perforated Sheet : Essays on Salman Rushdie's Art*.

24.6 'THE DOOR I SHUT BEHIND ME' : A DETAILED ANALYSIS

24.6.1 A Critical Assessment

On first impression, the title appears to refer to the Indian tradition of a bride leaving her paternal home forever after marriage, never to look back. "Crossing the Threshold" a story by another immigrant writer Surjeet Kalsey, deals with this theme of crossing over for good. However as you read the story, you will realize that it is not a bride leaving her home, but an Indian leaving his country to become a possible immigrant in Canada. The simile is very apt, as both the situations involve crossing over to a new life; this crossing over involves fear and uncertainly coupled with hope and desire.

The story opens with Chander, the protagonist, flying to Canada on a two year research associateship with the University of M, at an annual salary of \$ 8500. The exact amount of salary has been specifically mentioned to focus on the fact that those going abroad are usually lured by money and the attendant comforts. Kishen Agrawal, the crude and loud fellow passenger who does not have an immigrant-visa feels envious of Chander and regretfully comments : "Unfortunately, being a student, I don't have that passport to life long luxury. Have you calculated how much one can save in three years?" And he calculates that the total savings come to a six figure amount in Indian currency. He appears to be a perfect portrait of an ugly Indian. Cleverly, Parameswaran has analysed the mindset of an average Indian who goes abroad, his obsession with money and savings as well as his dreams of luxury and comfort.

As the plane clears the clouds, Chander focuses on the book in his hand "The Ramayana" his mother had given him at the airport along with Annie Besant's translation of Bhagavad Gita; "Keep it on your table," she had exhorted. She is a typical Indian mother- undemonstrative, non-interfering but loving and caring. She wants to make sure that her son should not forget his culture and traditions.

Agrawal, insensitive to his own loudness and Chander's discomfort, waxed more friendly and voluble. He spoke mostly about his own achievements, but interspersed his autobiography with adverse comments on western culture. In between, he did find time to make lewd comments on the air-hostess. As soon as the food trays arrive, Agrawal grew silent and appeared uncomfortable. He has been unable to use the flush on the plane, as he cannot handle the knobs and faucets, so he is upset and angry.

Chander explained the functioning of the toilet in the plane but when Agrawal returned to his seat, his criticism continued, "Our toilet habits are much cleaner. These westerners...". The same trend of criticism was carried through the meal. The Westerners were far behind in their culinary arts, they had no taste buds, no appreciation of finer shades of flavour, etc. Through Agrawal, Parameswaran portrays a typical class of Indians who criticizes the West and its culture, yet wants to stay abroad, earn money and lead a life of comfort and luxury.

Thus the story develops through contrast - everything about Agrawal revulsed Chander- his dress, his North Indian accent, his egoism, and his shallow generalizations. Unable to shake him off, Chander had to check in a hotel along with Agrawal. Agrawal wanted to go to a night- club but Chander refused this simple pleasure'. Agrawal wanted Chander to celebrate his immigrant visa. "The magic carpet to health, wealth and happiness- THE GREEN CARD!" Chander corrected him. "It isn't green, it isn't a card and this isn't the United States," but Agrawal ignored him. Chander felt very resentful and unhappy why had he allowed this leech to close in on him? "Was it patience that made him listen to the boor? Was it tolerance that kept him from rebuking? Or was it weakness?" Agrawal's uncouth behaviour sets Chander to ruminate on India as a nation, "Was it tolerance that had allowed India to suffer wave after wave of political and cultural invasions? Tolerance that had prompted Hinduism to be submissive while missionaries and governments had drawn away people and wealth? Or was it Weakness? Non-violence or cowardice? Two nomenclatures for the same quality, and that quality as a national trait for a people who flaunted it by using the more flattering name... a nation made of spineless thinkers and unthinking egotists... and the Agrawals always led the Chanders by the nose... because the Chanders permitted them to..."

In this manner, we get to know as much about Agrawal as about Chander, in fact, we get to know more about Agrawal. In his fit of anger Chander bursts out in a virulent attack on Agrawal, criticizing him for his prejudices, shallowness and ego, and doesn't even spare the society that breeds such people.

"What a society! Gossipy women who at thirty were already elephantine...lazy debauched men relaxing the afternoons away against dirty bolsters in their fly-invested shops, chewing betel leaves and spitting tobacco juice on the side walks..."

selling adulterated sweetmeats and shortweight grocery to poor customers..." Such a diatribe is unexpected from a person like Chander, but his shocked distaste turns to fascination when Agrawal starts crying, agreeing with most of Chander's accusations, and going into a fit of nostalgia and lament for his people and his home land: Agrawal's unashamed crying makes Chander realize his emotions of loss in new surroundings, makes him aware of the acute difference in their attitudes; even makes him envy Agrawal for this onslaught of nostalgia for persons and a place - something Chander was not capable of feeling. His cold rationality was duly matched by Agrawal's sentiments and irrational longings.

Chander realized that Agrawal wanted to be with his own people, to speak his own language. He suggests that Agrawal should look for some names common in his part of the country in the telephone directory. It is a great idea and soon they get an invitation to a get together of Indians in the Mundhra's home. Agrawal is excited, he fills his pocket with betel leaves as a gift for the Indians who wouldn't have tasted them for long. Although Chander also had brought two pounds of scented and spiced areca nuts, yet he did not want to share it with anyone. Suddenly he knew what he envied in Agrawal. "Spontaneity. That was it. Spontaneous nostalgia, fellow feeling, generosity," Parameswaran continues to build these two characters on the basis of contrast, and we find that Agrawal too, after all, has some positive qualities. The scales balance almost evenly.

At the Mundras Agrawal greeted everyone with a warm enthusiasm, but Chander could not do so. Further realization sets in - Chander accuses himself of snobbishness. "I am the insensitive one, he reflected, a clod that cannot respond or be touched by any strong emotion".

Chander started talking to the gathering, thawed a bit but couldn't match Agrawal who had become part of the company. People in the gathering belonged to all parts of India, but the language they spoke was English, and they prided in it. Their children didn't want the parents to speak in their mother tongue before their friends. Slowly the implication of their immigrant status dawned on him. They couldn't care less whether their children had any knowledge or feeling about their country, religion and language. And in India, these very people built walls of "My People, my language". This contrast is very aptly described by Parameswaran. Indians in Canada were only remotely associated with India - their concern was also superficial. When he talked about India, the drought, the Indo-Chinese war, long queues everywhere, black marketing, corruption and inefficiency, "He was conscious that he was magnifying their indifference and exaggerating his descriptions, but he felt impelled to provoke them into active sympathy and identification." But he failed to provoke them.

The mood at the get-together swings to music. A K.L Saigal album fills the air with nostalgia. What astounded Chander was that they spoke of the distant past. They seemed to have an image in mind, a golden age of romanticised memories - which did not lie in the immediate past. What were they? Indian or Canadians? They had not changed their food habits, their costume, they were a close-knit ethnic group. Yet they were far from the Indian current. They wanted to go back, but their hope was for a time far in the abstract future. "Like the mythological king Trihishanku, they stood suspended between two worlds, unable to enter either and making a heaven of their own."

Chander took out his visa and thought, is this the "passport to lifelong luxury [or] the devils bait to lifelong exile." These are the two extremes between which the immigrants dwell - luxury and exile. He felt a heaviness, felt like crying, he was confused. Discussion veers on to weather. Harish Bahl tells Chander, "The first winter is usually quite enjoyable, every day a challenge; it is the second or third winter that gets one down". When Chander informs him that he intends to go back to India, Bahl Comments, "That's what we all say for the first year or two." And then it's too late. One more brain drain casualty. Chander defends himself by saying that it was the age of individualism and not of abstract ideologies of patriotism and nation-

building. Bahl agrees absolutely and then gives a speech which is almost breathless in pace, (it is a sentence running into 16 lines) where he talks of all that India reminds him of and with rising irony talks of the breaking of bonds, of forgetting the roots and looking ahead ostrichwise. "When we leave our country we shut many doors behind us though we are not aware of it at the time", remarks Bahl.

However Chander replies, "There are many doors ahead of us". The story thus ends on a note of hope for the future. Ironically, it is Bahl the immigrant who puts the whole issue of immigrant's links with their past in a perspective, and it is Chander, who had claimed he had come only to go back, now looks ahead instead of behind and hopes for building a rosy future in Canada. It is very difficult to say whose perspective is correct, but Parameswaran is known to advocate the assimilation of immigrants in the country of their adoption.

24.6.2 Theme

The story deals with the immigrants dilemma. The ambivalence of their situation is poignantly brought out by Parameswaran. They are at times, between the devil and the deep sea. Whichever way they decide, some element of regret remains embedded in their situation. After building a contrast between the attitudes of Chander and Agrawal, where both are critiqued and found wanting in one way or the other, Parameswaran develops the theme by placing these two characters in the midst of a gathering of Indian immigrants in Canada. It is at this get-together that Chander is able to glimpse the life-style and mindset of the immigrants, it is there that Chander realizes the Trishanku like status of Indian immigrants. For all their bravado and indifference, they lead an unfulfilled life. However, Parameswaran endorses a positive approach; if people decide to adopt another country to live in, they must do it whole heartedly. They must not look back, but look ahead, with hope and pleasure. There can't be any half measures, it is these that lead to problems of belonging. The immigrants must be able to balance the demands of the present with the nostalgia of past.

24.6.3 Characterization

The story basically is built around two contrasting characters, Chander and Agrawal, who represent two different attitudes and ideologies. Agrawal is insensitive and loud, uncouth and irrational whereas Chander is respectable and rational. Agrawal epitomizes a class of Indians who criticizes the west and its culture, yet wants to stay abroad to earn money. Everything about Agrawal revulsed Chander -his loud dress, his north-Indian accent, his egoism, his shallow generalizations. Chander resents his own inadequacy as he has been unable to shrug off the leech like Agrawal. Terming tolerance as a weakness Chander bursts out in anger against his own passivity and blames the Country and its culture for being weak and submissive in the name of tolerance.

Thus we get to know as much about Chander, as about Agrawal. In his fit of anger, Chander comes down heavily on Agrawal, criticizing him for his prejudices shallowness and ego. Such a virulent attack is least expected from Chander, but his shocked distaste turns to fascination when Agrawal starts crying, agreeing with all the criticism heaped on him, and wanting to be with his family and his people. This child-like irrationality makes Chander become aware of his own inadequacy- he lacks such sentiments, he is incapable of showing such emotions. He retuctantly agrees that he lacks Agrawals spontaneity, fellow feeling and generosity. Parameswaran, thus builds these two characters on the basis of contrast, and we find that Agrawal too, after all, has some positive qualities. The scales balance almost evenly. The two in fact complement each other. One can sense that by clubbing the qualities of both, one can see a more complete being. At this stage Agrawal is almost ignored, and it is Chander who develops further from a diffident beginning with the common refrain that he intends to go back to India after some time, by the end of the story he decides to look ahead with hope and pleasure. The chances are that he would stay and became another case of brain-drain. When he interacts with Bahl the issue of immigration

gets clarified for him and he takes a conscious decision of looking ahead and not behind. An unsure, reticent and confused Chander becomes confident and clear in his perception of the situation and looks forward to his life in Canada with hope and confidence. Parmeswaran uses irony very adroitly to bring forth the attitudes of the two main characters which cover the whole range of emotions and rationality in dealing with the delicate problem of immigrants dilemma and their ambivalence.

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24.6.4 Narrative Technique

The story is narrated through a third person narrator, and the narration is simple and straightforward. Parmeswaran wants to focus on the dilemma that immigrants face living in a different culture and society. Parmeswaran decides to put forth her point of view basically with the help of two characters - Chander and Agrawal - who are developed in a contrasting manner. Both of them present their perspectives and enable the readers to judge for themselves what are the ground realities that the immigrants face. Parmeswaran uses irony with telling effect - after projecting Agrawal in a totally negative frame, she turns the tables on Chander who is made to see and feel his own inadequacy in certain important facets- namely spontaneity, fellow feeling and generosity. After focusing on these two characters, the narrative shifts to a get-together of Indian immigrants where Chander and Agrawal are also invited.

It is in this gathering that Parmeswaran projects the basic premise of her story - the problems and travails of the immigrant Indians on one side, as well as their lack of concern for India on the other. It is here that Chander gets to understand the Trishanku status of Indian immigrants, it is here that Chander evolves towards projecting a positive response even though Bahl presents an ironically nostalgic and quite breathless evocation of all that India stands for, all that they cannot forget even if they want to. Chander, who had earlier asserted that he would go back to India, looks at the future with hope. He is not looking back at the doors which have been shut but looks at the many doors that lie ahead. In a very unobtrusive manner, Parmeswaran presents her point of view with the help of characters and situation. The narrative is smooth and pacy, without becoming overtly complex.

24.7 SUMMING UP

As you are aware, both the stories "Swimming Lessons" and "The Door I Shut Behind Me" deal with Indian immigrants in Canada. Whereas in "Swimming Lessons" the protagonist tries to come to grips with the conflicting cultures of India and Canada, and becomes aware of the problems of an immigrant through others experiences. "Swimming Lessons" points towards a strange and superficial existence- living together without knowing each other, but in "The Door I Shut Behind Me", the protagonist is unable to coexist with his own countrymen- he feels alienated from Indians already settled in Canada as he finds them shallow and irrational. Interestingly, there is no Canadian character to contend with in the story. Both the stories project a "Trishanku" like existence for the immigrants, they are neither here nor there; they swing between acceptance and rejection. However, both stories project a positive point of view. By the end of "Swimming Lesson" the protagonist has got over his fear of swimming, symbolizing his victory over fear not only of water, but also of living in an alien society. In "The Door I Shut Behind Me", Chander also looks at his story in Canada with hope and pleasure, he decides to look ahead instead of behind; he would not dwell on the doors that he has shut behind him, but at the doors that are opening- full of opportunity for a bright future. In a way both the protagonists come to terms with their new existence.

24.8 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the narrative technique of "Swimming Lessons"
2. Why is learning swimming so important for the protagonist?
3. Contrast the characters and attitudes of Chander and Agrawal. Whom do you like more and why?
4. Critically analyse Chander's views on Indians as expressed in his angry outburst.
5. Do you agree that immigrants lead a "Trishanku" like existence? Discuss with reference to both stories.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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