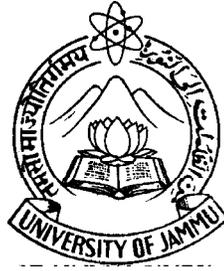


***Directorate of Distance Education***

**UNIVERSITY OF JAMMU**

**JAMMU**



**SELF - LEARNING MATERIAL**

**M. A. ENGLISH**

**Title of the Course :**  
**Female Literary Tradition in India**  
**Semester : III**

**Course Code : ENG 315**  
**Unit : I - V**  
**Lesson : 1 - 13**

**2019 Onwards**

***Course Co-ordinator***  
**Prof. Anupama Vohra**

***Teacher Incharge***  
**Dr. Jasleen Kaur**

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# M. A. ENGLISH

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COURSE No. : ENG 315

*Course Contributors :*

**Prof. Anupama Vohra**

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## **Welcome**

Dear Learners,

This course ENG315 Female Literary Tradition in India gives you glimpses into the creative out-pour of Indian Women writers from different communities, religion, caste, class, etc., to highlight the strategies used by them in different literary genres to contest gender discrimination.

Hope you will enjoy the study of this course, besides, the study material do visit the library to read the texts and other relevant material.

Wish you good luck !

**Prof. Anupama Vohra**  
Course Co-ordinator  
PG English

**Course Code : ENG-315**

**Duration of Examination : 3hrs.**

**Title : Female Literary Tradition in India**

**Total Marks : 100**

**Credits : 4**

**(a) Semester Examinations : 80**

**(b) Sessional Assessment : 20**

**Detailed Syllabus for the examinations to be held in Dec. 2019, 2020 & 2021.**

**Objectives :** The objective of the course will be to acquaint the students with the creativity of women who have borne witness to life, but were hardly ever permitted to speak. Tracing the female literary tradition through women's writing from different communities, class, caste, etc., the course gives insight into the strategies used by women writers for the contestation of gender representation.

**UNIT - I :** Women's Literature as a genre; Key concepts and debates in Women's Literature; pre-independence, post-independence and modern India, Salient features/ themes in Women's Literature.

**UNIT -II :** Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain : Sultana's Dream

**UNIT - III :** Toru Dutt : Love Came to Flora Asking For a Flower

Sarojini Naidu : Bangle Sellers

Gauri Deshpande : The Female of the Species

Mamta Kalia : After Eight Years of Marriage

Meena Alexander : Migrant Memory

**UNIT - IV:** Manjula Padmanabhan : Lights Out

**UNIT - V:** Mahasweta Devi : Draupadi

Indira Goswami : The Sin

Urmila Pawar : Armour

#### **Mode of Examination**

**The paper will be divided into sections A, B and C.**

**Section A**

**Multiple Choice Questions**

**M.M=80**

Q.No.1 Will be an objective type question covering the entire syllabus. Twelve objectives with four options each will be set and the candidate will be required to write the correct option and not specify by putting a tick mark (✓). Any ten out of twelve are to be attempted. Each objective will be for one mark. **(10 x 1=10)**

**Section B**

**Short Answer Questions**

Q.No.2 Comprises short answer type questions from the entire syllabus. Four questions

will be set and the candidate will be required to attempt any two questions in 80-100 words. Each answer will be evaluated for 5 marks. (2x5=10)

**Section C Long Answer Questions**

Q.No.3 Comprises long answer type questions from the entire syllabus.. Five questions will be set with internal choice and the candidate will be required to attempt all the questions in 300-350 words. Each answer will be evaluated for 12 marks. (5 x 12=60)

**Suggested Readings**

Bhasin, Kamla. What is Patriarchy? Kali for Women, 1993.

John, Mary E. Discrepant Dislocations: Feminism, Theory, and Postcolonial Histories. 1996.

Kumar, Nita, ed. Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories. Univ. Press of Virginia, 1994.

Women Writing in India: 600BC to the Present. 2vols. Tharu and K. Lalitha (Eds) Delhi: OUP 1991 & 1993.

Signifying Sell: Women and Literature . Malashri Lal, Shormintha Panja & Sumanyu Satpathy (eds) New Delhi: Macmillian.2004.

Lal, Malashri. Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English. Shimla:IIAS, 1995.

Mahadevi Varma : Links in the Chain

Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation. Tutun Mukherjee (ed.), New Delhi; Oxford, 2005.

Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial India, Kum Kum Sangari & Suresh Vaid (Eds). New Delhi: Kali for Women.1989.

From Myth to Market : Essays on Gender, Kum Kum Sangari & Uma Chakravarty (eds), New Delhi : Manohar, 1990.

Omvedt, Gail, Violence against Women: New Movements and New Tncories in India, New Delhi : Kali for Women, 1990.

Brownmiller, S. Against our Will : Men, Women, Rape, New York : Random Hosue, 1993.

Datar, Chhaya, ed. The Struggle against violence, Calcutta, Stree, 1993.

Kishtwar, Mandu and Ruth Vanita. In search of answers : Indian Women's Voices from Manushi, London : Zed, 1984.

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## WOMEN'S LITERATURE AS A GENRE

### STRUCTURE

- 1.1. Objectives
- 1.2. Women's Literature as a Genre
  - 1.2.1. Literature
  - 1.2.2. Women's Literature
  - 1.2.3. Genre
- 1.3. Key Concepts and Debates in Women's Literature
- 1.4. Indian Women's Literature
  - 1.4.1. Indian Women's Literature and Themes/Salient Feature during pre-Independent Era
  - 1.4.2. Indian Women's Literature and Themes/Salient Feature during post-Independent Era and Modern Era
- 1.5. Problems/Prejudices faces by Indian Women Writers
- 1.6. Multiple Choice Questions
- 1.7. Answer Key
- 1.8. Short Answer Questions
- 1.9. Long Answer Questions
- 1.10. Let Us Sum Up
- 1.11. Suggested Reading

## **1.1 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to contemplate Women's Literature as Genre. This lesson introduces the learners to Indian Women's Literature, themes and key concepts in Indian women's writings. The lesson also gives an overview of Indian women's writing during pre-independent, post-independent and modern era.

## **1.2 WOMEN'S LITERATURE AS A GENRE**

Dear Learners, before studying the concept "Women's Literature as a Genre", it is necessary to have knowledge about the terms like "Literature", "Women's Literature" and "Genre".

### **1.2.1 Literature**

Literature is defined as any written work. The term derives from Latin word *litaritura/litteratura* which means "writing formed with letters". According to definition, literature is a written document. However, the term literature is not restrictive to writing only. It also includes spoken or sung texts which have been passed from generation to generation. Literature can be classified according to whether it is fiction or non-fiction and whether it is poetry or prose.

### **1.2.2 Women's Literature**

Women's literature has often been defined as a category of writing by women. The tradition of women writing has been much ignored due to the inferior position of women in male-dominated societies. There are literature classes and anthologies in which women are greatly outnumbered by male writers or even entirely absent. The obligation of women's literature thus is to categorize and create an area of study for a group of people marginalized by history and to explore through their writing their lives and their unique sociopolitical space within their culture.

### **1.2.3 Genre**

According to Collins Dictionary, a genre "is a particular type of literature, painting, music, film, or other art form which people consider as a class because it has special characteristics".

Hence, Women's literature is a genre as it is a particular literature because it is a literature particularly created by women about women's issues like women's identity,

women's experiences, women's desire and feelings, women's status in the society, women's problems, women's struggle, progress, empowerment and happiness.

### **1.3. KEY CONCEPTS AND DEBATES IN WOMEN'S LITERATURE**

#### **'Victimised' or 'Empowered'**

The issue arises in an acute form in the debates on the theorisation of changes in gender relations and in particular in relation to the question of whether women are 'victimised' or 'empowered' as a result of these changes. There is a constant dilemma in women's literature over the extent to which women's actions are seen to be constrained by social, in particular, patriarchal structures.

#### **Patriarchy / Men's Treatment of Women**

Patriarchy is a social structural phenomenon in which male has the privilege of dominance females, both visibly and subliminally. This phenomenon is manifested in the values, attitudes, customs, expectations, and institutions of the society, and it is maintained through the process of socialization. Patriarchy is a function of male's physical, social, economic, and political power. Females suffer subordination to men.

#### **Segregation**

Segregation is a central concept in the analysis of gender relations. Segregation is the social practice in which men and women are separated from each other, usually with the dominant group taking the better positions.

#### **Madwoman in the Attic**

Made famous by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), the eponymous madwoman is Bertha Jenkins of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Rochester's mad wife hidden away in the attic of Thornfield Hall. Gilbert and Gubar's thesis suggests that because society forbade women from expressing themselves through creative outlets, their creative powers were channeled into psychologically self-destructive behaviour and subversive actions. A great example of the madwoman thesis in action is in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story "The Yellow Wallpaper".

The play *Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan, an Indian female author is a

finest example of this madness. The anxiety of Leela and the silence of the maid Frieda force the audience to think about the panics of Leela and Frieda because of their suppression of voice by patriarchy.

## **1.4 INDIAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE**

The works of Indian women writers have been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience. The very first prejudice because of which the Indian women authors suffer is that most of these women write about the enclosed domestic space, and women's perceptions of their experience within it. Consequently, their works are automatically ranked below the works of male writers which deal with 'weightier' themes. Indian women writers suffered from the other obstruction, that is the English language. Since proficiency in the English language is available only to writers of the intellectual, affluent, educated classes. Hence, the majority of the literary works in English come from the women belonging to high strata. As a result, the subject matter which depicts the repressed and oppressed lives of women of the lower classes suffers amiss in these works. The issues of the lives of the women belonging to lower strata one finds mostly in regional authors writing in Hindi, Bengali, Malayalam, Urdu, Tamil, Telgu, Marathi and other native languages, and in order to make these voices heard to the world, English translation of these writings is done.

### **1.4.1 Indian Women's Literature and Themes/Salient Feature during pre-Independent Era**

It was especially hard for the Indian women to rise up in these times because of orthodox patriarchal society and partition of India. The autobiography of Rashsundari Debi's *My Life* (1876) and Pandita Ramabai's *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1888) analysed the status of women in nineteenth century India. Ramabai's *The High Caste Hindu Woman* divides the life of Indian woman into three stages—childhood, married life, and widowhood. Each stage is replete with sorrow and travails. Women as mothers were honored but as wives were classed with cows, female camels, and slave girls. A wife mistreated by her husband had no rights outside her marital status.

Toru Dutt (1856-77) was the first Indian woman poet to write in English, and her work depicts archetypes of Indian womanhood such as Sita and Savitri, showing

women in suffering, self-sacrificing roles, reinforcing conventional myths in a patriotic manner. Her first work was published when she was twenty. It was a verse translation from French *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields: Verse Translations and Poems* (1876).

In *Kamala* (1894), Krupabai Sathianadhan explored the cultural clash suffered by a Hindu woman who is given western education in India and the experience of being caught between two cultures has remained a prominent theme in this work.

Sarojini Naidu, (born February 13, 1879, Hyderabad, India—died March 2, 1949, Lucknow) was a political activist, feminist, poet, and the first Indian woman to be president of the Indian National Congress and to be appointed an Indian state governor. She is called “the Nightingale of India.” Sarojini Naidu led an active literary life and attracted notable Indian intellectuals. Her first volume of poetry, *The Golden Threshold* (1905), was followed by *The Bird of Time* (1912), and in 1914 she was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Her collected poems, all of which she wrote in English, have been published under the titles *The Sceptred Flute* (1928) and *The Feather of the Dawn* (1961).

Kamini Roy (1864-1933), a Bengali poet, and a feminist, born in 1868 was India’s first woman to receive honours graduate in British India. Kamini Roy came from a family of elite Bengalis. Her father was a judge and a writer, and she picked up writing from him. She started writing at the age of eight. Her first work of poetry was published in 1889. It was called *Alo O Chhaya*. Some of her other notable works are *Mahasweta*, *Pundorik*, *Dwip O Dhup*, etc. She also wrote some remarkable poems such as *Smritichihno*, *She Ki*, *Sukh*, *Era Jodi Jane*, etc.

One of the very first great women to write in Urdu, Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991) has a lot of revolutionary literary works to her name. Generations of women have been influenced by her words, which were bold and taboo too. Ismat was also a feminist, and the first woman author to write about same-sex desire. Born in 1915, Ismat was much ahead of her times, often writing about female sexuality and other such topics. Her writings are inspirational and are idolised by young writers and authors. Some of her best work are *Lihaaf*, for which she was summoned to court in 1944 for obscenity.

Amrita Pritam was born in 1919. She wrote mainly in Hindi and Punjabi. She was Punjab's first female poet. In 1947, when India was partitioned, she moved from Lahore to India. However, she was, and is still loved by readers and intellectuals from both India and Pakistan. She has over 100 poems, Punjabi folk songs, essays and more to her name. Her work has been translated into many foreign languages. Her most remembered poem, known as *Aj Aakhaan Waris Shah nu (An Ode to Waris Shah)* has been read all around the world. It was a tribute to the lives lost during the partition of India and her anguish towards it. It is addressed to the Sufi poet, Waris Shah and is one of the most elaborate pieces written that remind us of the massacres of the partition.

Lalitambika Antaranam (1909-1987) in *Revenge Herself* narrates a late nineteenth century event that shook the foundation of the orthodox Nambudiri Brahman caste in Kerala. The writer uses the literary device of the ghost in order to bring out the pathos of the female victim in a first-person narrative.

Gaura Pant, who was better known as Shivani, was the first woman to write woman based fiction. She wrote for magazines such as Dharmayug and Saptahik Hindustan. She has an innumerable Hindi literary works in her name such as novels *Mera Beta*, *Surangma* and *Teesra Beta*. Some of her works have also been adapted into Indian television shows. In 1980, she received the Padma Shri award for her contribution to Hindi literature.

#### **1.4.2 Indian Women's Literature and Themes/Salient Feature during post-Independent Era and Modern Era**

The novels of early 1950s and 1960s dealt with the binaries: tradition-modernity and rural-urban. The period witnessed writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Manohar Malgonkar, Anita Desai, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, who took up new subjects and new themes dealing with women's self-awareness. For many Indian women novelists the quest for identity as impacted by the patriarchal system has been the favorite theme.

As far back as in 1955, Kamala Markandaya depicted Rukmini in *The Nectar in a Sieve*, as the picture of suffering and sacrifice, steeped in love and faith in the background of rural India. Even if it is a quest for nectar in a sieve, one must endure

and hope. The novel affirms a faith for a better tomorrow. Attia Hussain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) is in the form of an autobiography, covering a period of about 20 years in the life of its narrator Laila, a story about the growing up of a young girl against the background of disintegrating family, of political upheaval of pre-partition days. Nayanatara Sahagal explores the traditional narrow-minded Indian society which imposes arranged marriages in *This Time of Morning* (1965) while her book *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) deals with the hypocritical Indian society which has different yard sticks of fidelity for man and woman.

The novels of 1970s are woman-centered and increasingly become *vox-populi* for the new dynamic Indian woman. A radical thought for those times was Telugu writer Snehalatha Reddy's drama *Sita* (1974), which critiques *Ramayana*, and upholds the rights of Sita as a wife, as an individual and as a woman. Reddy depicts Sita as being a rebel against Rama and his pompous masculinity. Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (1975) which was awarded *The Booker Prize* and Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973) are good examples of female protagonists' struggle for control over their lives. Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* (1977), and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), which won *The Common Wealth Writer's prize* for Best First novel in the Eurasian region, are other novels which highlight an educated woman's quest for her roots. *The Thousand Faces of Night* portrays the mother-daughter bond as well as depicts the life of three different women, of different generations, trying to cope with their directionless lives. It deals with the ordeal of woman caught in the institution of arranged marriage, and her walking out of it in order to keep her dignity as a woman and human intact. Many novels are woman-centered, and deal with domesticity, such as Anjana Appachana's *Listening now*, which depicts the 16 years of the life of Padma, a lecturer in a university. It has six different female narrative voices.

The 1980s saw a maturity in the use of language, style and technique. The self-effacing tone of the earlier writers is replaced by the self-asserting tone of the latest ones. The likes of Arundathi Roy, Kavery Nambisan, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Nair, Rama Mehta, Gita Mehta, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, and others brought international recognition and ushered in western liberal morality. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, Leela Kasturi, Sharmila Rege, and Vidyut Bhagat are some essayists and critics

whose writings brought recognition to those aspects of Indian Women writings which never got acceptance in the society.

Jumpha Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies* and Anita Nair's *Satyr of the subway* deal with human relationships. Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai both write on middle class family. They project the alienation and identity crisis of their male-dominated female characters. Their quest is for an identity different from role playing as a daughter, a wife or a mother. Shashi Deshpande's novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* and Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer* plumb the depths of female psyche in the characters of Sarita and Sita. They depict the reality of incompleteness, and palpably describe the inner turmoil and the evolving self-knowledge as they break away from their narrow communities. They have to find within themselves the strength to be emancipated while living within traditional roles of the society. Sudha Murthy's *Dollar Bahu* moves out of the traditional boundary of India into the land of dreams and succor, America, exposing the other side of materialism and loneliness. She sees women in various stages of suffering within the folds of a cruel society, subjugated by husband, by children, by mother-in-law, by daughter-in-law, and coping with it.

The 1990s produced novels which focused on today's women of Modern India and leaves it to readers to gauge whether the status of women has undergone a change for the better or for the worse. These writers do not carry with them the colonial baggage but show a refreshing and different face of contemporary India. Their creations revolve around the general theme of middle class, in rural as well as urban set up and also the clash of values and systems, when the twain meet. Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves and Grandmothers* (1994), is about social realism in a tongue-in-cheek satire of the religious side of India and the duplicity of religious leaders, who are abundant in India. Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984) is satirically comical where Paro is married several times and has an adulterous relationship with a younger man in contrast to a model Indian woman, who is subjugated and chaste. The title seems to mock the tension between the traditional image and contemporary image of modern woman with the changing expectation and modernity. The 1990s novels are centered on female protagonists and their awareness of what it entails to be woman in a male-centered, tradition bound society, as in the works of

Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. Another theme to emerge is that of the lives of women during India's struggle for independence. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) follows the journey of Ida, who traces the life of her mother Virmati and her grandmother, in a quest to understand them. It portrays the difficulty of trying to become a distinctive individual in the caste-ridden society, and the obstacles and humiliations that she has to face, when she breaks traditional boundaries.

Many women writers have written novels of magic realism, social realism and regional fiction. Suniti Namjoshi (1941) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956) employ magic realism in *Mistress of Spices* (1997), and *The Mother's of Maya Diip* (1989). Suniti Namjoshi stands out for her use of fantasy. Here magic and reality beautifully blend together to create credible novels. The discursive mode of narration makes the novel realistic. Provincial writers such as Arundhati Roy (1961), Anita Nair (1966), and Susan Viswanathan have put Kerala on the fictional map of India. *The God of Small Things* (1977) went on to win *The Booker Prize*. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) and Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri* are Bildungsroman novels of growing up. The young Indian girl Jyothi becomes Jasmine and then Jane in U.S. Nalinakshi born in a small village nurtures a dream of becoming a doctor and fulfills it, going on to study and practice in India and abroad. Sunetra Gupta's *A sin of Colour* has the hero disappearing from the novel, while his English wife Jennifer, modeled on the patient Hindu wives, waits for his return for years and years.

The 2000s and recent novels are about representation of middle class women who have a career, and a development of a feminine sensibility beyond being a feminist. They might resist marriage as they might be happy and contented in their life. Here men in their lives, become peripheral. These novels of 2000s show a lot of variety in genre and themes. Meera Syal's *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (2000), depicts the dilemma of British-Asian men and women caught between the crossfire of traditions and customs of birth and adopted countries. It narrates the tales of Indian women from 1919 to present day, from youth to grandmothers. The common thread is one of attempted reconciliation between East and West within the context of women's roles. In *Namesake* Jhumpa Lahiri explores the clash of cultures and generations and the painful experience of assimilation into alien culture. Anuradha Marwah-Roy's *Idol*

*Love* (1999) presents a terrifying picture of an Indian dystopia in the twenty-first century. Meena Alexander's *Nampally House* (1991), and Rani Dharker's *The Virgin Syndrome* (1997) deal with various aspects of college life. Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* (1995), depicts women on the brink of an unforgettable change in their outlook. So do *The Mango Season* By Amulya Malladi and *Matrimonial Purposes* (2003) by Kavitha Daswani which explore the theme of arranged marriage. *Gypsy Masala* (2000), a story of dreams by Preethi Nair, presents the theme of chasing dreams. Anita Rau Badami's third novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call* (2006), explores what endurance in difficult situations mean. *Nightbird Call* spans from 1926 India to 1985 Canada. The three narrative female voices; Sharan, Leela and Nimmo, share the tragedy of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Usha K.R's *A Girl and a River* (2007), has the female protagonist in the backdrop of freedom struggle in India, tracing the path of her aunt Kavery's life. It holds a key to the family secret. It would throw light on the reason behind her fractured life and the hostility between her parents. Samina Ali's *Madras on a Rainy Day* (2004) deals with the clash of cultures and enforced marriages. It portrays the repressed life of Laila, whose education is divided between Indian and American schools and who is expected to marry a complete stranger and to live in purdah. It is about loss of personal freedom, loss of speech, broken voices with long silences in-between, in the lives of women trapped in a patriarchal society.

Women across the world and especially in India have met challenges to get themselves educated and for a Dalit woman it's twice hard. The few women who got themselves educated and wrote came out with books which are to a great extent autobiographical, slanting towards feminism and also considered mainly as a movement of the women to come out of the oppressive norms.

Bama Faustina Susairaj's *Karukku* (1992), the most famous work originally written in Tamil is an autobiographical account of her childhood experiences of being a Dalit. In her book she tries to bring about an awakening in Dalit women to empower them with education through her experiences. This work led to her being ostracized from her village as it critiques the social order but however gained critical acclaim. Her style of writing was noticed as being unique. She was born to a Roman Catholic family in Puthupatti which is in Tamil Nadu. Bama's ancestors were Dalit Hindus

converted to Christianity. She served the convent as a nun for seven years. It was after her years of servitude that she started writing. *Karukku* was well acclaimed and after that she went on to write two more novels, *Sangati* and *Vanmam* along with two collections of short stories: *Kusumbukkaran* and *Oru Tattvum Erumaiyum*.

Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (2003) originally written in Marathi also available as an English translation titled *The Weave Of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir* (2008), details the life of her family members and also gives insight into everyday life of Dalits.

P. Sivakami's *Anandhayi/The Taming of Women* is a novel which takes through the journey from the eyes of Anandhayi, the protagonist. Set in the early twentieth century, it is also about other women whose lives are intertwined with the male protagonist Periyannan's life—along with the inevitable changes that industrialization brings to a village's social and economic set-up.

Baby Kamble's autobiography *Jina Amucha* (Marathi, 1986)/*The Prisons We Broke* (English, 2008) is the depiction of Dalit women of Mahar community and their tribulations. Her father was a labour contractor who used to do contracts for the government. Baby Kamble ran an ashram for backward children till her death in 2012.

## **1.5 PROBLEMS/PREJUDICES FACES BY INDIAN WOMEN WRITERS**

### **1.5.1 Sexism**

The propensity of facing barriers in carving out a career in any given field is high for a woman because of her gender. The literary field is no different. Women writers are often dismissed as writing either 'chicklit' and 'romance' or being too sentimental and 'feminine' in their writing. In a world where male chauvinism are everyday norms, women writers face a plethora of challenges.

Author Shuchi Singh Kalra says that it bothers her that stories with a male protagonist are perceived as regular stories whereas stories with a female protagonist are classified as 'women's fiction'. She believes this alienates a large chunk of readers.

Writer Kiranjeet Chaturvedi stresses, "A lot of readers do approach books by gender, when the writer is female. Many men simply do not pick up women writers' work because of a few related reasons, all to do with gender. Women do read male

writers and hardly ever stop to think of not reading something by a man just because he is a man.”

Writer Ira Mukhoty Jayal says, “I find that as a woman writer of non-fiction, I am definitely questioned more on credentials and methodology than would a man. Also, since I have dealt with historical figures who incidentally happen to also be women, I am categorized as a writer of ‘women’s history’. Whereas we never specify if it is ‘men’s history’!”

Talking about this pertinent issue, Kiran Manral observes that the juries often are primarily men and because of the fact that books written by men are reviewed more than books written by women as per a recent survey conducted. “Since women’s writing is often dismissed as domestic and therefore not considered ‘worthy’ of the broader canvas that literary prizes wish to impose,” she tell us.

Kiran Manral says that it is time to celebrate women writers and make more space for them on bookshelves, in review columns, in award lists, and have men and women pick them up to read regardless of the gender of who wrote them.

Shuchi Singh Kalra says that marketing women’s literature like any other piece of literature can help do away with the bias. “It is important to break the conception that women’s literature is literature meant only for women readers,” she asserts.

### **1.5.2 The Language**

The second barrier which Indian women writers face is language. English is still the language of privilege class. Again, many women writers choose regional language to write in order to assert their individual and regional identity. Hence, the literature written by Indian women authors becomes limited to a limited audience. Therefore, this regional literature is translated into English so that it can reach to a wider audience.

### **1.5.3 Education**

Education in relation to women is still considered as a useless affair in Indian society. Firstly, it is deemed that a woman needs education only to keep account of household affairs. Secondly, in an Indian house a boy’s education is given more importance as compared to a girl’s education. For him, if it is necessary to stop her education, nobody is reluctant. Thirdly, in a poor house a girl’s education remains out

of question. Consequently, uneducated Indian women depend upon others to document their life stories. The problem becomes more intense in case of women belonging to lower strata who become marginalized not only because of their gender but also because of their caste and class. Some of the collaborative Dalit women's literature is: *Viramma: Life of an untouchable* (in French 1997, in English 2005) by Viramma, *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* (in Malayalam) by Nalini Jameela, etc.

### **1.6. MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS:**

- i.** Women's literature is a Genre because it \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. is a particular type of literature by women
  - b. is an autobiographical literature
  - c. is a fiction
  - d. none of the above
- ii.** Toru Dutt is a \_\_\_\_\_ Indian woman author
  - a. pre-independent
  - b. post-independent
  - c. Contemporary
  - d. None of the above
- iii.** *My Life* is an autobiography by \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Rashsundari Debi
  - b. Pandita Ramabai
  - c. Toru Dutt
  - d. Anita Desai
- iv.** \_\_\_\_\_ is a Dalit woman writer
  - a. P.Sivakami
  - b. Urmila Pawar
  - c. Bama

- d. All of the above
- v. *Dreams of Passion* by Namita Gokhale is a \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. An Autobiography
  - b. Satire
  - c. Only b
  - d. Both a and b
- vi. Ida is a character in \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Manju Kapoor's *Difficult Daughters*
  - b. Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan*
  - c. Amrita Pritam's *The Revenue Stamp*
  - d. None of the above
- vii. Arundhati Roy has written \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. *The God of Small Things*
  - b. *Life isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*
  - c. *Jasmine*
  - d. All of the above
- viii. *An Ode to Waris Shah* depicts the crisis of \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Colonialism
  - b. Patriarchy
  - c. Partition
  - d. None of the above
- ix. Ismat Chughtai was summoned for her work \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. *Dwio O Dhup*
  - b. *Lihaaf*
  - c. *Mera Beta*
  - d. None of the above

- x. \_\_\_\_\_ was first woman writer to write woman based fiction in India
- a. Gaura Pant
  - b. Githa Hariharan
  - c. Manju Kapoor
  - d. None of the above

### 1.7 ANSWER KEY

- i. a
- ii. a
- iii. a
- iv. d
- v. b
- vi. a
- vii. a
- viii. c
- ix. b
- x. a

### 1.8 SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS

- a. Define Women's Literature with illustrations.
- b. How is Women's Literature a Genre? Discuss.
- c. Discuss Patriarchy. How is it narrated in Indian Women's writings?
- d. Women's literature is about Women's concerns. How and why?
- e. Write a short note on Dalit women's writings.

### 1.9. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS:

- a. Discuss Indian Women's literature.
- b. Give an overview of Indian Women's Literature in pre-independent era.

- c. Attempt a note on themes in Indian Women's Writings during post-independent era
- d. Give an overview of India Women's Literature in Modern period.
- e. Discuss the problems and prejudices faced by India women authors.

### **1.10. LETS SUM UP**

Indian women writers' works reflect the truth of Indian reality. Their works are now receiving immense academic attention across the globe and have contributed a lot to the World literature, especially feminist literature. They have created a wide readership and a strong critical endorsement from academicians and scholars. All the post-colonial and postmodern predicaments faced by Indian Women writers, their self-consciousness, which continue, interrogate the social, philosophical, cultural issues of rape and sexual harassment of innocent women in the contemporary Indian society are focused in these writings. Their works have initiated a critique of feminism with nationalism. Their intellectual insights, conceptual, theoretical and textual experiments have engaged and interpreted the complex colonial and postcolonial situations. They have also raised the issue of paradox of reading and appreciation eloquently responding to the issues of violence, deprivation, sexually harassed women both in post-colonial and postmodern issues of rape and exploitation on the Indian women in the contemporary society.

### **1.11 SUGGESTED READING**

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**BEGUM ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN,  
*SULTANA'S DREAM***

**STRUCTURE**

- 2.1. Objectives
- 2.2. An Introduction to Author: Life and Works
- 2.3. A Brief Outline of *Sultana's Dream*
- 2.4. Multiple Choice Questions
- 2.5. Answer Key
- 2.6. Short Answer Questions
- 2.7. Long Answer Questions
- 2.8. Let Us Sum Up
- 2.9. Suggested Reading

**2.1. OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to introduce the learners with the Muslim woman writer Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. The lesson gives details about the life and works of the author and a brief background and outline of her work *Sultana's Dream*.

**2.2 AN INTRODUCTION TO AUTHOR: LIFE AND WORKS**

Begum Rokeya was born in a conservative Muslim family and her father, Jahiruddin Muhammad Abu Ali Haidar Saber, was well versed in Arabic, Urdu, Persian, Bangla, Hindi and English. Her father was a successful zamindar who married four

times. Her mother's name Rahatunnessa. Begum Rokeya had two sisters and three brothers one of whom died in early age. During this period education was not accessible to women and they were taught Arabic and/ or Urdu at home only. Roquia's elder brothers, Mohammad Ibrahim Abul Asad Saber and Abu Zaigam Khalilur Rahman Saber were sent to Saint Xavier's College, Calcutta, but Rokeya and her elder sister, Karimunnessa, were not allowed to attend the school. Though Rokeya was not allowed to receive formal education, she learnt both Bangla and English with the help of her brothers. Her brothers not only educated Rokeya, but also inspired her to write. At the age of eighteen, she was married to Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hussain, a magistrate in Bhagalpur. Sakhawat Hussain was previously married and was open minded. He encouraged her to complete her studies and do her literary works. Further, Sakhawat Hussain was supportive to her cause and he saved money in order to build a school. In 1902, Begum Rokeya made her debut in the literary world writing a story named 'Pipasha'. In 1909, her husband died.

Despite her personal losses, Rokeya never sat idle but started working for women's education and emancipation. The Muslim women of Bengal at that time were backward, neglected and oppressed. Rokeya realised that women could be freed from their shackles only if they were educated and economically independent. Accordingly, on 1 October 1909, five months after her husband's death, she started a school for Muslim girls at Bhagalpur with only five students, naming it after her husband, Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School. However, she could not continue at Bhagalpur for domestic reasons and decided to move to Calcutta.

At Calcutta, she set up Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in a house at Waliullah Lane on 16 March 1911 with only eight students. The school was eventually upgraded to Middle English Girls' School in 1917 and to High English Girls' School in 1931, because of the untiring efforts of Rokeya. The school, however, was shifted from time to time to different places because of the increase in number of students and some other reasons. The school got its permanent address in 1968 when it was finally shifted to its building at Lord Sinha Road. At the seminal stage, only non-Bengali girls used to go to Sakhawat Memorial School. However, Rokeya worked hard to convince Bengali Muslim families to send their daughters to school. She went from house to house, persuading the parents that education was good for girls and promising that *pardah*

would be observed at her school. Her tireless efforts paid off with middle class Muslim girls breaking the taboo against stepping out of the house to study. She also arranged horse-carriages so that girls could go to school and return home observing *purdah*. Thus, she contributed a lot in the awareness and enlightenment of Muslim women of Bengal.

Rokeya realised that social injustices and extreme forms of *purdah* kept Muslim women backward. She knew that before women could be emancipated, people's attitudes required to change. In order to achieve her goals, Rokeya, who was skilled in writing fine Bangla prose, started using her pen to target social prejudices, religious bigotry and ignorance. Rokeya wrote in a number of genres: short stories, poems, essays, novels and satirical writings, developing a distinctive literary style, characterised by creativity, logic and a wry sense of humour. She started writing in the "Nabanoor" from about 1903, under the pen name of Mrs R.S. Hossain. However, there is an opinion that her first published writing "Pipasha" appeared in the "Nabaprabha" in 1902. Ever since she continued to write regularly for the "Saogat", "Mohammadi", "Nabaprabha", "Mahila", "Bharatmahila", "Al-Eslam", "Nawroz", "Mahe-Nao", "Bangiya Mussalman Sahitya Patrika", "The Mussalman", "Indian Ladies Magazine", etc.

Keya is still remembered for her liberal thoughts, secular outlook and powerful writing. She spoke against the abuse of religious regulations that arrested the physical, mental and psychological growth of women in almost all her writings. In some of her writings, she advocated a concerted effort by men and women for social development. She also wrote on contemporary politics. Further, other luminaries of the period such as Sarojini Naidu, Lady Chelmsford, Lady Carmichael, Queen Sultan Jahan of Bhopal, etc., also spoke in praise of Rokeya and extended cooperation to her.

Keya Sakhawat Hossain is primarily remembered for her role in the women's movement in Bangladesh. She founded an organisation called Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam, or the Muslim women's society, in 1916 to make women aware of their rights. The society worked for women's education, employment and their legal and political rights. The society provided education to a large number of girls and arranged marriages for many poor girls. It gave shelter to orphans and the destitute and extended financial help to widows. It also established some businesses for women to earn

economic independence. The society contributed greatly towards the emancipation of Muslim women in Calcutta. Braving harsh comments and allegations from conservatives, Rokeya inspired women to join the society.

The harbinger of Muslim women's awakening and emancipation, Rokeya lived for only 52 years. She died in Calcutta on 9 December 1932. Her legacy, however, lives on. Bangladesh Government established a first public University to name after a woman, Begum Rokeya University in Rangpur. Her prominence could be estimated from the fact that many women who were noted for their role in the women's movements in Bangladesh were Rokeya's students.

Rokeya wrote on a wide range of subjects including social prejudice, adverse effects of the *purdah* system, women's education, social repression on women, women's rights and her progressive views of women's awakening. She also wrote against the tradition of child marriage and polygamy.

Rokeya's writings called upon women to protest against injustices and break the social barriers that discriminated against them. *Abarodhbasini* (*The Secluded Women*, 1931) is a spirited attack on the extreme forms of *purdah* that endangered women's lives. Her other noted works include *Matichur* (essays 1st vol 1904, 2nd Vol. 1922), *Sultana's Dream* (satire, 1905), *Padmarag* (novel, 1924). *Sultana's Dream*, which she later translated into Bangla as *Sultanar Svapna*, is a satirical piece, set in a place called LadyLand, a world ruled by women. The second volume of *Matichur* includes stories and fairy tales such as "Saurajagat" ("The Solar System"), "Delicia Hatya" (translation of "the Murder of Delicia", by Mary Corelli), "Jnan-phal" ("The Fruit of Knowledge"), "Nari-Sristi" ("Creation of Women"), "Nurse Nelly", "Mukti-phal" ("The Fruit of Emancipation"), etc. Rokeya also wrote fine poetry. Her poem titled "Saogat" was published on the first page of the first issue of the Saogat in *Agrahayan*, 1325 (1918 AD). Many of her other poems and essays were also published in the magazine.

Rokeya left behind innumerable letters in Bangla and English. She had a respect for the Bangla language. Although Urdu was spoken by the aristocratic Muslims of the time including her own home she understood that Bangla, spoken by the majority of the Muslims of Bengal, should be her medium of expression. She mastered Bangla

and strongly advocated its use at the Bangiya Nari Shikkha Sammelan (Convention on Women Literacy in Bengal) in 1927.

### **2.3. A BRIEF OUTLINE OF *SULTANA'S DREAM***

Rokheya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* first appeared in 1905, ten years before the American feminist and novelist Charlotte P. Gilman published her feminist utopia *Herland*. It is a short science fiction story first published in Indian Ladies' Magazine and later republished in book format in 1908. Rokeya wrote *Sultana's Dream* in order to pass her time when her husband was on a trip and to show her husband her mastery in English language. It details an unnamed narrator's dream of an Indian feminist utopia. The story is the first known work of Indian science fiction. Rokeya was an early feminist and the founder of Calcutta's first Islamic school for girls, as well as the Muslim Women's Organization.

*Sultana's Dream* is a feminist utopia in which Rokeya has cherished the idea that "women's mind are quicker than men's" and that women can be proved as better administrators than men. The feminist utopia presented in *Sultana's Dream* is named as LadyLand where women are the dominant sex, women rule everything whereas men are secluded just the mirror image of *purdah* at present times. It is an appealing story of how peace-loving women overpowered aggressive men through the power of their brains. Further, it anticipates radical ecological and feminist themes that continue to engage our attention to this day. The imagination of feminist utopia focuses on whether a gender equal utopia could really exist. It presents the picture of a rare unseen world without patriarchal oppression and gender binaries which is beyond the subjection of violence. Being a feminist utopia, it explores a world without gender binaries and gender discrimination.

Begum Rokeya Shekhawat is the earliest and most original critique of patriarchy in Bengal. Like any Muslim girl of her time, she too grew up in strict seclusion and was denied formal education. Although, the condition of Hindu women of her time was no better, she had criticised the anti-women customs among Muslims in contemporary Bengal. Nevertheless, her arguments to speak on women's subordinate condition were applicable for other communities as well. During the time of her writing, there were reform movements making waves in Bengal. There were discussions on

women's education. Both the Muslim and Hindu reformers had contemplated on the question of women's liberation and education. There were debates on whether women should be educated or not or if at all educated, then to what extent? Generally, elite women from Muslim families were provided basic education of reading and writing at home only completely following the practice of *purdah* or segregation of Muslim women from the mainstream. Like the Hindu reformers, the Muslim reformers also felt that with education, women would become better wives and mothers. However, going out of home for formal education was not accepted by many Muslim elites. They preferred the *jenana* system for educating their daughters.

Radical feminism explains that a feminist utopia cannot exist if inequalities exist due to gender binaries and discrimination. Thus, they believe that there exist a difference between men and women. Therefore, their needs and scope for development cannot be same. Thus, unlike liberal feminists they do not view men as ideals for women. *Sultana's Dream* provides a medium for imagining a feminist utopia which provides a critique to gender itself. The extreme radical elements in *Sultana's Dream* are depicted by Rokeya when she says that men are good for nothing. Further, she comments that there is no such need of any police or prisons as all men are imprisoned in the *mardana*. Thus, it becomes clear from the above statement that if the people liable to commit crimes are already segregated and kept indoors, there is no need of any such security measures. Thus, she criticises men wasting their energy and physical strength in fighting and violence whereas women as peace lovers can prove better and responsible citizens. She developed the idea of feminist utopia by contemplating on the difference in the behaviour of both men and women and who could prove better and beneficial citizens irrespective of the age old traditions of patriarchy favouring only men.

Although Rokeya Sakhawat's work *Sultana's Dream* is a feminist attempt at imagining a feminist utopia yet the story draws a lot of inspiration from Rokeya's life itself. She was raised in an elite Muslim society where women used to live in a secluded chamber of their homes known as *jenanas*. Her father was a conservative Muslim man who restricted her activity outside the home. Further, he encouraged only her brothers to get Western education and secure civil service position for themselves. However, due to her brother's encouragement she was able to read and write at

home only. Though grown up in such a restrictive society, she still was able to write such a daring and bold topic as mere thinking of a feminist utopia at that times was a new and controversial concept. Through this work, Rokeya has created a new concept of men instead of women being confined to the secluded sections known as *mardanas* as they are considered threats against the society. Thus, through this work, she has challenged the whole system and ideals of patriarchy that believes in the supremacy of men and consider women as inferior and non-essential part of the society.

Rokeya's exceptional work is based on the imagination of an imaginary land where women have access to the public domain without being restricted by religion and social customs. Thus, Rokeya had realized that religion plays an important role in the subjugation of women and social norms motivated by religion become the anklets of restrictions and limitations for women. The story is narrated by an elite woman protagonist from her luxurious secluded chambers. The protagonist falls asleep as she is "thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood." However, she is not aware whether she is in a dream state or is awake. She finds herself walking unveiled in daylight in another world where the gendered structures of Indian Muslim society are reversed as men are now confined to *mardana* (the name of the outer part of a household for men and guests, in complement to *zenana*, the inner part of a household reserved for women). In this world or utopia, women are unveiled in public, acting as the rulers and scientists. "Lady" scientists have turned away from building military machines and instead invent ways to harness rain from the sky and share energy from the sun. Thus, a contradiction is presented by Rokeya in the nature and behaviour of both men and women. Generally, men are always interested in strengthening their military power which is considered as wastage of both resources and manpower. However, women in Ladyland are more innovative and use these resources in the technological reforms as they invent things which are beneficial for improving the living standards of the people of Ladyland. One school of women scientists "invented a wonderful balloon, to which they attached a number of pipes. By means of this captive balloon which they managed to keep afloat above the cloud-land, they could draw as much water from the atmosphere as they pleased." Another university "invented an instrument by which they could collect as much sun-heat as they wanted. And they kept the heat stored up to be distributed among others as required." Thus, it is evident

that the factor behind the progress and success of women in the Ladyland is their free access to education, especially technical education which is otherwise reserved mostly for men. Thus, a sharp contrast is presented where all the gender roles are inverted creating a new atmosphere where women play lead roles in almost all fields and men are concentrated to peripheries. Further, through this first feminine utopia, Rokeya has drawn out the fact that women if well equipped with scientific knowledge could be proved more efficient in governing nation as well as providing better conditions necessary for leading a peaceful comfortable life. Thus, she says that if women are provided the necessary opportunities, they will bring brain rather than brawn to the table.

The celebration of scientific temperament of women in *Sultana's Dream*, itself makes it a radical feminist text. Rokeya has glorified women's participation in science as a safer option and also pointed out the fact that men had only misused their domination in the scientific world. She asserts that if women get a chance to participate in scientific learning, they can use it productively for future generations without wasting resources for futile activities like men do. She had also touched the perspective of wars as it is generally believed that men are more powerful and masculine and can do better in wars unlike women who are considered fragile. However, women are portrayed to be participating in the war in this work and they even proved victorious in this field too. This war actually takes place when few people, who had committed political offence, took refuge in the Ladyland. Thus, it is clear that Ladyland is war free as according to Rokeya women are more peace loving and generally do not like to indulge in any war and violence. However, provided a chance they can prove their worth in it also. The King in the neighbouring country wanted to get the culprits back. However, the Queen of Ladyland was not willing to do so. It was not her principle to turn out refugees. Therefore, the King had declared war. The men in the land stood up with arms, instantly, to defend their country. Nevertheless, all their attempts seemed to be failing one by one. The wise women in the land decided to take the matter in their hands. They knew that they would not be able to defeat men by arm or muscle power. So they decided to utilise their wisdom, here meaning scientific wisdom. It is commendable that the war was fought with wit and wisdom and scientific temperament but no bloodshed. It shows women's productive and constructive sense which was

not recognised during those days. Rokeya is so visionary writer that certain scientific thoughts and imageries prescribed by her is in process and practice in today's scientific life like the concept of rainwater harvesting, an eco-restoration drive, a greenery movement that bears immense water management potential in areas of water crisis.

The text of Begum Rokeya inspires one to take a dive into the status of Muslim women in contemporary India. It may be noted that the position of women under Islam have been the subject of debate, more among the educated Muslims. This trend becomes more prominent since the impact of Western liberalisation; "The controversial subject of women's rights has assumed great importance in the Islamic world and is a burning issue today. One of the most striking parts of the Indian Constitution is the fundamental right related to equality of religion and freedom of cultural practices. Our Constitution has laid down in Articles 25 to 30 the rights of religious, cultural and linguistic minorities and thus made India a truly democratic and pluralist nation (Kaushik and Munjial, 2013). Indeed this is a very progressive right for the sustenance of all the communities. However, the situation at present is that Muslim girls are among the least educated sections of Indian society which clearly depicts the plight of Muslim women as it has not drastically changed since the times of Begum Rokeya.

Reading this story is to celebrate the authorship of an eminent Bengali Muslim woman writer, feminist, and social reformer in the early twentieth century. Adding to this recognition, the text might also be read as relationship between techno-science, futurity, gender, and dreaming. *Sultana's Dream* can be situated along a genre of Western utopian writing that used an allusion of the dream to enter into conjuring another world. More than this, in colonial Bengal, dreaming was charged with other histories and forces. Dreams hold a special role in Islamic history and in The Qur'an. The Prophet Muhammad's revelations included dreams that were divinely inspired. Dream interpretation was an established feature of medieval Muslim literature and practice, and a thick history of dream interpretation exists in Bengal. Dreams can have a prophetic potential, and offer divinely inspired insights and valued knowledge. Such dream visions can happen both when asleep and awake, as waking visions. Further, they are understood to come to the dreamer as opposed to being produced or authored by someone. The historian Projit Mukharji, writing about colonial Bengal,

draws out the importance of dreamscapes as potent intangibles within South Asian traditional medical practices. Dreams, he has argued, were a well of divine inspiration for innovative new treatments. Dreams had epistemic authority that conferred divine force onto new remedies or practices. Thus, dreams are not mere flights of fancy or creations of the unconscious. They are a source that brings potential, insight and innovation into the world. Dreaming can be the perception of an intangible presence or potential in a world saturated with intangibilities and held together by imaginaries. Further, the recognition of the powerful world making capacities of non-secular dreaming in Islamic and Bengali dream practice pushes back on Benjamin's analysis of phantasmagoria to underline that techno science is as just one of many methods of wakeful dreaming. Techno scientific speculation joins an already rich array of potent practices that perceive the immaterial and felt as a historical force.

Thus, *Sultana's Dream*, although is presented in a dream sequence, depicts the author's most innate desire to break all the barriers related to women. It is simply giving air to the ire that remains suppressed due to customs, which are patriarchal in nature and practice. As woman in an Indian family is considered as the 'honour', many restrictions are imposed on her in order to secure that honour. There is restriction in her mobility and learning, her decision in her life and her 'dreams'. There are still prevalent the ignominious cases of honour killing. This generally happens when women or even men cross the set norms imposed on them by family, religion and society. Indeed, *Sultana's Dream* speaks of a utopian Ladyland. It can come to reality if women themselves come out of the mental slavery to men. This subordination is internalised in any woman so much so that they forget to realise their own potential. Seldom women try to assert their identity as it goes against their given role and responsibility towards their familial duties. Thus, this dream analogy gives vent to the most suppressed desires of women, especially Muslim women to break free from the shackles of seclusion and being constantly under male supervision. It wonderfully provides an alternative perspective to think and imagine how a world could look where women would rule and there would be no chains of imprisonment of culture and religion bound to them.

Hence, in the beginning of the twentieth century, Begum Rokeya, through her writing, had attracted international attention to understand the condition of Indian





- Q. 14 Women are considered more efficient and diligent as compared to men because\_\_\_\_\_
- a) They are more powerful
  - b) They are more intelligent
  - c) They take less time to complete a task as they do not indulge in unnecessary activities like men
  - d) They are clever
- Q.15 The Queen of Ladyland indulge in war with the neighbour country because\_\_\_\_\_
- a) she is arrogant
  - b) she wants to prove her power and influence
  - c) she is not in favour of abandoning the refuge seekers
  - d) she had a violent temperament

## **2.5 ANSWER KEY**

Q1. a

Q2. d

Q3. b

Q4. b

Q5. a

Q6. d

Q7. b

Q8 b

Q9. c

Q10. b

Q11. b

Q12. b

Q13. c

Q14. c

Q15. c

## **2.6 SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS**

- Q1. Describe in brief the contributions of Begum Rokeya for Muslim women's empowerment in Bengal.
- Q2. Briefly comment on the writings of Begum Rokeya.
- Q3. How Begum Rokeya succeeded in getting education? Explain.
- Q4. Describe the contribution of Sakhawat Hossain in Begum Rokiya's literary life.

## **2.7 LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS**

- Q1. Describe in detail the life of Begum Rokeya's influence on her writings.
- Q2. Discuss, the main themes in *Sultan's Dream*.
- Q3. Comment on the title *Sultana's Dream*.

## **2.8 LET US SUM UP**

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, is a well-known Bengali social activist, educationist, and was born on 9 December 1880, into a prominent family of Pairaband in Rangpur. She played a pioneering role in awakening and enlightening Muslim women. She is considered as the leader of Islamic feminism. Named as Rokeya Khatun, she is popularly known as Rokeya Khatun in Bangladesh. She was married to Khan Bahadur Sakhawat Hussain in 1898 due to which she got her surname as Hossain. Sakhawat Hussain was a liberal minded person who encouraged Rokeya to gain education and prominence. She is the pioneer of Women's liberation in South Asia. Begum Rokeya propagated equal rights for men and women as both should be considered as rational beings irrespective of their gender. She realized that lack of education and ignorance was the basic cause of the gender disparity and reason behind the low economic status of women. She founded the first Muslim Girls' school in Kolkata in 1911. In

1916, she also established Muslim Women's Association that fought for women's education and employment.

*Sultana's Dream* (1905) is celebrated as one of the earliest examples of feminist science fiction. Its author, Begum Rokeya Shekhawat Hossain, was a renowned advocate for Muslim women's education and equality in colonial India. Begum Rokeya was the most prominent Bengali Muslim Feminists of the early twentieth century.

## **2.9 SUGGESTED READING**

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### *SULTANA'S DREAM*

#### **STRUCTURE**

- 3.1. Introduction
- 3.2. Objectives
- 3.3. Plot and Setting
- 3.4. Characterisation
- 3.5. Detailed Summary and Critical Analysis of *Sultana's Dream*
- 3.6. Important Quotes from *Sultana's Dream*
- 3.7. Multiple Choice Questions
- 3.8. Answer Key
- 3.9. Short Answer Questions
- 3.10. Long Answer Questions
- 3.11. Let Us Sum Up
- 3.12. Suggested Reading

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This lesson introduces the learners with the characters and the plot of the novella *Sultana's Dream* written by Rokeya Shikhawat Hossain. Further, it provides the detailed summary and critical analysis of the novella *Sultana's Dream*. Rokeya Hossain has artistically envisioned a feminist utopia named 'Ladyland' and has provided a medium for enhancing the imagination and critical capability of her readers.

## 3.2 OBJECTIVES

The lesson aims at introducing the learners with the plot and critical summary of the novella *Sultana's Dream*. It provides a detailed analysis of the characters and the events that take place in the novella *Sultana's Dream*.

## 3.3 PLOT AND SETTING

The novella is set in a feminist utopia called Ladyland that is a mirror image of the Purdah system of patriarchy as men rather than women are made to follow the customs of purdah and are secluded in a zone called *mardana* just like the system of *zenana* that exists in patriarchy. In Ladyland women hold the superior position and are the masters. The driving force behind the success of Ladyland is education of women. Rokeya was well aware of the importance of education and has thus symbolically highlighted the fact that women can be proved more efficient provided they get free and easy access to education, especially scientific education so that they can utilise it to make the work easy and can control machine. In the conventional, inverted world of *Sultana's Dream*, the men whose advantage is brawn rather than brain, remained confined in *mardana* and perform the daily chores, while the women, headed by a Queen who is ably supported by her deputies—the female principals of the two women's universities—use their superior and intellectual ability to govern the country wisely and well. Thus, Rokeya through the novella has totally inverted the gender stereotypes as she presents women more intelligent and hardworking as compared to men, who are shown lazy and brute.

## 3.4 CHARACTERISATION

The novella is narrated by unnamed narrator who while contemplating on women's conditions in India dreams a feminist utopia where women are the head while men are confined to *maradana* section to manage household chores. Another character that frequently appears in the novella is Sister Sara, an imaginary and close friend of the narrator. She is the one who encourages the narrator to overcome her shyness and break away from her veil which is nothing but a shackle to her freedom. Lady Principals involve women trained to engage in war through words and strategy, rather than strength and combat. The Queen is shown as the ruler of Ladyland and established commerce and social practices of the land. She considers men as

untrustworthy and has made a rule that her country will trade only with women of other countries.

### **3.5 DETAILED SUMMARY AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NOVELLA *SULTANA'S DREAM***

*Sultana's Dream* is a short science fiction written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, also known as Rokeya Begum, in 1905. It is a novella. A novella is a text of written, fictional, narrative prose. It is longer than a short story but shorter than a novel, usually 17, 500 and 40,000 words. *Sultana's Dream* is basically the first science fiction written by an Indian Muslim woman to emphasise the importance of education, especially scientific education to women. Though, Hossain has written the short narrative to show her husband her mastery of English and to pass her leisure time in his absence, she has developed an awestricken plot by utilising the genre of science fiction even when it was in its nascent stage. The plot is built on an unnamed narrator's dream of an Indian feminist utopia. Hossain was an early feminist and the founder of Calcutta's first Islamic school for girls, as well as the Muslim Women's Organization. *Sultana's Dream* is a significant example of the feminist utopia as it is written by a woman belonging to the subcontinent that is dominated not only by patriarchy but also faced the brunt of colonisation, as India was a British colony till 1947. Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* is a sharp analysis of Muslim women's life of that time for whom it was the norm to remain illiterate and in seclusion of purdah. Since Hossain was raised in a conservative Muslim environment, she was also made to confine herself within the limits of Purdah and her movement was restricted to home. Though she was not allowed by her father to get a formal education, she knew the importance of education for women.

In this fictitious work, Hossain has totally reversed the gender constructions developed by patriarchy. The novella details the daily lives of the women, which consists of a two hour work day. In her feminist utopia, Ladyland, women play an active role in administration and outdoor activities whereas men are confined to home and household chores. Thus, a reversal of gender stereotypes is done thereby presenting a sharp contrast to the ideologies and structures of patriarchy.

*Sultana's Dream* begins with an unnamed narrator ('Sultana' here is a title.

For querrn in the subcontinent it can be related to ‘Sultan’ or ‘king’) who, in a state of trance, contemplates about the state of Indian womanhood. *Sultana’s Dream* is told in first person. She says she is not sure whether she fell asleep or not, but knows that she felt as if she were awake. A friend, Sister Sara, enters the room and wishes her good morning, although it is night time. Sara invites her outside to have a walk in the garden, to which she is hesitant as she is afraid that she will encounter a man while walking in the street in broad daylight, an action that is a ‘taboo’ for women at the time. However, due to Sara’s much insistence, the narrator agrees to her request. When she steps outside, she discovers that it is not night time and there is indeed light outside, and the streets are filled with people. But strangely, there are no men out.

She notices that the passersby laugh at her in a language she cannot comprehend. When asked, Sister Sara explains her that they are mocking at her “mannish” activities as she is acting timid like men do. The narrator does not understand her, and then suddenly notices that she is not walking with her friend at all and this woman is a complete stranger. She then tells the woman, still referred to as “Sister Sara,” that she is uncomfortable walking around without putting a veil on. Then, sister Sara tells her she need not worry about her veil as she is in Ladyland, and does not need to worry about encountering a man while being unveiled.

The narrator looks around and sees that Ladyland is like a garden completely free from any pollution or dirt. The streets are filled with flowers. Sister Sara suggests that Calcutta could look like this too, if the men of that city wanted it to and do not spoil it with activities which pollute the environment. The narrator asks where all the men are, and Sister Sara explains that in Ladyland, men are kept indoors, just as women are kept in *zenana* in India. The narrator justifies the pretext of purdah or confinement to Sister Sara on the grounds that it is not safe for a woman to come out of the *zenanas*, women’s quarters, because she is naturally weak and is unable to protect or secure herself. To this, Sister Sara replies that this applies only when men or wild animals are out in the streets. She compares the idea of keeping women indoors while men roam free to locking up the sane and letting the insane loose, because men are more capable of harm.

The narrator explains her pitiable plight to Sister Sara that she has no choice

in keeping to the *zenanas* as women have no voice in their own affairs in India. Everything is decided by men on their behalf as they are strong and their strength makes them “lord and master.” However, Sister Sara strongly condemns the idea providing to the fact that lions are stronger than men but that does not mean lions rule the world. She says women in India have lost their rights by their negligence, ignoring their best interests.

The narrator and Sister Sara sit together. Sister Sara begins to embroider, explaining that although this is all women have to do in the *zenana*, women in Ladyland still do this work, rather than giving it to men, as they lack the patience to thread a needle. She proves the point that women are superior and more efficient to men by explaining the fact that she is able to do both the domestic work of women and the office work of men. Men, on the other hand, stretch two hours of work into seven by indulging in harmful and futile activities smoking and talking rather than concerning themselves to their own job and business.

Sister Sara informs the narrator that in Ladyland there are no epidemics, or even mosquito bites. It is rare for anyone there to die young. She shows the narrator their advancement in science and technology and how they are able to trap solar energy and utilise it in cooking their food. She tells that these new technologies were developed some years ago, after their country’s Queen mandated that all women should be facilitated with education, especially scientific education. She also barred them from marrying until they were at least twenty-one. Women advanced in science and technology because of their sharp minds. Women’s universities also invented ways to draw water directly from clouds which put an end to draught and excess rains and storms.

While women were inventing new technologies for the upliftment of the living standards, the men of the country were focused on enhancing the military strength, and ridiculed the women’s inventions. This infuriated women and they sought revenge, however, the “Lady Principals” of the two women’s universities advised them not to respond by words but by action.

They were able to get the opportunity when refugees from another country sought political asylum in Ladyland. However, the king of the neighbouring country

did not like this. He demanded the return of the refugees to which Queen opposed as it was against her principles to turn out the ones who seek help and refuge. In response to the Queen's denial, the neighbouring country's king declared war. All the men of Ladyland went to defend their country and to drive the enemy out, but were defeated. The Queen then turned to the women scientists as her only hope to protect the country from the hands of enemy. One of the Lady Principals came up with a plan to defeat the enemy, but made a prerequisite condition that all the remaining men must be confined to the *zenanas*. The next day, the Lady Principal and her students marched to the battlefield and directed all the sun's rays using a technical instrument, towards the advancing army. Scorched, the enemy had to retreat.

Sister Sara then proudly told her that no one has dared try to invade Ladyland ever since, and women have ruled while men remain in the *zenanas*. However, men tried to reoccupy their position of dominance by writing to the Queen their plight and justification for their failure. However, the Queen refused and told the men that they would be called out again if their services were required. So far, it has been ten years and their services are not needed still. Sister Sara explains that the system of confining men indoors is called *mardana* derived from *marda*, the Urdu word for "man." Ever since the *mardana* system, there has been no crime and no need for the criminal justice system.

Sister Sara continues to explain the wonders and achievement of Ladyland, how they are able to save labour. She explains that machines are used to do work and thus fields are tilled by machine due to which manpower is saved. There are no railroads or paved streets as the citizens only use airways to travel. So there is no threat of rail or street accidents either. A sprinkler system keeps everyone cool in summer, while stored solar energy keeps them warm in winter. Their religion is based on "Love and Truth," which is essential condition for living in Ladyland as everyone is supposed to speak truth only. Because of it, there is no trace of crime or violence in the country. No one is punished with death; and offenders if any are simply banished, though they are forgiven if they repent genuinely.

The narrator urges Sister Sara to meet the Queen, and Sister Sara obligingly assembles a hydrogen-powered air-car that takes them to her. The Queen greets them both and gives an account to the narrator about their trade system. Ladyland

trades only with the countries where women are traders, as they consider men dishonest and untrustworthy. Their standards of living provide a sharp contrast to the patriarchal standards as they prefer to seek knowledge, rather than wealth, and try to enjoy the gifts that nature provides them rather than wasting and destroying them.

The narrator tours the whole country of Ladyland, but wakes up to discover herself back in her chair in India. Ladyland was all but a dream.

The imagining of a feminist utopia like Ladyland raises the question whether a gender-neutral utopia can exist, a world without patriarchal oppression and gender binaries which is beyond the violence that gender itself produces within the lives of people. A feminist utopia helps to imagine a world without gender binaries and gender discrimination.

Although Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's work *Sultana's Dream* is a feminist attempt at imagining a feminist utopia, named 'Ladyland', the plot does not remain untouched by the personal experiences of Begum Rokeya as the story draws a lot of inspiration from her own life experiences as a girl child born to an upper class Muslim family. Rokeya was made to observe the strict practice of Purdah like other women of the family which secluded them to the domestic realm. She was not allowed to get education like her elder brothers who, on the other hand, were provided Western education to enable them to secure jobs in civil services. However, her brothers questioned the tradition of purdah that gave rise to seclusion and marginalisation and encouraged Begum Rokeya and her elder sister Karimunnessa to read and write English and Bengali at home which they were prohibited from.

Karimunnessa was married off at a very young age (before the age of fourteen) after being sent to her maternal grandparents place because of her father's objection to studying Bengali. The inhibition of Muslim women's education had a deep impact on Rokeya and she wanted to make people aware of the importance of education, especially to Muslim women. She has emphasised it in her various works including *Sultana's Dream*. In one of her works she mentioned that marriage was the main factor that prevented her sister to educate herself. However, she later became a poet and wrote poetry mainly in Bengali that was spoken and understood by common masses easily.

LadyLand is a feminist utopia created by Begum Rokeya where women have the access to public spaces without being restricted by social or religious customs. Thus, Rokeya had realised that the patriarchal culture and religion influenced by it are the main reason behind the ignorance and subjugation of women. The total subversion of Ladyland from a male dominated space was thus, unimaginable and unbelievable by Sultana. She experiences herself a free being by first reclaiming a public place where she is not subjected to male gaze and surveillance. Muslim women are made to veil in the presence of men. So in Ladyland, one cannot find men roaming freely due to which women in Ladyland are exempted from veiling themselves. Thus, Rokeya has imagined a land where norms and regulations are formulated by taking into concern the issues of women rather than men.

*Sultana's Dream* reveals various emotions felt by women facing patriarchal oppression. The writing style depicts emotions of anger, fear and constant urge to challenge male authority. Rokeya attempts at seeking the attention of women readers and reminding them their worth and encourages them to question the patriarchal power that confines them to the domestic realm. In the story, women are shown as more rational and scientific than men, who otherwise enjoy the position of being more rational and intelligent beings. The character sister Sara is also a scientific researcher who believes in her worth and considers women superior to men. Thus, women are shown in the story to handle the work of men more efficiently as “women’s brain is quicker than men’s.” However, when the matter of women’s traditional work comes, Sultana is aghast with Sara’s assertion that men are unworthy to work for women. Thus, a sharp contrast is created to the ideologies of patriarchy as women are shown more intelligent and diligent in the matter of work as compared to men. Sultana is delighted to see the way women manage and control everything so tactfully and efficiently.

The novella is a sharp attack on the social and religious customs that plague women’s emancipation. The story focuses on women’s need to attain more education and challenge customs like child marriage and purdah system. Through the sexual transformation of purdah system shown in the novella through the seclusion of women to male seclusion, Rokeya has highlighted how purdah system has created a negative environment for women as it hinders their development and prosperity.

There is a complete switching over gender roles as women are shown as scientific researchers and men being capable of advancing military power. Through the story, Rokeya emphasizes on women's take over and control on social and religious matters. In the feminist utopia Ladyland, religion is given attributes of 'Love and truth' in which killing of another human being is prohibited and considered a crime. The Ladyland customs also defy relations of kinship which are given much importance under male dominated world.

*Sultana's Dream*, written during colonial rule, attempts to highlight the importance of equality, women's education and their freedom. Further, through this story, Rokeya quite successfully ridicules patriarchal oppression faced by Muslim women that hinders their normal functioning in day-to-day life.

Though, the novella on the surface appears as recreating structures of domination and inequality, but it primarily depicts how the adversities of patriarchal oppression impacted the lives of Muslim women in the late nineteenth century. *Sultana's Dream* is considered as a feminist utopia which attempts to challenge patriarchal oppression by preaching women a lesson of recognizing their self-determination and worth. Therefore, *Sultana's Dream* offers no space for male domination and oppression. It throws light on various social and religious customs that were practised to dominate women, especially Muslim women in India before the partition. Rokeya's childhood memories and educational background allows her to contemplate and deeply reflect on issues plaguing Muslim women's emancipation as they are forced to live a secluded life being active only in kitchen or *zenana* section of their home.

*Sultana's Dream* questions and provides a contrary ideology to each and every ideology and popular notions propagated by patriarchy that favours men. When the narrator of the story innocently repeats what women were often told about men, "Even their brains are bigger and heavier than women's. Are they not?", her new friend immediately tells her, "Yes, but what of that? An elephant also has got a bigger and heavier brain than a man has. Yet man can enchain elephants and employ them, according to their own wishes." Thus, the novella attempts to question the notions made by patriarchy about the superiority of men thereby providing an alternative approach of the same.

In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya not only criticises the traditional role for Muslim women in the twentieth century, she is also derisive and critical of women who have allowed their 'self' to be trapped within a limited role provided by patriarchy. The narrator explains her subvert condition in Calcutta to Sister Sara by saying, "We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master, he has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana", and when Sara asks her 'Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?', she explains—like any 'good' traditional Muslim woman from that time probably would—"Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women." Thus, the idea of a male dominated society run through the use of strength and force is highlighted here, but Rokeya does not abide by that as she propagates a contrary idea through the character of Sister Sara. Though "'A lion is stronger than a man,' says Sister Sara, 'but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests.'"

The ease with which Rokeya casually dismisses the myths perpetuated by parochial patriarchal systems of the time makes *Sultana's Dream* particularly pleasing as an early feminist text. She appears to be so confident in her belief that every aspect of male-dominated society can be challenged provided women must accept the fact that they are more efficient than being restricted to domestic duties only. The positivity in her faith that the status quo of women can be challenged appeals as the idea appears so refreshing and anew. It is reported that her husband read the story and after finishing it he declared it to be "a splendid revenge" - revenge upon patriarchy and male dominance.

Rokeya was also well aware of the fact of the double threat to women—patriarchy and living under colonisation. This is highlighted from the fact that Queen of Ladyland tells the narrator, "We do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for a piece of diamond though it may be a thousand-fold brighter than the Koh-i-Noor, nor do we grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne. We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy nature's gifts as much as we can." Thus, it appears both interesting and

fascinating that she brings up two of the most valuable items plundered by the British Empire in the subcontinent—the Koh-i-Noor, a precious diamond mined in the seventeenth century in India that became part of the Crown Jewels in 1877, and the Peacock Throne, commissioned in the seventeenth century which no longer exists, though many jewels adorning it were taken by British colonialists and are presumed to be a part of the Crown Jewels. It becomes apparent that Rokeya was not appreciative of the British Empire or its presence in the Indian subcontinent, and she was not even afraid to express her content about it.

Thus, Rokeya has touched issues that Muslim women of her age dealt with, particularly patriarchy and colonisation. Thus, third world women are victims of double marginalisation as they are subverted not only by patriarchal construct but also have to face suppression from colonisation. Rokeya has freely depicted her contentment about patriarchal norms that obstructs the freedom and liberty of Muslim women through the construction of a fictional world where women are freed from the chains that patriarchy puts on their feet. The ideology women should have equal rights throughout the world, especially in the Indian subcontinent where women are struggling against a male-dominated society remains dominant all through the novella: “We constitute half of the society,’ she said, ‘If we remain backward can the society move forward? If somebody’s legs are bound up how far can she walk? Indeed, the interest of women and men are not different. Their goal of life and ours are the same.”

### **3.6 IMPORTANT QUOTES FROM *SULTANA’S DREAM***

- A. When asked by Sister Sara about the silence of women for their deprived condition in the patriarchal society of Calcutta, Sultana explains her by just repeating what she and other women of her society are made to believe:

“We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master, he has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana.”

“Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?”

‘Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women.’

‘A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the

human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests.”

- B.** Expressing awe and surprise to Sister Sara about their advancement in science and technology and their using of technology to harness solar energy for cooking, Sultana says,

“Your kitchen is not inferior to a queen’s boudoir!”

I replied with a pleasant smile, ‘but we must leave it now; for the gentlemen may be cursing me for keeping them away from their duties in the kitchen so long.’ We both laughed heartily.”

When Sultana could not find men on streets or anywhere, she enquired from Sister Sara,

“‘Where are the men?’ I asked her.

‘In their proper places, where they ought to be.’

‘Pray let me know what you mean by “their proper places”’.

“O, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors.” Just as we are kept in the zenana?’

- C.** Aggravating over the plight of women in the patriarchal society who are nothing but weak and harmless members of the society, Sister Sara questions the whole system of purdah that patriarchy has created which she feels is unjust and pathetic,

“But dear Sultana, how unfair it is to shut in the harmless women and let loose the men.”

“Why? It is not safe for us to come out of the zenana, as we are naturally weak.”

- D.** When Sultana just repeats the patriarchal perception of justifying the practice of purdah that is considered to be created for the safety of women themselves, Sister Sara provides her an altogether different perspective to contemplate and view the actual situation. She further justifies her practice of *mardana* as

according to her it is men who need to be controlled and secluded rather than women are harmless and more rational members of the society:

“Yes, it is not safe so long as there are men about the streets, nor is it so when a wild animal enters a marketplace.”

“Suppose, some lunatics escape from the asylum and begin to do all sorts of mischief to men, horses and other creatures; in that case what will your countrymen do?”

“They will try to capture them and put them back into their asylum.”

“And you do not think it wise to keep sane people inside an asylum and let loose the insane?”

“As a matter of fact, in your country this very thing is done! Men, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women, shut up in the zenana! How can you trust those untrained men out of doors?”

- E. Sister Sara justifies the ways of *mardana* and when Sulatana asked about the contribution of men in the society, she simply explains that there is no need for them to be free and outside as they are worthy of nothing and women handle social and political affairs of the country so efficiently:

“They should not do anything, excuse me; they are fit for nothing. Only catch them and put them into the zenana.”

- F. Sister Sara further explains the sloth and carelessness of men in performing their works as women of the Ladyland perform the same task in two hours that men take six hours to do:

“In two hours! How do you manage? In our land the officers, – magistrates, for instance – work seven hours daily.”

“I have seen some of them doing their work. Do you think they work all the seven hours?”

“Certainly they do!”

“No, dear Sultana, they do not. They dawdle away their time in smoking.

Some smoke two or three choroots during the office time. They talk much about their work, but do little. Suppose one choroot takes half an hour to burn off, and a man smokes twelve choroots daily; then you see, he wastes six hours every day in sheer smoking.”

### 3.7 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

- i. The narrator in the novella *Sultana's Dream* is \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Sara
  - b. Queen
  - c. Unnamed Character
  - d. None of the above
- ii. Sara is \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Narrator's friend
  - b. Queen Guard
  - c. Lady Principal
  - d. None of the above
- iii. Who spoke the following lines in the novella *Sultana's Dream*?

“Your kitchen is not inferior to a queen's boudoir!” I replied with a pleasant smile, ‘but we must leave it now; for the gentlemen may be cursing me for keeping them away from their duties in the kitchen so long.’ We both laughed heartily.”

  - a. Narrator
  - b. Sara
  - c. Queen
  - d. Lady Principal
- iv. *Sultana's Dream* is a \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Novella
  - b. Novel

- c. Autobiography
  - d. None of the above
- v. *Sultana's Dream* is presented as \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Manless world
  - b. Female-dominated world
  - c. Sin free world
  - d. All of the above
- vi. 'Ladyland' is run on \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Moon Power
  - b. Solar Power
  - c. Hydro Power
  - d. Fire
- vii. The novella details the daily lives of the women, which consists of a \_\_\_\_\_
- a. two hour work day
  - b. three hour work day
  - c. twenty-four hour work day
  - d. twelve hour work day
- viii. *Sultana's Dream* is told in \_\_\_\_\_ person
- a. Third
  - b. Second
  - c. First
  - d. None of the above

### 3.8 ANSWER KEY

- i. c
- ii. a

- iii. a
- iv. a
- v. d
- vi. b
- vii. a
- viii. c

### **3.9. SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS**

- a. What is a novella? How is *Sultana's Dream* a novella?
- b. Discuss in brief *Sultana's Dream* as a science fiction.
- c. Define Utopia. Briefly comment on *Sultana's Dream* as a utopia.
- d. Write briefly the role of Sister Sara in *Sultana's Dream*.

### **3.10. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS**

- a. Critically analyse *Sultana's Dream* as a critique on suppression of Indian Muslim women.
- b. Discuss the colonisation of third world woman as presented in *Sultana's Dream*.
- c. Discuss the tradition of Purdah in Indian society. How and why it is subverted in the novella *Sultana's Dream*.
- d. Comment on the character of Sultana/protagonist in *Sultana's Dream*
- e. Analyse *Sultana's Dream* as a feminist utopia.
- f. Critically analyse the character of Queen in *Sultana's Dream*.

### **3.11 LET US SUM UP**

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* depicts a dream sequence but it is not simply a sequence for entertainment. It rather speaks for a transformation in society to bring women out of the boundaries of four walls of home and to work in the public sphere without intrusion of men. Through a dream she challenges the system of beliefs associated with Muslim women.

### 3.12 SUGGESTED READING

*A Study Guide for Begum Rokeya's "Sultan's Dream"*. Cengage Gale.  
n.d

Chakrabarty, Priyanka. "A Contemplation on 'Sultana's Dream'." [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/294118151\\_A\\_Contemplation\\_on\\_'Sultana's\\_Dream'](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/294118151_A_Contemplation_on_'Sultana's_Dream')

Hossain, Rokeya Sakhawat. *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*. Penguin Books, 2005.

Murad, Mahvesh. "Under the Radar: Sultana's Dream." *Tor.com*, 2019.

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*SULTANA'S DREAM*

**STRUCTURE**

- 4.1. Introduction
- 4.2. Objectives
- 4.3. *Sultana's Dream* as a Feminist Utopia
- 4.4. Imagery and Symbols in *Sultana's Dream*
- 4.5. *Sultana's Dream* as a Postcolonial Novella
- 4.6. *Sultana's Dream* as an Ironic/alternate Reality
- 4.7. Dream analysis of *Sultana's Dream*
- 4.8. Secularism and Morality in *Sultana's Dream*
- 4.9. Pursuit of Science prevalent in *Sultana's Dream*
- 4.10. Portrayal of Men
- 4.11. Importance of Women's Education and Empowerment in *Sultana's Dream*
- 4.12. Examination Oriented Questions
  - a. Long Answer Questions
  - b. Short Answer Questions
  - c. Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
  - d. Answer Key (MCQs)

#### **4.13. Let Us Sum Up**

#### **4.14. Suggested Reading**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

This lesson provides critical appreciation of the novella *Sultana's Dream*. Further, learners get acquainted with the novella *Sultana's Dream* as a feminist utopian text. The learners will be benefitted from the MCQs provided at the end of the lesson as they can check their grasp and awareness regarding the text. The lesson also provides both long and short Examination Oriented Questions.

### **4.2 OBJECTIVES**

This lesson aims at developing critical ability of the learners by providing them exercises and subject matter concerning the novella *Sultana's Dream*. It helps the learners to understand the literary terms and approaches concerning the novella.

### **4.3. SULTANA'S DREAM AS A FEMINIST UTOPIA**

“You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Ladyland, free from sin and harm.”

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is a prominent writer whose creative vent of mind gives rise to many important writings, from readers especially those concerned about the inequality of gender. Her firsthand experience as a woman born in a strict Muslim family has given her the fuel for writing about women's issues, especially Muslim women of India. Being the pioneer of Bengali Muslim feminism, she portrays the overall miserable condition of the Muslim women of her time and tries to provide a solution to the problem by generating an innovative idea of a feminist utopia where all the gender roles are subverted as women are set free from the prescribed gender stereotypes of patriarchy.

Rokeya started her literary career in the early twentieth century. Her writings mainly focus on feminism and its effects. As her parents were orthodox, she was deprived of the opportunity to attend a school in her childhood. She was taught to recite the holy Quran at home only and her mental faculties were limited to household work only. But her undaunted thirst for education got an impetus from her elder brother

who taught her both Bangla and English, though both of the languages were prohibited to the girl children of the family by their conservative father, as only Urdu was considered as a reputed language used by elite Muslims. English was considered as an official language that only men needed as women had no concern with office and work. Thus, Rokeya was successful in her pursuit of getting education as her elder brothers were liberal and open-minded and openly supported Muslim women's cause. Thus, she became a self-educated woman with a progressive bent of mind. The nourishment that she received from her affectionate brother later got ripe with the encouragement of her husband after her marriage and she started writing as a result. Rokeya's writings mainly attack the injustice and indiscriminate faced by women, prominent among them being *Sultana's Dream*, *Padmarag* and "Abarodbashini". In *Sultana's Dream*, and *Padmarag*, Rokeya emphasizes the need of education and self-employment for women. In addition, in "Abarodbashini" she satirizes the society where women suffer the tragic consequences because of purdah. "Abarodbashini" is a counterpoint to Hossain's fictional utopia created in *Sultana's Dream*.

On her husband's insistence and encouragement, she continued writing and gradually her writings were published in various papers and journals. As she was aware of the trials that women were made to face in the society, she focused on women's tragic plight of oppression in her writings. Being a Muslim woman, she was made to observe purdah at a very early stage. Further, the severity of the practice of purdah could be judged from the fact that Rokeya was not even allowed to meet women that were strangers. During that time, women's education was frowned upon. The condition of Muslim women was much worse. Women were not self-reliant as their movement was restricted to the four walls of the house. The holy Quran and Persian language formed the only education that Muslim women received and that too at home. The practice of purdah was sanctioned and encouraged by patriarchy for it upheld the notion that purdah was an essential and necessary measure for the safety of the women. Women lagged behind in every respect during Rokeya's time. Social conservativeness and lack of awareness were the prime reasons that worked against the advancement of women, who could not accept the opportunities to develop themselves as real and independent human beings. These narrow social attitudes coupled with women's own apathy crippled the spirit of women. As they dwelled in the depth

of darkness, they were against female education. Therefore, because of women's own narrow-minded mindset, their awakening was interrupted and blocked.

Rokeya Shakawat Hossain's writings focus mainly on the issues concerning women, especially Muslim women. As feminism speaks about the rights and equality of women for constructing a better society Rokeya also emphatically addresses all the discrepancies and injustices against women in her writings. The main idea of feminist theory is that men and women should be equal in every respect. Rokeya Shakawat Hossain was a strong voice of feminism in the history of Bangla literature. She demanded equal rights and privileges for both men and women without offending the sentiments of men: "We do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for a piece of diamond though it may be a thousand-fold brighter than the Koh-i-Noor, nor do we grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne. We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy nature's gifts as much as we can."

*Sultana's Dream* is structured around a fictitious nation, Ladyland, where women rule and men are considered as the 'second sex'. As the title reflects, we see the story opens in a dream sequence of the protagonist who enjoys her share of freedom through a utopian dream of breaking away from the four walls of the *zenana*. In Ladyland women find their freedom through education and scientific advancement. Rokeya invites, with *Sultana's Dream*, women of her society to imagine an illusionary experience of liberty that exists outside purdah. The story does not depict happy ending rather there is only shattering of that "happy dream". The whole scenario is temporary and takes an opposite gear soon, and the awakening of the person who dreams serves as a signal to remind the readers that the empowerment of women is nothing but a temporary dream for women. Lorde Audrey, an African American feminist writer, says, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow [her] temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable [her] to bring about genuine change".

Being deprived of equal education and other rights and privileges which men enjoy, Rokeya feels the condition of women which is nothing different from what Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright, makes Nora say to her husband in *A Doll's House*. Nora says, "Our house has been nothing but a playroom. Here I have been

your doll- wife just as at home I used to be papa's doll-child". She was well aware of the miserable condition that women lead in a conservative patriarchal society of the subcontinent. She chose it to be the subject of her writings as she felt it was necessary to uncover the hidden patterns of exploitation that Muslim women faced and to create awareness about their social rights and position.

Feminist utopia is a branch of utopian literature and the overlapping category of feminist science fiction. An American radical feminist, Sally Miller Gearhart calls this sort of fiction 'political'. It sharply contradicts and contrasts the present world with an idealistic society, criticizes contemporary values and conditions, sees men or their systems as the major cause of social and political problems (for example war) and presents women as equal to or superior to men, having ownership over their reproductive function. Carol Pearson, another American poet, says that these texts 'portray' women as the creators of a new vision. Feminist utopias work within the ideological structures, as they utilize feminist ideologies in their creation of utopian spaces. In utopias, single-gender worlds or simple sex societies have long been one of the primary ways to explore implications of gender and gender differences. In speculative fiction, female-only worlds have been imagined as a disease that wipes out men, along with the development of technological or mystical methods that allow female reproduction. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel describes this type of separate society. Many feminist utopias pondering separatism were written in the 1970s, as a response to the lesbian separatist movement. Utopias imagined by male authors have often included equality between sexes, rather than separation. The use of female only worlds allows the exploration of female independence and freedom from patriarchy. The societies may not necessarily be lesbian or sexual at all—a famous early sexless example *Herland*. In utopias, the projection of the myth does not take place in the remote past or in the future or in distant and fictional places imagining that at some time in the future, at some point, there must appear the possibility of living happily.

Ladyland is basically a feminist utopia where science, technology and humanism work in unison to make women self-reliant and empowered. Patriarchal oppression becomes meaningless in this utopia. Like most feminist utopias, *Sultana's Dream* is a direct exploration and critic of a gendered pivotal society. Ladyland is a utopian space especially designed for women since it represents an ideal feminist

space where they are made free from the gendered stereotypes put by patriarchal culture. *Sultana's Dream* employs utopia to inspire those women who suffer within patriarchal societies. The story can be seen as a representation of a satirical utopian society as power of males is taken away and given to females, thereby making them self-reliant and independent. Men are viewed as negligent members of the society that could not be trusted with the important administrative tasks of maintaining and smooth functioning of the Ladyland and therefore, they are restricted to the tasks pertaining to kitchen only. However, they are not trusted with works with minute details that demand complete focus and attention as men are considered sluggish and indolent. This becomes clear from the instance when the narrator saw Sister Sara doing “needle work” by herself and when asked Sister Sara explained her that “a man has not patience enough to pass thread through a needlehole even!”.

One of the essential aspects of this story is the presentation of women as educated and intellectual leaders of the land during a time when education, especially the knowledge of English was a privilege limited to men only. The reform movements taking shape during this period discussed the issue of women education in the context of them being suitable wives and mothers. *Sultana's Dream* makes a departure from this thought, illustrating women's education as a necessity in order to make them responsible citizens rather than commendable housewives for the gradual progress of the country. It is interesting to note how Rokeya presents this entire departure of thought and practice as a right of women to education rather than a privilege. She further illustrates Ladyland as a country where women education is must and there are present all girls' schools and colleges. Further, viewing the importance of education for women, the Queen of the country has made a law that the age of marriage for women is twenty-one, thus checking child marriages which serves as an impediment in the education of women. This endorsement of women education and running of the country by women acts as a demonstration of womanpower over male dominance. However, the avenue of education has a larger political context that is delineated through the use of language in the story.

Thus, Sultana's encounter with a typical opposite world than her own world shows how much she has been internalised with restrictions on women. The incidents and the encounters faced by Sultana make the reader think of her as a fictional extension

of Begum Rokeya herself. The part played by Sister Sara refers to Rokeya's critical ability which she utilises to argue against the norms of patriarchy, which controls women's fate.

#### **4.4 IMAGERY AND SYMBOLS IN *SULTANA'S DREAM***

The imagery applied by Rokeya Begum in *Sultana's Dream* is artistic and apt as implied by the fact that the name 'Sultana' used in the novella is symbolic of a lady Sultan, King/Emperor. She playfully bashes the prevailing old school inclusiveness of the then male dominated society – 'zenanas, and criticizes 'weaker species' logic. In Ladyland, 'zenanas' are said to be replaced by 'mardanas' (*mard-* male in Hindi/Urdu), thereby making the land a crime-less eco-friendly 'Amazon'. The things that looked like science fiction in her 'wonderland', when observed now, were actually prophecies and solutions for twenty-first century: Solar Energy, Hydrogen weather balloons, Commercial Aviation and even competitive academics.

The dream sequence in the story also serves as imagery used to depict the preservation of environment and hints at the ecological mismanagement carried on by the imperial power. In Ladyland, there is no road or railway, as there is on the contrary a green carpet on which people walk. In Ladyland due importance is given to horticulture and its improvement and there is no use of coal or chimneys in the kitchen as cooking is done using solar power, hence pollution is controlled. This entire structure of Ladyland might be read as a territorial metaphor to reflect a shift from the colonial pattern of land use. Ramachandra Guha while writing about the Chipko movement of the 1970's remarks that ecological disruption and environmental issues are interlinked with social justice and the state's mismanagement of nature in the name of industrialization is ecological imperialism which has disastrous cultural and ecological effects. Rokeya in *Sultana's Dream* has illustrated the existence of an alternative world where concepts of botany and horticulture, which were considered to be feminine and open to amateur women by the British, are elevated. In this context, Rokeya's description of the importance of nature in Ladyland starting from the green carpet to using of solar energy and conservation of water bodies by utilizing only rainwater might be studied as an attempt towards ecological balance and sustenance of the environment.

The use of flying car and automated farms in Ladyland illumines the fact that women could prove more intellectual and progressive than men in dealing with scientific instruments and other technological advancements as they know implicitly how to cooperate and how to coordinate, whereas men focus mostly on economic competition. The invention of instruments for weather control suggests the fact that if women were dominant they could lead the society towards better and progressive future and could help in attaining more powers over nature rather than indulging in futile activities like war and violence that patriarchal society usually do. Another fact that is evident from *Sultana's Dream* is that men in general believe that they are the superior sex which is taken for granted as their authority is never challenged. However, in Ladyland they are given a challenge by women scientists and are defeated effortlessly as men only possess "brawn rather than brain". It symbolises the fact that men are not the superior beings as are considered and women could prove more progressive and intellectual if provided a chance. Thus, men see the world only in terms of competition, ignorant of the fact that each person has something to offer.

#### **4.5 SULTANA'S DREAM AS A POSTCOLONIAL NOVELLA**

Rokeya Shakawat's *Sultana's Dream* was written when India was still a colony of British Empire. Though the novella is written in a feminist strain, yet Rokeya has not forgotten the initial problem that has bounded the whole country men and women into the chains of slavery. The use of English language in writing the story acts against the 'linguistic colonialism' prevalent during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. With the advent of the East India Company, and subsequent British Rule over Bengal and the rest of India, English as a language was introduced in the curriculum to make indigenous people accustomed to the language and able for official work. But, this English education was mostly restricted to a part of the society, majorly Hindus whereas Muslims especially the Muslim women were restricted from it. Sayyid Ahmed Khan started a socio-cultural movement to introduce English education for the Muslims, so that they did not lag behind, similarly Rokeya was also involved in campaigns arguing for English education for women. During this time, her learning

English, and publishing a story about a utopian land in English, familiarizes the concept of educated women and demonstrates the need for education of women. It also establishes English as a language being used by a native woman for creation of literature and her identity rather than official work. However, education is not the only issue that has been highlighted in *Sultana's Dream*. Further, focus is on horticulture and improvement in botanical technology.

Unlike colonial Bengal, where men think horticulture to be a work related to women as well as wastage of time, it is of immense importance in Ladyland. It is evident from her work that she represents a time when the colonial power was rearranging agricultural practices. Thus, Rokeya has directly criticized the imperialist strategy of East India Company that focussed only on its trade and paid less importance to agricultural activities. They built roads and railway tracks for the smooth transportation of their goods due to which agriculture and horticulture suffered. Rokeya has criticised this tactics of Britishers through the fact that when asked by the narrator about their food, Sister Sara replied that the natives of Ladyland depend largely on fruits and other things provided by nature and thus pay huge focus on agriculture and horticulture. Rokeya has pointed out and sharply criticised the practice of imperialism which results from the greed that men have developed for the materialistic things: "We do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for a piece of diamond though it may be a thousand-fold brighter than the Koh-i-Noor, nor do we grudge a ruler his Peacock Throne. We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy nature's gifts as much as we can." Thus, in the feminist utopia, Ladyland there is an alternative viewpoint as its natives believe in peace and harmony and being content in what nature has gifted them rather than preying on others wealth. Through the story, Rokeya offers an alternative view of a decolonized world where science is utilized to sustain life and environment is nurtured and not plundered.

#### **4.6 SULTANA'S DREAM AS AN IRONIC/ALTERNATE REALITY**

Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* is a campaign in support of women whose needs were unmet by the male-centred and dominated socio-religious orthodoxy that was

at the helm of the society she lived in. She addressed the issues of women's (primarily Muslim women's) confinement to narrow domestic lives in her writing, and rallied behind the cause of female education.

Her iconic work *Sultana's Dream*, a utopian fantasy novella originally written in English, famously reversed gender roles. It tells the story of Ladyland which is run by women with the help of scientific knowledge and technological advances, while men are confined to the *zenana*, or as Rokeya terms it, the *mardana*. The novella begins with Sultana who seems to have been transported to a different world in her sleep, as Sister Sara, a native of Ladyland guides her through this new world order.

While explaining how women came to be in power despite being "naturally weak," Sister Sara offers the irrefutable logic that since men are "dangerous like wild animals," they must be locked up, while Sultana reflects that in her world, men who are capable of "doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women are shut up in the *zenana*!" Upon hearing this, Sara gently chides Sultana, stating that it is women who have neglected themselves and thus, "have lost [their] natural rights by shutting [their] eyes to [their] own interests." Calling the novella a "science fiction utopia" in her article "Feminism's Futures: The Limits and Ambitions of Rokeya's Dream" Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan writes that "there is poetic justice in the fate that men suffer as it is their own self-destructive aggression that brings them to defeat." Women do not use physical might but instead exercise their political and military power "wisely and with restraint," putting their scientific knowledge to the best use for the economy.

Over a hundred years ago, Rokeya wrote about the ideal use of solar power to generate electricity and explained how nature and science can be used simultaneously for sustained growth. As Rajan writes in her article, Rokeya's utopia bears the "specific lineaments of science fiction – either the scientific fantasy of a world where science and technology deliver womankind (and mankind) from their condition of enslavement, or alternatively where women acquire and use scientific knowledge to transform the world."

Rokeya's husband and many other literalists alleged that *Sultana's Dream* was an act of literary revenge or an attack against the male sex. However, they failed to

recognize that Rokeya was attempting to portray an alternate reality in an ironic manner, presenting the absurdity of a hierarchy based on sex and gender. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan argues that the writer could not “have been blind to the ideological implication of an idealised female ruler maintaining segregation and retaining the sexual division of labour while merely inverting it.” Just as how women are rarely accorded the right to voice dissent or be heard and their issues are largely unseen by the male-controlled society in our world, men in *Sultana’s Dream* are invisible, their voices are never heard; we do not get to know how they actually feel about their reversed role in the social order as the story presents men’s narratives from women’s point of view. In her reluctance to discuss the politics of the “reverse enslavement of men,” Rokeya seems to reflect the apathy and discomfort in discussing the politics concerning women’s rights in our patriarchal society. Thus *Sultana’s Dream* read as a destabilisation of gender, where the politicisation of gender rather than the sex of a person is the main problem.

#### **4.7 DREAM ANALYSIS OF SULTANA’S DREAM**

Dream is an activity that everybody experiences. It is a kind of situation in which we would like to see or enjoy what we cannot do in our real life. Hovering within our unconscious experience, dreams also have the ability to pull at our consciousness during wakefulness intruding on our thoughts. According to Sigmund Freud, an Austrian Neurologist and the founder of Psychoanalysis, dreams are the forms of attempts for fulfilling wishes by the unconscious part of our minds to resolve a conflict, may be something recent or something from the recesses of the past. The realm of fantasy, according to Freud links the unconscious with the conscious, thus if recognized as utopian activity, *Sultana’s Dream* like other feminist utopia’s appear to argue that dreaming becomes a state that could be utilized more effectively in the struggle for utopian transformation, linking ideas to action. People tend to dream of a perfect society when they are frustrated by the present one. Through dream they try to correct the follies and vices of the prevalent society.

The dream mode is used as a powerful tool to expand the boundaries of human thought. Sultana, the protagonist, dreams of an ideal world, Ladyland, where the women emerge as victorious in every sphere of their lives. *Sultana’s Dream* is more

about action than words, although the actions take place within the dream itself. Women's empowerment, their emancipation and the development of the society were not idle dreams for Rokeya, rather the frame of dreams it carries has been her vision of life and she didn't built the castle of her vision in air. She has used the dream sequence for the development of the females and to make the society progressive. *Sultana's Dream* portrays the splendid inventions of the women of Ladyland. The talented women of Ladyland invent Solar Heat Catcher, Air car, Captive Balloon, etc. She provides her imaginary girls with proper education and faculties and then presents them as perfectly empowered women with their achieved excellence in all spheres of life. So in the dream, she through the use of science fiction provides better pathways for a better nation.

Through dreams, the author has fulfilled her inner desire of a society which can prosper through scientific inventions and discoveries and also bear the message to womenfolk that empowerment can lead them to the zenith of success and they too can dominate society. Sultana departs from Ladyland using the dream mode once again. She carries home the realization that women of Ladyland have an irrepressible zest for life. An American Professor of Political Science, Lyman Tower Sargent's definition of utopia as 'social dreaming' fits well in discussing *Sultana's Dream* as it defines two key aspects of utopianism: the ongoing relationship between the individual and the social and between the private dream and the public dream expression of that dream. His work, "The Three Faces", manifests that the idea of social dreaming is not a paradox but it binds together the private and public, the individual and the public in one space. The significance of fantasy and desire in any Utopian project is emphasized by him. According to him it is not a 'mere daydreaming' but it should first be grounded in the mind before its representation. The individual desires of the writer and the open expression of them are well thought of by the writer herself and then are represented artistically to develop an educated, advanced and classless society without patriarchy. And this feminist nation is reigned over by love, honesty, scientific invention and endeavour, etc. Everywhere there is peace and harmony. Virtue itself reigns there.

#### **4.8 SECULARISM AND MORALITY IN *SULTANA'S DREAM***

*Sultana's Dream* includes the idea of secularism. In *Sultana's Dream* Sultana asks Sister Sara "what is your religion?" To this she replies, "Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful." "We do not take pleasure in killing a creature of God, especially a human being. The liar is asked to leave this land for good and never to come to it again."

Therefore, it is clear that in Ladyland it is their religious duty to love one another and to be truthful. If anyone lies then they are not punished with the death sentence rather they are banished from Ladyland. If any offender repents sincerely for his mistakes then he or she is forgiven. So it can be said that Rokeya represents humanism at its best. To her human beings are supreme. Morality is given priority and thus, transcends other aspects of life. According to Rokeya humanitarian values should be the foremost priority of people. She in her essay "Shugrihini" ("The Good Housewife") says:

We ought to remember that we are not merely Hindus or Muslims; Parsis or Christians; Bengalis, Madrisis, Marwaris or Punjabis; we are all Indians. We are first Indians, and Muslims or Sikhs afterwards. A good housewife will cultivate this truth in her family. This will gradually eradicate narrow selfishness, hatred and prejudice and turn her home into a shrine; help the members of her family to grow spiritually. (Hossain 210)

#### **4.9 PURSUIT OF SCIENCE PREVALENT IN *SULTANA'S DREAM***

Rokeya discusses the issue of power and how men hold dominion over women. The terms, 'lord' and 'master' precipitates Rokeya's war against the subjugation of women and the status of women during her time. She brings to attention the issue of power and privileges and demonstrates that women are able to work with the level of efficiency that men, in the form of prejudice, mark only as their own. Rokeya not only glorifies women's participation in science as a safe option but also states that given a chance to participate in scientific learning, they can use it productively for future

generations without wasting resources. She portrays the women in Ladyland as individuals who use their skill and wit to create something for the goodness of the society instead of getting engaged in warfare.

The water balloon is one example of the inventions that help reduce the frequency of rainstorms and diseases caused by the mosquitoes nesting in stagnant water and mud. They plough the land by using the water from water balloon. Their bathroom is also nicely decorated where the roof can be removed while taking a shower. Rokeya presents an interesting narrative where women are depicted as using their power to innovate. They use solar heat to cook. So their kitchen is free from coal, fire or smoke. Sultana comes to know more about their scientific creation when Sister Sara tells her that they collect rainwater from “water balloon” when they need rain water. As a result, they do not suffer from flood or thunderstorm. In order to keep the country cool in hot weather they sprinkle water from artificial fountains and in cold weather they keep their rooms warm with sun-heat. They enjoy bath by removing the roof of the shower pipe.

When the female members of Ladyland start to engage themselves in scientific researches and come up with new ideas, their male counterparts make fun of them. Especially when the ladies manage to draw water from the atmosphere and heat from the sun, the men laugh at the members of the university and call the whole thing “a sentimental nightmare”.

Here “a sentimental nightmare” demonstrates the inventions made by women. Rokeya here emphasizes the fact that men, by nature, are always ready to belittle the achievements of women. Here the scientific discoveries by the female members of the universities are being looked down upon by the males. According to them women are best at their homes not with scientific ideas.

However, when the country was attacked by the neighboring country the male soldiers start fighting bravely but in vain. The Queen of Ladyland tells the wise ladies of the university to come up with ideas to defeat the enemies. She tells them that if they cannot beat them physically then they should use their brainpower: “If you cannot save your country for lack of physical strength,” said the queen, “try to do so by brain power.”

One of the Lady Principals comes up with an idea and that is to direct all the rays of the concentrated sunlight and heat towards the enemy. The enemy faces the heat and sunlight and runs away panic-stricken. The country is saved by the scientific invention of women and so all the men have been kept under *mardana* (opposite to *zenana*).

Rokeya here brings to light that women too can defend themselves by using their brains. Physical power does not always dominate over brainpower. Women consider themselves, as men also do, weak because they are physically weak but it is not necessary to think that physical strength is the key to success. Rokeya uses the example of an elephant saying: “An elephant also has got a bigger and heavier brain than a man has. Yet man can enchain elephants and employ them according to their own shapes.”

She envisions a land where women can run a government, make scientific discoveries to establish the belief that women are capable of handling any situation calmly, and win using their own instinct.

Rokeya in *Sultana's Dream* depicts a land where a queen inherits the throne at the age of thirteen yet the country is ruled by the prime minister. Soon the rules reverse when the neighboring country attacks their land and the men fail to protect the land. The ladies attempt to rescue their country and gain success through scientific inventions. Here Rokeya, through the portrayal of the queen and the leading university women, sheds light on female involvement in politics. She relies on the literary tool of fantasy to create a land where there is no patriarchal dominance; rather women are their own masters and have the ability even to run a country which has been quite impossible at her time. She shows women's productive and constructive sense by which women can defeat men. They utilize their wisdom and it is commendable as they dedicate their wit to overcome the difficult situation and emerge victorious. It depicts Rokeya's desire to see women engage in political affairs and play the role of the commanding master which seemed literally unthinkable during her time.

### **3.10 PORTRAYAL OF MEN**

*Sultana's Dream* is a utopian literary work and a strong attack against the male dominated social system. She creates an imaginary world in opposition to the

existing patriarchal world. The men in the text are at the opposite pole to that of men in reality, and are portrayed as timid, defeated, shattered, and spineless. In Ladyland, men perform the duties of women. They take care of the babies at home, cook for family members and even feel shy at the sight of women. They are kept in *mardana* just as women are kept in *zenana*. Sultana asks about the men's whereabouts to Sister Sara:

Where are the men? I asked her. In their proper places, where they ought to be. Pray let me know what you mean by their proper places. O I see my mistake; you cannot know our custom, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors. Just as we are kept in *zenana*. Exactly so.

Here the male race can be compared with the 'yahoos' of the yahoo island as depicted by the famous English satirist, Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*. The yahoos are depicted as idle, lazy creatures with no sense, conscience and consideration, a creature too lustful with no intelligence. Work is good for them and so they do their utmost to avoid work. They are presented as mentally and morally inferior. The men in *Sultana's Dream* are similar to the yahoos. The men here are timid and they feel shy at the very sight of the women. And that's the reason Sister Sara covers her body before entering the kitchen so that men can feel relaxed and can do their work without hesitation.

Men are depicted as a threat to women. Sister Sara opines that women are not safe until this threatening animal is locked in. The men folk demonstrate that they spread terror and brutality for the women. Males in both the real and utopian worlds are similar. They think that women's education is unnecessary. Women's contribution to society is rejected. The men of Ladyland are devoid of scientific awareness and are busy showing their masculine power. They call the technologies of women 'sentimental nightmares'. But later they are imprisoned.

Men here show no responsibilities towards the liberty of the country. Due to cowardice and lack of skill they step back and without question get ready to abide by slavery and thus retreat from the battle field. They leave the country at the edge of destruction. At their shameless return the queen orders them to accept complete

segregation from the outdoor world and take shelter into the cocoon of the *mardana* with no freedom and free will. They surprisingly accept the offer as a boon to save their lives. By accepting defeat, they show their true nature of cowardice and selfishness. Instead of taking a stand for the country they bow their heads down and give in to the queen's demand. The famous Shakespearean adage "Cowards die many times before their death" certainly befits their personality.

Rokeya overthrows the whole male community to the dungeon of the *mardana* so as to make them realize how women are treated and are shut in the heart of darkness. The qualities which men usually possess in the conventional social system are absent in *Sultana's Dream*. They are portrayed like parasites having a large body but hollow inside. Thus, Rokeya constructs a feminist social structure where men are devoid of their traditional role of 'master'.

Imprisonment of men in the Ladyland is a sheer revenge against the imprisonment of women. But according to Rokeya, women are responsible for their own state of being oppressed as they silently submit to such oppression. She thinks that women may possess faculties and talents equivalent to or even greater than men. Women are capable of developing themselves to a stage where they may attain complete mastery over nature without help from men and create a new world. She wants to motivate women towards a process of self-realization and break the barrier that has always hindered them. The dream sequence in *Sultana's Dream* presents many images which are totally opposite from reality. It demonstrates many issues regarding women's rights. She presents Ladyland as an ideal land for women to fulfil all their dreams and emphasizes her interest in educating women and focusing the termination of the practice of early marriage. Rokeya, through the portrayal of the Queen of Ladyland, actually expresses her intense will for women's education and raises her voice against early marriage being herself a victim of it. Sister Sara provides a brief history about her Ladyland and queen:

Our good queen liked science very much. She circulated an order that all women in her country should be educated. Accordingly a number of girls' schools were founded and supported by the Government. Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage

also was stopped. No women were to be allowed to marry before she was twenty one.

Rokeya sheds light on the cultural practice of early marriage and focuses on her fascination in science. She creates Ladyland to portray women at their best and to show that power in women's hands can be used more efficiently than by men. She shuts the men indoors. She also includes the universal clash between men and women in her Ladyland. Her description about how men actually react on hearing the scientific inventions by women are the real reactions of their hostile and dominating attitude towards women. They laugh at their invention and women decide that they would rather commit suicide than lose their honour.

#### **4.11 IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN *SULTANA'S DREAM***

It is evident from Rokeya's writing of *Sultana's Dream* that the driving force behind the success of Ladyland is women's education. She focuses on women familiarizing themselves with the world of science. To show the women that they too can be the head of the educational institute, she creates the characters of Lady Principals who have, with their wisdom and wit, reached the zenith of success and are capable of solving the obstacles which are in their way. That education is the key to women's empowerment and progress is one of the main features of this story. She demonstrates how women use their skills to achieve the same goals that men have fallen short of despite their show of physical might and military power. She thinks that the desired progress of women is an urgent necessity for the advancement of a society, because no society could ever move forward in the true sense of the term leaving half of its members at home. That is the reason that she has always spoken of women's equal participation in the workforce with men. She depicts women in Ladyland working in universities, and trying their best to use their wit for the advancement of the society and the queen who is dedicated to her Ladyland and is working very hard for its development.

Her target of criticism is not the patriarchal society only. She is equally scornful and critical of women for their tendency to remain under confinement. Thinking that women are equally responsible for their submission as they willingly accept their

subordination and subjugation without realizing the consequence, she blames them for their blind submission and holds them accountable for their situation. She criticizes women actually when Sister Sara asks Sultana:

Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?

Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women.

A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race.

You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests.

Here Rokeya is a harsh critic of women who purposefully choose to be subservient to men. She holds women responsible for their own misery. She continues to say that “Shutting your eyes to your own interests” is one of the many reasons women have been unable to rise from their deplorable state. She uses the analogy between the human and lion to show that physical strength does not equal to power and believing one is weak is walking away from the duty of pursuing one’s own-interest. Women should know this strength does not always equal to power. They should not let men overshadow their talent by means of physical strength. Rather they have to use their skills in such way that men fail to dominate them. A man does not display physical strength to tame a lion. He uses different techniques to make the lion yield to him. And in Ladyland women do not use arms to seclude men, they make it happen by their shrewd thinking. In this way Rokeya manages to destroy the notions of strength associated with men.

Rokeya does not speak against women’s household work. She thinks that women cannot be good housewives if they do not gain special knowledge about housework. To accomplish the household chores one needs education too. In *Sultana’s Dream* the land is free from all kinds of diseases. They do not suffer from epidemics and it is free from mosquitoes. And this happened because the land is neat and clean. They decorated the country beautifully and the kitchens of Ladyland are smoke free. Therefore, to keep the house well-arranged education is must. Rokeya in her essay “Shugrihini” (“The Good Housewife”) states that:

One needs intelligence in order to keep the house clean and well-arranged. The housewife will have to show her taste in the very beginning when the house is being built. After the house is built, one needs furniture. Intelligence is needed in arranging them. One should know where each piece of furniture would look the best and where it will not. (Hossain 203)

She demonstrates very clearly the duties a good housewife has in arranging the house. She has also shown what happens when the house is not neatly maintained. She says:

You can often see cobwebs decorating the store-room like awnings. Tamarind and rice are mixed up and so are different spices. It takes an hour to find sugar. As the room is kept entirely closed you get a stuffy odour the minute it is opened. The housewives are used to it. (Hossain 203).

Education develops the mental faculty of a person. In addition, through education we can differentiate between right and wrong, what we should do and what should be avoided. And education is compulsory in every sector of life. By describing the kitchen in *Sultana's Dream* and by showing what happens when the kitchen is not properly kept, Rokeya portrays why education is necessary for girls in the housekeeping sector. She suggests the solution of the problem, that is education.

To conclude, we can say that Rokeya unhesitatingly and unflinchingly expresses her allegations against a male-dominated society in her utopia *Sultana's Dream* to make women of her time aware and alert of their rights and privileges in the society. She spoke in a time when the society was fully under the control of male members. Despite the adverse situation of women in the then society, she did not lose heart to give her criticism against male dominance. She teaches women the values of education and self-confidence to flourish in an independent way in the society, no more to be in the disposal of their male counterparts. The feminist approach she takes to preach her ideas justifies her attitude towards the society as a whole.

#### 4.12 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

**(a) Long Answer Questions:**

- Q1. *Sultana's Dream* is a feminist utopia. Comment.
- Q2. Discuss the symbolism and imagery used by Rokeya Sakhawat in *Sultana's Dream*.
- Q3. Describe in detail *Sultana's Dream* as a science-fiction work.
- Q4. How were men defeated and restricted to *mardana* sections in Ladyland?
- Q5. Analyse the statement that Ladyland is a paradox on the twentieth century social standards.
- Q6. Discuss the importance of women education as highlighted by Rokeya in *Sultana's Dream*.

**(b) Short Answer Questions:**

- Q1. Briefly discuss the post-colonial elements highlighted by Rokeya Sakhawat in *Sultana's Dream*.
- Q2. Why the narrator was ridiculed and called “manly”?
- Q3. How did Sister Sara justify the *mardana* system to the narrator?
- Q4. Briefly discuss the technological advancements made by women scientists in Ladyland.
- Q5. Why men are considered lethargic and useless in Ladyland?
- Q6. How Ladyland was able to escape from foreign invasion?
- Q7. How is *Sultana's Dream* inspired from the real life events of Rokeya Sakawat?
- Q8. Why was the narrator hesitant to walk in the garden?
- Q9. How is Ladyland pure, free from dirt and pollution?
- Q10. Discuss the system practiced in Ladyland for punishing culprits.
- Q11. Why are there only two working hours in Ladyland?

**c. Multiple Choice Questions:**

- Q1. The narrator at the first sight thought Sister Sara to be \_\_\_\_\_



- Q3. d)  
Q4. b)  
Q5. d)  
Q6. d)  
Q7. Their sacred relations  
Q8. No  
Q9. a)

Q10. Keep their women confined in *zenana*

#### 4.13 LET US SUM UP

*Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is one of the best example of an act of female literary subversion which aims to craft an alternative reality fairer to women. Rokeya relies on the literary tool of fantasy to subvert dominant discourses and reach women's true "home," a utopia in which women control their own lives. The home becomes the outside world and, ironically therefore, precisely where women belong. She envisions the nation as Ladyland, a technologically advanced world where men are confined to the *zenana* and women guaranteed complete freedom.

#### 4.14. SUGGESTED READING

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**TORU DUTT : LOVE CAME TO FLORA AS KING  
FOR A FLOWER  
SAROJINI NAIDU: “BANGLE SELLERS”**

**STRUCTURE**

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Objectives
- 5.3 Toru Dutt: “Love Came to Flora Asking For a Flower”
  - 5.3.1 Toru Dutt: Introduction
  - 5.3.2 “Love Came to Flora Asking For a Flower”: Text
  - 5.3.3 “Love Came to Flora Asking For a Flower”: Summary
  - 5.3.4 “Love Came to Flora Asking For a Flower”: Critical Appreciation
  - 5.3.5 “Love Came to Flora Asking For a Flower”: Examination Oriented Questions
- 5.4 Sarojini Naidu: “Bangle Sellers”
  - 5.4.1 Sarojini Naidu: Introduction
  - 5.4.2 “Bangle Sellers”: Text
  - 5.4.3 “Bangle Sellers”: Summary
  - 5.4.4 “Bangle Sellers”: Critical Appreciation
  - 5.4.5 “Bangle Sellers”: Examination Oriented Questions
- 5.5. Multiple Choice Questions

5.6. Answer Key

5.7. Let US Sum Up

5.8. Suggested Reading

## **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

This lesson introduces the learners to Indian women poets writing in English. The lesson starts with Toru Dutt, a pioneer in Indian English writing who in the late nineteenth century introduced romanticism in poetry writing lyrically the myths and legends of Hinduism for world appreciation. The lesson also discusses Sarojini Naidu whose poems deal with the exploration of the Indian rural set up. Her poems present a vivid account of the Indian rural life.

## **5.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint the learner with Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu as poets to highlight the divergent themes prevalent in their writings. The lesson also highlights how women writers offer resistance against oppression through their writings.

## **5.3 TORU DUTT: “LOVE CAME TO FLORA ASKING FOR A FLOWER”**

### **5.3.1 Toru Dutt: Introduction**

Toru Dutt was an Indian poet of the nineteenth century Bengali Renaissance. Toru Dutt was born in her ancestral residence in Rambagan on 4th March, 1856. She was the youngest daughter of Govind Chandra Dutt, a highly placed Indian officer. Her childhood was spent with her elder sister, Aru Dutt, at her father’s garden house in the city of her birth. Her family happened to be one of the few converts to Christianity in Bengal at the time of orthodox Hinduism. Her was a well-known family of Rambagan in North Calcutta. She was only six, when her family was baptized in 1862. Along with her parents and sister Aru, she remained a devout Christian. However, despite her rigorous attachment to her Christian faith, Toru Dutt never alienated herself from the epical and mythological accounts and legends of the Hindu religion. She was, in fact, much inspired by them and their echoes were heard in her literary creations. In fact, she had a poetic sensibility and a romantic yearning, both of which were found

expressed in her poetical works, not voluminous, but impressive enough. Toru Dutt, as one of the first Indian women, went abroad in 1870 and visited France and England. Along with her sister Aru, she mastered the French language in a short time during her stay in France. She became competent enough to write original works in the language. Toru Dutt, like Derozio, did not live up to maturity. She was a little more than twenty one when she died in Calcutta on August 30, 1877. Toru Dutt remains a notable name among the Indian poets in English, particularly for her poetical collection *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* published in 1876. The work brought her to fame, of course posthumously, because she did not live to see and enjoy her recognition as a Bengali poet in English.

### 5.3.2 “Love Came to Flora Asking For a Flower”: Text

*Love came to Flora asking for a flower*  
*‘ That would of flowers be undisputed queen,*  
*‘ The lily and the rose, long, long had been*  
*Rivals for that high honour. Bards of power*  
*Had sung their claims. “The rose can never tower*  
*‘ Like the pale lily with her Juno mien”—*  
*‘ “But is the lily lovelier?” Thus between*  
*Flower factions rang the strife in Psyche’s bower.*  
*‘ Give me a flower delicious as the rose*  
*‘ And stately as the lily in her pride”—*  
*“But of what colour?”—”Rose-red,” Love first chose,*  
*‘ Then prayed,—”No, lily-white,—or, both provide;”*  
*‘ And Flora gave the lotus, “rose-red” dyed,*  
*And “lily-white,”—the queenliest flower that blows.*

### 5.3.3 “Love Came to Flora Asking For a Flower”: Summary

“Love Came to Flora Asking for a Flower” by Toru Dutt presents the idea that the lotus is the most beautiful of all the flowers. “Love Came to Flora Asking for a Flower” begins with a conflict between the rose and the lily flower. The goddess of

love, Aphrodite, approached the flower goddess, Flora to create a flower who would undisputedly be the queenliest of all flowers. Both the lily and the rose, used their “bards of power” in their fight over the queenliest flower title. The rose is described as never reaching the level of the lily flower, because the lily has a strong willed demeanour. In line 8 of the poem, we reach the climax where all the flower groups form cliques in a bitter conflict within the soul’s essence. The goddess Flora is given the task of creating a flower as “delicious as the rose” and “stately as the lily in her pride”. With lines 9-14 come the solution to the problem of finding the queenliest flower of all. Toru has Flora create a flower that is both red as a rose and white as a lily. As a result, Flora creates a flower with the characteristics of a rose and a lily combined and creates the beautiful lotus flower.

#### **5.3.4 “Love Came to Flora Asking For a Flower”: Critical Appreciation**

Why did Toru choose the lotus flower as the queenliest of all flowers is the central concern of the poem. The lotus is a national symbol of India and the Hindu faith. The overall theme of the poem is the pride of India’s culture and Hindu religion. The idea of the Hindu religion being the ultimate religion of the world is the main focus of “Love Came to Flora Asking for a Flower”. Hinduism is polytheistic in nature, and beliefs are practiced through idol worship. The idols can be human, animal or natural, such as the Sun God. Each idol has a form of symbolism, which represents knowledge, wealth, strength, etc. Toru wanted to acknowledge her Indian background for others to understand her love for her native country India. Although she had travelled and received her education abroad during her childhood, she still believed India to be her home. Indian tradition explains that the lotus flower springs not from the earth but from the surface of the water and remains pure and unblemished, despite the impurity of the water. The purity of the lotus expresses the idea of supernatural birth and the appearance of the first created entity from the ancient waters of chaos, thus the lotus is observed as the medium of the Hindu creator Narayana and his second being God Brahma. Toru uses the idea of Greek and Roman goddesses to create a western understanding of Hinduism and its divine faith of the lotus. Toru had an ability to excel in her writing at a young age and is one of the most famous Indo-Anglican poets of India. She mastered “Love Came to Flora Asking for a Flower” in a Petrarchan style

by separating the poem into two divisions, the Octave and the Sestet. Toru was able to present the problem of searching for the queenliest flower in the octave, which was composed of the first eight lines and resolved the issue by creating the lotus in the sestet, which consists of the last six lines. She uses the rose and the lily in the poem to describe the West and the East. The “lily” is a representation of the white race and the “rose” depicting the reddish skin tone of the eastern race, such as her native India. Thus, the poem “Love Came to Flora Asking for a Flower” indicates a fusion between the West and East. Although Toru herself was raised as a Christian with western ideology, she was able to relate herself back to her Eastern roots of India in the sonnet. The lotus is a representation of Toru and her cultural encounters living in Western Europe. She interlaces her Western experience and education in order to create herself as her beautiful native Indian lotus flower.

### **5.3.5 “Love Came to Flora Asking For a Flower”: Examination Oriented Questions**

1. What is the symbolic significance of the lotus in the poem?

Ans. Toru Dutt’s “Love Came to Flora asking for a Flower” is a Petrarchan sonnet that deals with the issue of crowning a flower as the queen. When Love looks for it, the choice cannot be made easily. Poets over the years have highlighted different aspects of the rose and lily, two contenders for the high honour, and in each case it seems that one has a better claim over the other. Two arguments—one each in favour of the rose and lily are presented in the first eight lines (octave) of the poem. As Love’s search for the perfect flower continues, the sestet sees the resolution of the argument. Love wants to have the best possible feature in “the queenliest flower that blooms”. In such situation, it is the lotus which is given to Love which was not only “rose-red dyed” but also “lily-white” and is the most suitable candidate for the position of the queen of flowers.

At a deeper and symbolic level, the poem deals with the operations of psyche, love and flora. Love asks flora for the best solution to have a happy and peaceful life. At first, flora points to what is going on in psyche, the rising and falling of the conflicting thoughts and feelings – pride (lily) and sobriety (rose), purity-love, stateliness-deliciousness, life-death, etc. Love then asks for a solution in which contraries merge

and transform into a harmonious whole. And flora offers ‘the Lotus’ – the symbol of the unified vision as talked of in Indian Philosophy.

Dutt shows her superb mythopoetic imagination. Love and Flora both are related to Greek and Roman myths. In Latin mythology love is Cupid. He loved the beautiful maiden Psyche. Flora in Roman mythology is Goddess of flowers and spring time.

The figures of speech used include personification (Love, Flora, rose, lily); simile (“Rose can never tower like pale lily”, “a flower delicious as the rose”, “stately as the lily”); metaphor (Lotus is considered “queenliest” of flower. The flowers are “rivals”. They think of ‘high honour’. One cannot tower’ the other). The poet has used both dialogues and descriptions. Short dialogues of love show poet’s curiosity and impatient mind. The poet fumbles in the choice of beautiful shown through affirmation and negation. The use of hyphen tells all this :

“But of what colour? – “Rose-Red” love first chose,  
Then prayed, - “No, lily-white, - or, both provide”.

In the ends the poet describes the solution.

As Dr. Mary Ellis Gibson notes, “In Hindu and Buddhist iconography, the lotus connotes purity and spiritual realization arising from the muck of creation. The goddess Lakshmi (associated with wealth, beauty, wisdom) is often depicted on a full-blown lotus. Thus, Toru substitutes her own version of beauty, inspiration, and poetic power for... the lotus, combining the red and the white, exceeds even Juno’s beauty”. It is also said the lotus’ unfolding petals signify the expansion of the soul. Because the lotus is the National Flower of India, Dutt may have intended to inject geopolitical undertones into this “battle” of beauty. Dutt uses her European influences—the poem’s form, language, Roman mythology—in order to establish the Indian and Hindu dominance of the lotus. She chooses not to portray the obvious importance of the lotus to the Hindu gods but rather to show its supremacy to the culture that her readers would assume to be the dominant one.

The Lotus presents a harmonious vision of life. The message is that superiority lies in the simultaneous presence of opposing qualities. The poem has an airy atmosphere, abstract symbolic characters and an idealistic message.

2. Comment upon the title of the poem “Love Came to Flora asking for a Flower.”

Ans. Refer 3.3.4 and the above question’s answer

3. How are the East and the West represented in the poem? Elaborate. How is that East/West dichotomy relevant to Toru’s own life?

Ans. Refer 3.3.4

## **5.4 SAROJINI NAIDU: “THE BANGLE SELLERS”**

### **5.4.1 Sarojini Naidu: Introduction**

Sarojini Naidu was the eldest daughter of Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya and Varada Sundari. She was born in Hyderabad Deccan, on 13<sup>th</sup> Feb., 1879. In the atmosphere of most colourful Hyderabad, Sarojini Chattopadhyaya started her childhood slowly ripening into girlhood of immeasurable poetic promise. Her stormy rise to greatness started when she passed the Madras matriculation at twelve, and composed a 1000-line poem at thirteen. She fell in love at fourteen and married Govindrajulu Naidu at nineteen and had four children while she was twenty-five. She had six sisters and brothers. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, the youngest of them became a renowned Indo-Anglican poet and playwright. Sarojini Naidu’s first major collection of poems *The Golden Threshold* was published in 1905 when she was twenty-six years old. She dedicated the book to Edmund Goose. Her second volume of poems *The Bird of Time* was published in 1912 with introduction of Edmund Goose. Her third publication *The Broken Wing* came out in 1917. *The Feather of Dawn*, a book of poems edited by her daughter Padmaja Naidu was published in 1961, twelve years after the poet’s death. Apart from her literary career, she was the first Indian woman to become the president of the Indian National Congress, the first woman governor of a state in independent India, the principal follower of Mahatma Gandhi and the best-known Indian woman of her time and an international figure of India’s cultural ambassador and spokesperson of the freedom-movement. She was a figure of liberal women of India who talked about women’s education and the unity of India in U.S.A. and England as “a cultural ambassador of east”. She was truly “Bharat Kokila” or “the Nightingale of India” as Gandhiji used to address her and she breathed her last on 2<sup>nd</sup> march 1949.

#### 5.4.2 “The Bangle Sellers”: Text

*Bangle sellers are we who bear  
Our shining loads to the temple fair..  
Who will buy these delicate, bright  
Rainbow-tinted circles of light?  
Lustrous tokens of radiant lives,  
For happy daughters and happy wives.*

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

*Some are like fields of sunlit corn,  
Meet for a bride on her bridal morn,  
Some, like the flame of her marriage fire,  
Or, rich with the hue of her heart’s desire,  
Tinkling, luminous, tender, and clear,  
Like her bridal laughter and bridal tear.  
Some are purple and gold flecked grey  
For she who has journeyed through life midway,  
Whose hands have cherished, whose love has blest,  
And cradled fair sons on her faithful breast,  
And serves her household in fruitful pride,  
And worships the gods at her husband’s side.*

### 5.4.3 “The Bangle Sellers”: Summary

The poem begins with the speakers introducing themselves as bangle sellers who sell their articles at the temple fair. They call out to the people to buy their bangles. These hawkers describe their bangles as delicate, bright, rainbow-tinted circles of light. They advertise by questioning who will buy these bangles for their daughters and wives. It is important to note here that though the speakers of the poem are several, it appears as if there is a single speaker. This is due to the fact that they all have the same purpose and thus seen singularly as a ‘class essence’. Also, the Bangles here are called ‘*lustrous tokens of radiant lives*’. It shows us the Indianness of the poem, where bangles are bought on special occasions and are associated with happiness and prosperity.

The second stanza onward, the speakers talk of the kinds of bangles they have. Some of these bangles are suited for a maiden’s wrist. They are silver and blue in colour like the mountain mist. Some of them are ‘flushed’, that is pink and light red in colour like flower buds growing beside a woodland stream. Still others are green and glowing like the transparent beauty of new born leaves.

In Indian society, bangles have an important cultural and religious place. Different coloured bangles are worn by women during different stages of life. Blue, silver, and green are generally worn by young maidens. It is interesting to note that the poet here uses the words ‘flushed like the buds that dream.’ The word ‘buds’ here is suggestive of chastity. ‘Buds that dreams’ symbolizes young girls dreaming of marriage. In this stanza, the poet presents the stage of youth in a woman’s life.

In the third stanza, the bangle sellers say that some of their bangles are yellow like ‘fields of sunlit corn’. Bangles of this colour are perfect for a bride on her bridal morn. Some of the bangles they have are bright red. They represent the flame of a newly turned bride’s marriage fire, that is, the passion of her newly made relation. The red bangles also stand for her heart’s desire. The bangles are ‘tinkling, luminous, tender and clear’. They express both her joy of starting a new life with her husband and the sorrow of leaving her parents behind. What we find striking is the use of the words ‘bridal laughter and bridal tears.’ These words convey the whole of a woman’s

transition in life from a maiden to a wife and all the emotions attached with it in a single line. This stanza marks the transition of life from a maiden to a wife.

In the final stanza of the poem “*Bangle Sellers*”, the speakers continue to advertise their bangles. They shout that some of their bangles are purple and gold flecked grey. These are suited for a middle-aged woman who has ‘journeyed through life’. They are for her who has raised her children well, and has remained faithful to her husband and family. These bangles are, they say, perfect for she who has maintained her household with pride and ‘worships the gods at her husband’s side’. In this stanza, the poetess writes down what she perceives as the qualities of a good wife. There is a reference to the word ‘sons’ used to mean offspring. While it could be a happy coincidence, it could also suggest the ingrained attitude of male preference in the society of Sarojini Naidu’s times.

#### **5.4.4 “The Bangle Sellers”: Critical Appreciation**

Written by the prominent Indian poetess and politician Sarojini Naidu, “*Bangle Sellers*” is a poem exploring the life of Indian women, the Indian culture and traditions revolving around women. In most of her poems, Sarojini Naidu writes on the theme of Indian culture and people. Her poems are focused on Indian settings and this poem is no exception. In its Indianness, the poem resembles another poem of hers, *In the Bazaars of Hyderabad*. The poem revolves around bangles, which is an important ornament for ‘embellishment’ of women in Indian Society. In the poem, the bangle sellers are at the temple fair and they shout out to the people passing by to have a look at their bangles. They urge them to buy bangles for their daughters and wives. The poem “Bangle Sellers” is a celebration of the female life. It shows us the various stages of a woman’s life and attempts to represent the Indian culture and the role of bangle sellers in the traditional set up.

“Bangle Sellers” is a poem describing the life of Indian women, the customs and traditions they partake in. The poem uses the theme of bangles, an important ornament for Indian women to embellish themselves with. The setting of the poem is at a temple fair where the bangle sellers call out to people to have a look at their bangles and buy them for their daughters and wives. The Bangle sellers are introduced at the start of the poem. They are present at the temple fair to make a trade for their

bangles. These peddlers enumerate the qualities of their product by using adjectives like *delicate, bright, rainbow-tinted circles of light*. They urge the onlookers to buy them for their daughters and wives. The sellers are represented in one voice to emphasize that they all have the same goal and purpose. The words '*lustrous tokens of radiant lives*' give a peek into the Indian culture and the significance that bangles are associated with happiness and prosperity. The second stanza showcases different kinds of bangles the sellers have. Some of these bangles are for young unmarried maiden's wrist. They are coloured silver and blue resembling the mountain mist. Others are pink and light red in colour akin to tender flower buds blossoming near a woodland stream. There are also some green coloured bangles, glowing fresh and pure like new-born leaves. This represents the fact that in Indian society, different coloured bangles are worn by women during different phases of their life. The complete stanza depicts the youthful stage in a woman's life. Now the sellers point out that the bangles are coloured like '*fields of sunlit corn*'. They are fit for a grown woman on her bridal morning. Other bangles are bright red just like the flame of the marriage fire (Hindu bridal ceremony). The red bangles indicate her heart's desire and passion for her new life as a bride and wife. They are described as '*tinkling, luminous, tender and clear*'. These bangles compare the marriage flame to a bride's deepest desires. The usage of '*bridal laughter and bridal tears*' represents both the excitement of a new beginning as a wife and the grief of separation from the parents and home. It points to the transition that a woman makes from a maiden / daughter to a wife. In the final stanza, the Bangle Sellers talk about bangles that are purple and gold-flecked grey. These are perfect for middle-aged women who have '*journeyed through life*' and raised their children and family. These women have fulfilled their household duties with pride and commitment and showed devotion to their God with sincere prayers alongside their husbands. The poet extols the qualities of a good wife and mother. The use of word '*sons*' in place of '*children*' may also be a satirical reminder of the accepted preference for a male child in Indian society at that time and age. The entire poem is a tribute to Indian women and their beauty and grace. It is a celebration of their femininity or female form. It threads various stages of a woman's life into the cultural wealth of India. It also acknowledges the part of bangle sellers in the customs and traditions of India.

The entire poem has a structure where each stanza focuses on a particular theme. The first stanza depicts the merchants touting at the temple fair to attract the attention of the people passing by. The consequent stanzas focus on bangles of various colours the seller have for women of all different ages. The poem has a simple rhyme scheme of aabbcc for each stanza. With mostly octasyllabic lines the poem has no distinctive metre, but one has an apprehension of the same due to the use of easy language and a general fluidity of words. Use of clever similes has made it a beauty.

#### 5.4.5 “Bangle Sellers”: Examination Oriented Questions

1. Give a critical appreciation of the poem “The Bangle Sellers.”

Ans. Refer 5.4.4

2. How does Sarojini Naidu depict Indian ethos in the “The Bangle Sellers”?

Ans. Refer 5.4.4

3. How do the bangles in “The Bangle Sellers” symbolically represent a traditional Indian woman’s life? Discuss.

Ans. In her poem “*The Bangle Sellers*” the poet Sarojini Naidu has expressed her conception of Indian women in a traditional social set up. She has presented three stages of a woman’s life to show the changes in the life of a woman with regard to the colour of her bangles.

In the second stanza she talks about the maiden, an unmarried girl. A maiden wears silver and blue coloured bangles like ‘mountain mist’, sometimes pink and light red bangles like the ‘flushed buds’ and sometimes her bangles are brightly glowing. She is ‘flushed like the buds that dream’ indicating her chastity and her dreaming about marriage. Colours like silver and blue symbolise the natural connections between colours of bangles and nature of a girl. Even the pink colour like that of buds suits them. As buds are carefree and dreaming it means that girls are also carefree. They are like the tender leaves which enhance the beauty of nature.

The next stanza of the poem is about her transition from a maiden to a wife. It’s her ‘bridal morn’ with ‘bridal laughter and bridal tear’. In this stage, the yellow bangles like ‘fields of sunlit corn’ and red bangles like ‘the flame of her marriage fire’ are most suitable for her. This stage of a woman’s life represents the passion of a

newly made relation. 'Bridal laughter and bridal tear' expresses all the emotions attached with this transition in a girl's life. Yellow colour symbolises the fields of sunlit corn. The red shows the heart's desire and the fire. They have a mixed feeling, that is, they are happy because they are starting a new life and are sad because they are leaving their home.

Finally, it is the middle aged woman 'who has journeyed through life midway'. She wears bangles that are 'purple and gold flecked grey'. She has reared her children with love and care. All she is concerned with now is her household, her family. She serves those with pride, 'worships the gods' together with her husband and continues to live a happy life. She wears purple and grey coloured bangles. Purple symbolises success whereas grey colour depicts maturity. She is happy because she has completed her job of serving children and husband and is proud of her life.

### 5.5 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS:

1. Toru Dutt was a \_\_\_\_\_ Indian poet.
  - a. Bengali
  - b. Telgu
  - c. Marathi
  - d. None of the above
2. Toru Dutt wrote in English and \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. German
  - b. French
  - c. Spanish
  - d. None of the above
3. *Bianca* by Toru Dutt is a \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Collection of poetry
  - b. Novel
  - c. Autobiography
  - d. None of the above
4. Toru Dutt died at the age of \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. 84
  - b. 32
  - c. 21
  - d. None of the above
5. "In the Bazaars of Hyderabad" is written by \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Toru Dutt
  - b. Sarojini Naidu
  - c. Kamala Das
  - d. None of the above

6. “Some are like fields of sunlit corn,  
Meet for a bride on her bridal morn,  
Some, like the flame of her marriage fire,  
Or, rich with the hue of her heart’s desire,  
Tinkling, luminous, tender, and clear,  
Like her bridal laughter and bridal tear”  
These lines are from the poem \_\_\_\_\_
- a. “The Bangle Sellers”
  - b. “The Female of the Species”
  - c. “After Eight Years of Marriage”
  - d. None of the above

### **5.6 ANSWER KEY**

1. a; 2. b; 3. b; 4. c; 5. b; 6. a

### **5.7 LET US SUM UP**

Toru Dutt’s most poems have an Indian theme and an Indian background. Through the poem “Love Came to Flora Asking For a Flower” she wants to acknowledge her Indian background for others to understand her love for India. The colours of the flowers call to mind the privileged position Europeans give to people on skin colour. Dutt through this poem unsettles that ideology. The Nightingale of India, Sarojini Naidu portrays a vivid picture of common Indian life in her poem “The Bangle Sellers”. She deals with the life of bangle sellers in her poem “The Bangle Sellers” initially. But later on, she becomes more concerned in celebrating the life and actions of a woman’s life in totality using the trope of bangle sellers as a background.

### **5.8 SUGGESTED READING**

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**GAURI DESHPANDE: “THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES”**  
**MAMTA KALIA: “AFTER EIGHT YEARS OF MARRIAGE”**

**STRUCTURE**

- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Objectives
- 6.3 Gauri Deshpande: “The Female of the Species”
  - 6.3.1 Gauri Deshpande: Introduction
  - 6.3.2 “The Female of the Species”: Text
  - 6.3.3 “The Female of the Species”: Summary
  - 6.3.4 “The Female of the Species”: Critical Appreciation
  - 6.4.5 “The Female of the Species”: Examination Oriented Questions
- 6.4 Mamta Kalia: “After Eight Years of Marriage”
  - 6.4.1 Mamta Kalia: Introduction
  - 6.4.2 “After Eight Years of Marriage”: Text
  - 6.4.3 “After Eight Years of Marriage”: Summary
  - 6.4.4 “After Eight Years of Marriage”: Critical Analysis
  - 6.4.5 “After Eight Years of Marriage”: Examination Oriented Questions
- 6.5 Multiple Choice Questions
- 6.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.7 Suggested Reading

## **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

The lesson deals with Gauri Deshpande, whose poems deal with the feminine sensibility. In her writings she exhibits the various issues which women face in their day-to-day life. The lesson also dwells upon the poetry of Mamta Kalia whose poetry gives a bold expression to the women whose voices have been traditionally subjugated. Her writing is marked with rebelliousness which delineates the various feminist issues. In an autobiographical manner Meena Alexander's poetry touches upon the various aspects of a migrant woman's life.

## **6.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint the learners with Indian female poets Gauri Deshpande and Mamta Kalia and their works. The poets reveal in their poetry the loneliness, despair and seclusion women suffer in their lives.

## **6.3 GAURI DESHPANDE: “THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES”**

### **6.3.1 Gauri Deshpande: Introduction**

Gauri Deshpande (11 Feb. 1942 - 1 Mar. 2003) was a novelist, short story writer and poet. She was born in Pune to Irawati and Dinkar Karve and was the granddaughter of Dhondo Keshav Karve. She had two siblings—an older brother and sister. After completing her schooling in Ahilyadevi School, she went to the Fergusson College to receive M.A. in English Literature. Later, she went on to receive Ph.D. in English Literature from Savitribai Phule Pune University under the guidance of S. Nagarajan. Deshpande had two daughters with her first husband; and one daughter with her second husband. She had three grandsons and one granddaughter. She split her time between Pune, Vinchurni, and various places around the world where her husband was posted. She also taught at the Department of English at Fergusson College and was later a professor at the Department of English at Savitribai Phule Pune University.

Gauri Deshpande wrote in both Marathi and English. Her works include short stories and articles. As a writer she created a space for herself in the literary world by writing in a style of her own. Although she is a renowned writer of the Marathi language,

she had never planned to write in Marathi. It was only after the death of Irawati Karve in 1970 that Gauri wrote an article in memory of her in a newspaper. This article was well received and this opened the doors of Marathi literature for her. She left a mark on the Marathi literature world with her short story and novels having themes centred upon the upper middle class cosmopolitan women. Apart from that she translated ten volumes of *Arabian Nights* written by Sir Richard Burton in Marathi which were published in 1976-77. She translated the Marathi books written by Sunita Deshpande “Ahe Manohar Tari” into English as “And Pine for What is Not” and Avinash Dharmadhikari’s “Aswastha Dashkachi Diary” in English as “Diary of a Decade of Agony”. Her “Ek Pan Galavaya” is a collection of three short stories. “Turungatil Patre” is a story of an urban and sensitive young woman who is trying to comprehend her relationships to men in her life. The second story “Madhya Latapatita” is again a story of a happily married woman in that anxious passing phase of approaching middle age. She is unsure of the meaning and purpose of her married life. She leaves her husband, with whom she is living in a foreign country, and returns to Mumbai to reassess the meaning she was seeking. The last story in the collection “Ek Pan Galavaya”, is about Radha, a woman past her middle age who has lost her husband recently.

### **6.3.2 “The Female of the Species”:** Text

*Sometimes you want to talk  
about love and despair  
and the ungratefulness of children  
A man is no use whatever then.  
You want then your mother  
or your sister  
or the girl with whom you went to through the school,  
and your first love, and her-  
first child- a girl-  
and your second.  
You sit with them and talk.*

*She sews and you sit and sip  
and speak of the rate of rice  
and the price of tea  
and the scarcity of cheese.  
You know both that you've spoken  
of love, despair and ungratefulness of children.*

### **6.4.3 “The Female of the Species”: Summary**

The poem's title belies the informality of expression that follows. The title in itself makes one conscious of the aspect of the female as the other and also about the fact that Deshpande was fond of Darwin's work on the origin of species. The term 'species' in itself makes one wonder at the exclusiveness it represents as how many of us would have said 'the male of the species' for the masculine is taken as the norm and the female as the aberration of nature.

From Gauri's view, when a woman needs to have a heart to heart talk on love and despair or about children, talking to a man has no value. The words 'love and despair' make one wonder at the nature of these feelings. It is a common belief that no matter how much a mother has to tolerate, she is fated to love her children and so, perhaps in context of their perceived ungratefulness the feeling of despair manifests itself.

The poet talks directly to the reader and the 'you' rings clear as if acknowledging a shared experience with assurance. When a woman sits down to unburden herself she needs women to help her like her mother or sister or her best friend. This is an all female world. You (if you are the woman) ask your first love, that is your girl child and your friend's first child, a girl, to attend this ceremony too. Interestingly, she deliberately underlines the fact that her friend's first child is a girl.

And all these women do is sit and talk while they drink tea. You have a completely closeted world where one woman talks while her friend sews. The women talk of the cost of provisions for they are the ones who manage the house, they are the invisible accountants. The ladies do not talk of the fact that their children don't seem to be grateful for their love – instead they speak of the prices of tea. They talk of

basic necessities and how they juggle them but buried within are given up dreams and ambitions that have never been given a voice.

Then they move on to speak of the scarcity of cheese which can imply the sacrifices they have made to give their children a better future. Sacrifices their children will not understand. And though they have not really spoken to each other of the pain they feel at such behaviour, this talk in itself is a means of silent communication. They each know what the other means for they all share this feeling and so in the end there is a sort of catharsis as each feels unburdened.

These women are not career women but housewives who may or may not have once thought of earning their bread too. However, it seems that managing the house and the rations is something that is in the nature of a woman just as these little talks are. They have managed their affairs perfectly but at the end of the day as mothers they hanker for some love or acknowledgement of the care they have bestowed. Such women can be found anywhere across India, chatting with their saris tucked as they make a vociferous group of chattering women who seem happy and content but within their hearts hold secret desires which were stifled or sacrificed a long time ago.

#### **6.3.4 “The Female of the Species”: Critical Appreciation**

The central theme of the poem “The Female of the Species” is the existential predicament of woman as an individual and stresses the great yearning of the woman to be understood by her male partner. Woman, the embodiment of love, without any expectations gives happiness to her family members but her sufferings are unknown and unheard. She is symbolic of loneliness of a woman – a wife and a mother – a loneliness conditioned by family and society.

“The Female of the Species” provides a feminist perspective on women’s lives, where they beset loneliness and frustration. Gauri Deshpande’s exploration of love, despair and ungratefulness of children in the poem is splendid. In this poem, Gauri Deshpande conveys the feeling of a woman to another woman. She is symbolic of loneliness of a woman – a wife and a mother – a loneliness conditioned by family and society. Mother is fated to love her children. To unburden herself she needs women to share her experience with women. “Sometimes talk of love...ungratefulness of

children.” For the sake of love a mother sacrifices a lot in her life. But when she becomes old she is not loved by her family member especially by children and husband for whom she sacrificed her life and her likes.

She never expresses it directly because it may hurt them. Women, the homemakers discussed the price of necessary needs to exist. Their existential predicament, their talent to make both ends meet and their sacrifice are shown through this poem, “The Female of the Species”. Just to exist on the commercial world, a woman sacrifices a lot. Her need of outlet to express her feelings is conveyed significantly in this poem. Women discussed about the “rate of rice and price of tea” and the scarcity of cheese. Many people are in search of money and the love for the fellow being is given less importance. In the economic and busy life people hardly find time to spend with the parents and siblings. The poem is a plea to take care of parents and spend some time in talking with the parents in the busy world and not to send their parents to old age home. Firstly, the woman wants her mother who knows about her and who cares for her in the family. Secondly, she wants her sister who has shared everything with her from her birth and from whom she learnt sharing in her childhood. Still she needs the company of her sister. Next she speaks to her school friend because a friend in need is a friend indeed. Without any expectation true school friend help each other. Her helping nature is developed by her school friend. She considers her first child especially, the girl child to share with her and on whom she showers her love. She thinks of her school friend. She wants to accompany her friends and relatives. Man, the breadwinner of the family hardly finds time for her feelings. He is deaf and dumb to her feelings. After experience she decides that there is no use to speak with him. Certain things a woman cannot share with man. Women do not complain about their family members directly. She never reveals her sorrow and suffering as it may hurt her family members. She knows only how to make others happy. If she expresses the ungratefulness of children it would damage the image of their children. So they cannot share. Due to unavoidable circumstances all are busy in this commercial world. After her daily routine she needs the company to share her feelings. Nobody is there to share her feelings. Grown-up pride cannot hide the need to belong. Her need of people to talk, share and listen is not fulfilled. The cost of living is more but the source of earning is less. But she has to manage life. Woman, the home maker manages her

family with meagre income. She finds happiness in feeding others. She is the caretaker of the family but nobody is there to take care of her. She did not speak about her love and despair and ungratefulness of children. She could not express what she has actually planned to discuss. Keats says, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter”. Like Keats’ unheard melodies are sweeter, women’s untold miseries are endless. Though they just discussed about the price of tea and rice their untold miseries are endless.

### **6.3.5 “The Female of the Species”: Examination Oriented Questions**

1. How does “The Female of the Species” reflect feminine sensibility?
2. Comment upon the theme of loneliness and despair in “The Female of the Species.”
3. The poem lays emphasis on women’s bonding with one another. Elaborate.

## **6.4 MAMTA KALIA: “AFTER EIGHT YEARS OF MARRIAGE”**

### **6.4.1 Mamta Kalia: Introduction**

Mamta Kalia was born in 1940 in Mathura. Both her father and her uncle, who studied at St. John’s College, Agra, had a passion for literature and both specialized in English and Hindi Literature. Mamta Kalia completed her M.A. in English Literature from Delhi University in 1963 and later took up lectureship at SNTD Women’s University in Mumbai. Since 1973, she headed a degree college in Allahabad before retiring in 2001. She married Ravindra Kalia, whom she had met at a seminar in Chandigarh and the couple have two sons. As revealed in an interview with Eunice De Souza, it was her father who impelled her to read a medley of writers, ranging from the British, American and Russian to the Indian. Her literary acquaintance includes the confessionals such as Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das. A bilingual writer, Mamta Kalia writes in both English and Hindi. She has published two volumes of poetry in English: *Tribute to Papa and other Poems* (1970) and *Poems ’78* (1978). In Hindi she has written five novels, seven short story collections, two one-act play collections, four novelettes for children, and has edited three works. She has won six awards for

her writing in Hindi. She is best-known for her works in Hindi and English including *Beghar*, *Janch Abhi Jaari Hai*, *Nirmohi*, and *Bolne Wali Aurat*.

In the year 2017 she was honoured with the esteemed literary award Vyas Samman for her pioneering novel *Dukkham Sukkham*. *Dukkham Sukkham*, published in 2009 is a saga of a lower middle-class family's three generations. The literary work focuses on the transition in relations and situations of our society. She has received prestigious awards including 'Yashpal Katha Samman', 'Ram Manohar Lohia Samman', and 'Sahitya Bhushan Samman'.

#### **6.4.2 “After Eight Years of Marriage”:** Text

*After eight years of marriage  
The first time I visited my parents,  
They asked, “Are you happy, tell us”.  
It was an absurd question  
And I should have laughed at it  
Instead, I cried,  
And in between sobs, nodded yes.  
I wanted to tell them  
That I was happy on Tuesday  
I was unhappy on Wednesday.  
I was happy one day at 8 o'clock  
I was most unhappy by 8.15.  
I wanted to tell them how one day  
We all ate a watermelon and laughed.  
I wanted to tell them how I wept in bed all night once  
And struggled hard from hurting myself.  
That it wasn't easy to be happy in a family of twelve,  
But they were looking at my two sons,*

*Hopping around like young goats.  
Their wrinkled hands, beaten faces and grey eyelashes  
Were all too much too real.  
SO I swallowed everything,  
And smiled a smile of great content.*

### **6.4.3 “After Eight Years of Marriage”: Summary**

Written in a confessional tone, Mamta Kalia recounts the time when she meets her parents after eight years of her marriage. Mamta Kalia narrates that as she meets her parents for the first time after eight years of her marriage, the first question that her parents ask is about her happiness. They ask her if she is happy in her marital life. To Mamta Kalia it seemed an absurd question and after hearing it, as the agonies and frustrations of her married life come to the surface, she begins to sob. However, not wanting to narrate the plight of her marriage to her parents, amidst the sobs, she affirms that yes, she is happy in her married life. Later in her mind, Mamta Kalia recounts how she wishes to tell her parents about the true state of her marriage. She wants to tell them all the peculiarities of her married life, which were troubling her. She wanted to tell them that no doubt, sometimes she felt happiness, but at other times, she was engulfed by a feeling of sadness. She also wants to narrate the little things which she does with her family. She further states that she wants to tell her parents about the agonies she faces in her marriage, which lead to her weeping in her bed all night. She is further distressed by the fact that she has to live in a large family consisting of twelve people. Living in such a large family makes things difficult for her. But Mamta Kalia soon notices that her parents are much more interested in her sons, and after enquiring about the state of her marriage, they do not pay much attention to her, and all their attention is drifted towards her two sons. At this time only, Mamta Kalia comes to acknowledge the element of old age in her parents. She notices their wrinkled hands, tired faces, and grey eyelashes, which emphasised their old age. At this point, after seeing her parents, like every other self-sacrificing woman, grown up and raised in the Indian ethos, she decides to swallow her grief, and she smiles as if she is highly satisfied with the kind of life she is living.

#### 6.4.4 “After Eight Years of Marriage”: Critical Analysis

In her poem “After Eight Years of Marriage” Mamta Kalia shows us what happens after eight years of marriage. Mamta Kalia is always behind every middle class woman. She very well projects herself through her characters. She usually takes a light theme to depict the mental agony of middle class women. In the poem “After Eight Years of Marriage”, she writes about a woman’s compulsions. She is not at all satisfied with her marriage and in a large family of the in-laws her future dreams are shattered. When she visited her parents for the first time after eight years of marriage, they asked her whether she was happy, which she thought to be an absurd question, but like an accommodating Indian wife ‘swallowed everything/and shielded a smile of great content’. She describes her personal suffering and believes that traditional large joint family causes trouble which she can never forget: “That I was happy on Tuesday I was unhappy on Wednesday I was happy one day at 8 o’ clock I was most unhappy by 8.15... And struggled hard hurting myself’ ... I swallowed everything And smiled a smile of great content.”

After marriage, women are compelled to live a life of double-standards. Kalia observes how a woman lives a life of hypocrisy for when her parents inquire about her married life, she gives a ‘smile of great content’ as she doesn’t want to hurt her parents by narrating the miseries of living in a joint family. The poem puts it poignantly: “I want to tell them how I wept in bed all night once/ And struggled hard from hurting myself./ That it was not easy to be happy in a family of twelve/... I swallowed everything /And smiled a smile of great content.” So like an ‘obedient’ and ‘accommodating’ Indian wife she ‘swallows’ everything. To ask such a question to a married woman in Indian society is absurd “I should have laughed at it”, she says, because everybody witnesses the tragic predicament of women after being married. “Instead I cried/ and in between sobs, nodded yes.” A woman’s life gets complicated in a patriarchal society as she has to maintain her smile while her heart sobs.

The poem “After Eight Years of Marriage” vividly captures the woman’s unhappiness and dissatisfaction within the context of marriage. A married woman is expected to adapt to so many changes within so short a period of time that there goes on a veritable emotional roller-coaster ride in her life. Mamta Kalia recalls in the poem how her parents inquired of her marital life in her husband’s home when she

visited them for the first time after eight years. The mere fact that she could not manage to meet her parents for eight years clearly brings out the restrictions imposed to even meet her parents at her husband's place. And the question 'Are you happy, tell us', which is an ironical echo of W.H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen", actually brings out all the repressed feelings and agonies which she wants to pour out and which would be cathartic. But soon she checks herself as this emotional outburst would only cause anxiety to her parents: "Women learn to swallow all things and yet smile like contented beings." (Saxena 82). Thus, Mamta Kalia never says a word for she knows that it would upset her old parents. Moreover, the proof of her happy marital existence – her sons – was hopping around like young goats. This is a carping criticism of the perception of marriage in India, where the sign of a successful marriage is the birth of children and not emotional companionship between the partners. Therefore, she camouflages her real feelings. Mamta Kalia, in the poem, shows how her entire life has turned out to be one based on pretension – pretending to be caring and affectionate to her husband's relatives, pretending to be enjoying a satisfying relationship with her husband, pretending to be leading a happy, contented married life to her parents and pretending that all this did not matter to herself. Thereby, she becomes the sacrificial goat in the bargain of marriage.

#### **6.4.5 "After Eight Years of Marriage": Examination Oriented Questions**

1. How does "After Eight Years of Marriage" narrate the oppression marking a married woman's life?
2. The poem "After Eight Years of Marriage" depicts the Indian ideals which lead to oppression of the married women. Elaborate.
3. Give a critical appreciation of the poem "After Eight Years of Marriage."
4. Discuss the frustrations which the speaker of the poem encounters as a married Indian woman.

#### **6.5 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS:**

1. Gauri Deshpande was born in \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Maharashtra

- b. Andhra Pradesh
  - c. Haryana
  - d. None of the above
2. "The Female of the Species" is written by \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Irawati
  - b. Dinkar
  - c. Pushpa
  - d. Gauri Deshpande
3. The title of the poem of "The Female of the Species" is inspired from \_\_\_\_\_
- a. *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin
  - b. *Violution* by Frank Ryan
  - c. *Cantor's Dilemma* by Carl Djerassi
  - d. None of the above
4. "After Eight Years of Marriage" is written by \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Mamta Kalia
  - b. Gauri Deshpande
  - c. Toru Dutt
  - d. None of the above
5. *Arabian Nights* is translated in Marathi by \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Gauri Deshpande
  - b. Mamta Kalia
  - c. Toru Dutt
  - d. None of the above

#### **6.4.7. Answer Key**

1. a ; 2. d; 3. a; 4. a; 5. b.

## 6.6. LET US SUM UP

Gauri Deshpande talks about love and relationship in her poems. Isolation and lost love are the recurrent themes in her poem “The Female of the Species”. “The Female of the Species” conveys a kind of feminine feeling and the need deeply felt by the poetess to communicate with the world as a woman. Mamta Kalia’s poetic sensibility is almost exclusively subjective in its response to experience as a beloved and as a serving woman. She depicts oppression of women with greater self-consciousness, a deeper sense of involvement and with a note of protest.

## 6.7. SUGGESTED READING

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**MEENA ALEXANDER**

**STRUCTURE**

- 7.1 Objectives
- 7.2 Meena Alexander: Life and Works
- 7.3 Text of the Poem : Migrant Memory
- 7.4 Analysis of the Poem
- 7.5 Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)
- 7.6 Examination Oriented Questions
- 7.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 7.8 Suggested Reading

**7.1 OBJECTIVES**

The main objective of the lesson is to introduce the learner to Meena Alexander and her poetry. The lesson would further familiarize the learner to Meena Alexander's poem "Migrant Memory".

**7.2 MEENA ALEXANDER: LIFE AND WORKS**

Meena Alexander was born in 1951 in Allahabad, India. She has tackled the questions of exile, race, gender, sexuality, violence, cultural differences, and multiple identities in her poems and novels. She makes use of her various cultural

experiences and memories of the past to cope with the present. Through an articulation of her multicoloured experiences, she provides clue to her complex identity. She lives in an alien space and writing in search of place becomes the voyage of self-discovery for her. She spent her childhood in North India, in Allahabad. Her father had his first posting as a meteorologist there. Still the very regular visits to Kerala connect her deeply to the homeland. Tiruvella and Kozhencheri provide the touch of the native soil of Kerala and her physical, psychological, religious, spiritual, and social roots are anchored there. After early childhood in Allahabad, shifting to Pune and regular visits to Kerala, there came the crossing of borders to Khartoum days as her father got job in newly independent Republic of Sudan. She celebrated the fifth birthday on the Arabian Sea during her first ocean crossing. Since then her life became the story of multiple crossings, spending six months in Kerala and other six months in Khartoum. Kerala remained in her memory with closer affections and enriched her imagination. She started her career as teenager in Khartoum. The two fold processes of protesting against and liberating from the burden of being born in female body and initiation of creative sensibility are started in Khartoum days. The beginning of her writing at the age of ten or eleven caused great anxiety to her mother because the writing life demands expressiveness, which is “quite contrary to the reticence that femininity requires”.

As a result of multiple migrations and settlement in foreign land, the mother tongue Malayalam remained at the oral level only giving her the feel of alienation and ‘lost language’. On the contrary, in Khartoum she learnt English from a Scottish teacher. She is remained caught between the “terror of babble” and the “terror of nonsense” as expressed in the essay ‘Exiled by a Dead Script’ and tried to dissolve the burden of English language by understanding the sound and sense of Arabic and Malayalam. Language becomes crucial matter for the poet, as she knew multiple languages such as Malayalam, Hindi, Tamil, Arabic, English, and French. The violence involved in learning English, the colonizer’s language had a tangible effect on her urge to subvert the linguistic patterns of English language. She experienced the racial set-up as ‘the first non-white child’ at Clergy House School in Khartoum. The experience of colour discrimination was bitter for the child of six years and she poignantly states, “My blackness stuck out like a stiff halo all around me”.

After completing high school education at the age of thirteen, she entered Khartoum University. There she participated in street demonstrations organized by the students to raise voice against Southern Sudanese problem. She had inherited these seeds of rebellion from her nationalist maternal grandparents. She insists that, “It must be possible for all human beings to struggle towards equality and social justice, to live in a world without unnecessary suffering” . On the advice of her examiner at Khartoum University, she joined Nottingham University to pursue her Ph.D. She experienced the burden of colonization and femaleness there. She was blamed for publishing papers outside the area of study, British Romanticism, and modern poetry.

In the last year at Nottingham, she had fallen in love with a Dutch man Maxim, a scholar from Amsterdam. However, she returned to India. Her purpose in returning was to reclaim and preserve her Indian identity as she writes, “(In the) British culture, . . . I always felt that what I really was, was being left out as an Indian woman and also as someone. . . from the third world . . . I couldn’t have survived in England. And not because of anything in other people; I felt that I had to go back to India”. She returned to India in 1974 and joined teaching at Miranda House in Delhi. In 1975, she worked as a CSIR Fellow at Jawaharlal Nehru University and then moved to Hyderabad, first to Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages and then to the University of Hyderabad where she could deal with the questions of poetry. However, the question of English and its belongingness in India stayed with her. During this period, she made many friends including writers, social activists, academics, and feminists. She met her husband David Lelyveld, a Jewish American Historian first in Hyderabad. Within three weeks of their first meeting, they decided to get married and then as a pregnant bride, she made her continental crossing to New York subverting mother’s expectation of an arranged marriage. Spending a year in teaching at Minneosta, she settled in New York with her husband and two children Adam and Svati. She served as a professor at Hunter College and Graduate Centre of the City University of New York. Her experience of being a ‘Unwhite’ in America was reminiscent of her stay in England and results in a kind of psychic trauma out of which she recovered through her own sense of self-affirmation. The experience of racial hatred in ‘You black bitch’ stuns and injures her sense of being

and raises doubt about survival “Where I am? Who am I?” Meena Alexander seems to transgress all boundaries with an ease and a struggle to rise above them. She established herself on several fronts as a child, as a creative writer, as a woman and as an expatriate in America, exploring into the issue of ethnicity. Her perceptions about the self and life have been elaborated by a series of journeys –from Kerala to Khartoum, back to Kerala for the summer break, the Ph.D. study at Nottingham in Britain, and then to US, New York and again back to Bombay and further to Kerala. Within the group of South Asian women struggling with the burden of writing in English, Meena Alexander has established herself as a solid phenomenon by producing substantial work of poetry, prose, and fiction. She has published twelve collections of poetry, two novels, two autobiographical works and her Ph.D. dissertation under the title *The Poetic Self*, two critical books and several articles, research papers and short stories on contemporary issues. Majority of her works are autobiographical and reveal the psychological trauma of multiple migrations. However they reach beyond the personal life and go on to explore the simple human experiences of longing, love, and loss. She began her writing at the age of ten. For her writing is the music of survival. The separation from motherland and her beloved grandfather. Ilya made her to write secretly in order to compensate the loss of people and places. It helped her to restore the lost world. Therefore, she writes in an essay ‘Composing Poetry’, “In composing poetry, I am composing myself” She began writing poetry with Arabic speakers in Khartoum. Her first efforts in French were translated into Arabic for her circle of university friends. They were published in the main newspaper in Khartoum, but she could not read her first publications. The serious effort of writing poetry began in England as it was the period of struggle, exile, alienation, and victimization of racial experience. The *Bird’s Bright Ring* (1976) is a long poem divided into sixteen movements of varying length with final coda of thirteen verses.

The next volume, *I Root My Name* (1977) is a collection of eighteen lyrics of varying lengths on courtship, death, degeneration of the world and various other subjects. The mood of the poem is sad and melancholy which comes out of loss of self, of people and places, of identity and of nation. The loss makes the desire of being rooted very prominent in the poet and it can happen only through verses

because she knew that, “If poetry is the music of survival, place the instrument on which that music is played, the gourd, the strings, the fret” In *Without Place* (1978), Alexander realizes that poetry is place.

Alexander continued writing both poetry and prose after she moved to United States. She published *Stone Roots* in 1980. She reconstitutes her stone roots and nourishes herself through writing the poems that are rooted in the soil and the landscape of a village in South India. The crisis of being homeless compels her to find place in her strong roots of the past. Therefore, Alexander creates the imaginary figure of her female ancestors in *House of a Thousand Doors* (1988). It is Alexander’s first volume of poetry published in America. This is collection of poems and some prose pieces, with a deep sense of memory from childhood spent in Kerala and North Africa, education in England and University career in New York. She sticks to her matriarchal tradition in search of past. She draws upon her political, intellectual, and emotional sources from her two grandmothers, who appear in poem after poem in the collection. It is a rich and comprehensive account of herself and her roots. The collection treats variety of themes including two grandmothers and her attachment to them, writing, houses, childbirth. Some poems are addressed to Jayanta Mahapatra and Dorothy Wordsworth. *The Storm: A Poem in Five Parts* (1989) and *Night Scene, the Garden* (1992) are long autobiographical poems. *The Storm* is interspersed with theme of displacement, dislocation, violence, and ritualized order and woman’s experiences of the world as female and immigrant. The poetic sequence in several voices in *Night Scene, the Garden* muses on the experience of birth of daughter Svati and connects her to the past, her mother, and grandmothers. The father’s memories, fate of several women, the illegal possession of house by a crook, its repossession, and the subsequent aftermath form the major part. However, the most significant theme is a childhood experience in a garden when Alexander felt she could possess the world only by being a poet. Alexander wrote about women and Romanticism in *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley* (1989). Her Ph.D. dissertation developed into: *The Poetic Self Towards a Phenomenology of Romanticism* (1979) gives indication of philosophical strength that shaped both her experimental material and her approach to poetry itself. It also

reflects her highly intellectual awareness of historical and literary continuities from Romanticism to post-symbolist aesthetics.

The study of Romanticism has shaped Alexander's interest and attitudes as Bruce King writes in *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, "She has written about phenomenology and women in Romanticism, her poetry is similarly concerned with the creation of the self especially the feminine self and what it means to be Indian if you live abroad". Before Alexander moved to the US, she had completed a draft of her first novel, *Nampally Road* and published it in 1991. It is significant for her because it is the work that "marks a crossing, a border". Alexander perceives the fact of exiled life where she must redefine, rediscover and restate her and seeks refuge in *Nampally Road*. The novel is written in semi-autobiographical mode. It uses Alexander's own background, first in Kerala, then in North Africa, subsequently in Nottingham, England and finally back in India during the Emergency in 1975. Mira Kannadical is the protagonist of novel identical with the writer herself. She attempts to make sense of her own troubled past and future. It treats the issues of contemporary India such as political corruption, colonial education, police brutality, subjugation of women, and communal strife. Alexander's autobiography *Fault Lines* (1993) explores the deepest and remotest corners of her being while living as a dark skinned and displaced woman. The first person narrative gives comprehensive statement of her selfhood, explains her, and states her position with the pressure of her 'Femaleness' and 'Her un-whiteness'. The issues of identity, ethnicity, fracturing of the self, memories of past, childhood, burden of using colonial language and being born in female body, and racial discrimination have been explored to emphasize the complexity of living in multicultural society.

The Collection *River and Bridge* (1995) is divided into four sections, 'News of the World', 'Mandala', 'Blood Line' and 'San Andreas Fault'. It depicts largely the world corrupted by violence and made sorrowful by an inescapable sense of dislocation. There are also poems about the mother experiencing the birth of child as the birth of another self. *River and Bridge* establishes her as one of the finest contemporary poets and proves her as the most disciplined poet speaking about different cultures, countries, and violent events there. Another autobiographical work *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1996) is about

the shock of new life. It explores the questions of identity, Diaspora, ethnicity, language, femaleness, and community discriminatory practices. *Manhattan Music* (1977) is also autobiographical novel depicting the life of Indian immigrant married to a Jewish American and settled in US with him. In *Nampally Road*, *Manhattan Music* and *Fault Lines* Alexander suggests a path of recovery and healing through female solidarity and friendship.

The poetic collection *Illiterate Heart* (2002) is dedicated to the memory of father. It uses memory as a medium and metaphor to depict the narrative of loss. Act of writing, for the poet becomes an effort to recapture and preserve the past, places and people. Her experience of exile is translated into the intimate exploration of a connection to both India and America. In *Raw Silk* (2004), she has reflected on the theme of the aftermath of 9/11 to grapple with the very public nature of terror and violence that had affected the life in US. It reflects the surrealism of life in the aftermath of 9/11. It also portrays variety of violent incidents in the US and in the world outside its borders. Author of such works on the very contemporary issues has received several honours throughout her career. They are an Altrusa International Award (1973), Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York Research Foundation Awards (1989, 90), McDowell Colony Fellowships (1993, 1998), the New York State Foundation for the Arts Poetry Award (1999), a PEN Open Book Award (2002, for *Illiterate Heart*) and a Residency at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Study and Conference Center (2005). Her memoir *Fault Lines* was chosen as one of publishers weekly Best Book of 1993. She is highly acclaimed poet who tries to make an explicit connection between her own past in the Kerala and distinct but comparable experience of loss felt in the alien country. She writes for survival creating the connections between the legacies of cultural traditions and the burden of racialized identity in the US. Much of her work is concerned with migration and its impact on her subjectivity and with violent events like partition, massacres, carnage, and 9/11. Out of the trauma of multiple migrations, Alexander emerged as a significant voice of diaspora. With many inland and abroad literary influences, she has earned a respectable place among Indian women poets in English. However, the topic of the present study is restricted to the study of Alexander's

poetry only. Since she was an accomplished poet using her multicultural background to its fullest effect, her poems have significant themes.

### **7.3 TEXT OF THE POEM: MIGRANT MEMORY**

#### ***Migrant Memory***

#### ***I***

*I try to remember a desert town,  
Mirages at noon, at dusk a dusty lawn  
Bottles of gin and scotch, a mathematician.  
To whom I spoke of reading Proust all summer long.  
His mistress stood on tiptoe wiping his brow with her pent up silk,  
Her sari, hot green rivaling the neem leaves.  
Watching her, amma whispered in the wind– Be real.  
Take a husband of good stock  
As for love, it's blind.  
Appa's voice low – No dowry.  
You're all you need, Your own precious self.*

#### ***II***

*A lifetime ago grandmother Eli wore gold,  
Stepped off a boat into a paddy field and vanished.  
Ink inches forward in her diary.  
Place absolves us, distances startle,  
Turmeric pounded on stone, crushed fenugreek  
She kept in a jar by her bedside.  
Why, no one knew.  
When the neem starts to flower, we'll use the petals for chutney.  
Gandhi is coming out of jail soon.*

*Two rupees for a new teapot, we need it badly.  
Three for a sack of sugar.  
Fear humps in me—a pregnancy.  
Who will do the embroidery on my little's one's skirt?*

### **III**

*Canyons of dirt crop up in a tree lined garden  
Doorways slide into rubble.  
Where is grandmother now?  
I need a golden ratio for loss.  
Can Fibonacci's theorem ease the hazard of memory?  
Under cloud cover I enter Combray.  
Proust approaches wrapped in a Fortuny robe:  
On his knobbly knees Two peacocks woven in silk  
Sip from a vase set in a field  
Emblazoned with syllables of Sanskrit.  
She leans against his shoulder, my grandmother,  
The nationalist who has burnt her silks.  
She wears finest khadi draped about her heels.  
She follows him into his cork-lined room.  
He finds a dry twig, sets it in a glass.  
Years pass.  
Shreds of green surround the central aureole,  
Shocking pink.  
A haboob blows, shutters explode.  
Grandmother's gold, sunk in time's flood,  
And in the dusty capital*

*Where I spent my early years,  
A boy soldier bathed in his own blood.*

#### **7.4 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM**

To Meena Alexander, the question of home is bound with “a migrant memory and the way that poetry ... permits a dwelling at the edge of the world”. “It has also to do with the kind of shelter that poets can make with words”. Anna Sujatha Mathai writes about the poem “mysteriously taking shape within,” whereby “one becomes the home” the poets affirm in their distinctive manner, the possibility of a return to the “self” and “home,” routed in the unpredictable detours of words and in the labour of poetic composition. Alexander names the creative space as the “zone of radical illiteracy, the curious place beneath the hold of a given syntax, ... a zone to which words do not attach, a realm where syntax flees”. It is a zone that will recognise neither the moorings of place nor the sensuous densities of location. Acutely word-conscious and theory-informed, Alexander writes a kind of poetry that seems to over-ride the rigid divisions between theory and creative writing. Her prose pieces replenish her poems with their critical punch and fervour. She has evolved a “poetics of return” out of her vast repertoire of experience as an immigrant poet and an academic. Her aesthetics springs from her intuitive grasp of the unpredictable and incalculable layers of creativity. The spacelessness and “fiery muteness” of turbulent longings elude the tangible world of words. In her powerful essays—“Poem out of Place-Zone of Radical Illiteracy,” “Lyric in Time of Violence,” “The Poem’s Second Life: Writing and Self- Identity,” and the “Poetics of Dislocation,” Alexander probes into the whole gamut of creative writing with remarkable sensitivity and perspicacity. Her migrant sensitivity lends a sharpness and fragility to her poetic vision of homeland “Poetics of Dislocation” is a meditative pause on the complex issues of “displacement,” meandering into its etymological labyrinth to fasten on the two meanings—“to put out of place,” and “to put out of proper position in relation to contiguous parts.” In fact, all her writing evolves from this creative enquiry into the inextricable bond between the writer and her home / homeland. This search becomes inevitable to Alexander, an immigrant academic ensconced in a place cut away from her Tiruvalla. Places visit her imagination as a palimpsest of names, and

as “images all, suspended in memory, yet bound to my sensual body” . The persistent slippage of a terra firma accounts for a fragmentation of poetic vision— the broken mirror whose fragments have been irretrievably lost. But the poet can tap a rich seam out of the fissures of comprehension. It is precisely the partial nature of the memories and their fragmentation that make them so evocative for the writer. Rushdie calls them “the shards of memory” of “greater resonance” whereby “the mundane acquired numinous qualities” . A spatial-temporal dislocation implies the existence of a location from which rupture has taken place. Quoting L. P. Heartley, Rushdie calls the past, “a foreign country [where] they do things differently there”. To Alexander the “bits and pieces of temporality echoing in [her] inwardness,” are to be “redisposed in a poem” as a shining symbolic space. The provisional nature of all truths and certainties, and the fault lines in comprehending the self and the world become an indispensable part of the human understanding. The broken mirror of poetic vision enables the poet to perceive things partially, yet definitely. She envisions a harmony that underwrites a poetics of dislocation where multiple places are joined together, lit by the desire to “recuperate the past, [figure] forth the future”. Rushdie would call it “some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt” and “create imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind”. According to Alexander, there arises an urgent need for the poet to think space in the new century marked by massive migrations of people, and ceaseless circulation of goods and knowledge (“Poetics of Dislocation” ). To the woman poet, the task of reclaiming the past is more than the creation of “imaginary homelands” because she has to “think space through her blood and bones,” and to “figure out how space allows [her] to, permits language, encodes the poem”. Space also means an inner frame and an internal index of sense, “a blossoming of words, out of flesh”. Her inner world becomes a palimpsest of imagined landscapes and the dwelling of memory, without which she could not make her poems. Realizing the intimate bond between the “self” and “place,” she allows her poetic imagination to flit over names of places, as “they are all unknown to us, all names ...”. The past, comprising her childhood, her grandparents, the garden and the trees, is re-formed into her intimate space / mindscape. To an immigrant writer who is physically alienated from her homeland,

the past becomes her home, “albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time” and her present, foreign. Born of this pain and violence of dislocation is the “poetics of loss,” as well as the emergence of a sensibility enriched by the simultaneity of geography. It involves the possibilities of living “here” in body and elsewhere in mind and imagination.

Journey back and forth in time, Alexander’s poem epitomises a quest wherein the writer plants her self in her early days in Kerala, recounting events from her distant childhood. History, myth and memory interact as she recreates strongly felt images of a childhood in Kerala. Out of this provisional negation of place, where words elude the grasp of poetic imagination, evolves the creative sap. The physical, cultural, and linguistic alienation from her homeland calls for an inordinate sensitivity to the use of English, a colonial language. Allied to this burden of colonial past is the social repercussion on woman writing. The linguistic struggle is a reflection of other struggles between the cultures within the writer and the social influences at work. It entails the translation of emotions, thoughts and the “self,” at the risk of creating ambiguity and of loss.

Alexander never fails to be intrigued and entranced by the tenuous gaps between thought and word, in the silence that fills with meaning. Her childhood fascination for the musty fragrance of her Tiruvalla garden, the sensuous hold of its red soil takes shape into a literary and a poetic concept. Digging deep into the marrow of the soil, and inhaling its rich fragrance becomes a highly sensuous act that is also concrete, tangible and vital. In her memoir, she writes about her grand mother’s marriage, the impact of Gandhi on common people and people struggle to run the household, etc. Fissures and fault lines in life and writing are thus effortlessly intertwined. Memory also implies nostalgia, homesickness that could be remedied by romanticizing the past and aching for what is lost. Nostalgia is also important aspect of diasporic consciousness. By simultaneously distancing and bringing closer the imagined past, nostalgia exiles us from the present and the past is constructed as “Simple, pure, ordered, a shining geography”. In his article ‘Invention, Memory and Place’ Said defines memory as the record of the past incidents that are “manipulated and intervened in for sometimes urgent purpose in the present”. Through making up memories, the diasporic poet continuously tries to catch the dead past

before it fades away completely. It is this making and unmaking of memories that creates a deep sense of attachment to the past places and people by juxtaposing past incidents with present. Ultimately, it results in discursive formation of identity and the self. The memory of the diaspora poet is often fragmented, fractured, and displaced by struggle of life in adopted land, and “memory and its representations touch very significantly upon questions of identity, of nationalisms, of power and authority”. The memories and the past incidents of the migrants life may be different because there is mingling of real memories with the imagined, exaggerated memories and then memory, begins to be “used, misused exploited, rather than something that sits inertly there each person to possess and contain” Diaspora, as a dislocation from homeland, continuously dwells on “homing desire” . It is not just a desire to possess, reconquer the physical or geographical territory, but it is a need for belonging to an identity rooted in the land of origin. Consequently, the dream of returning to the homeland and longing for space becomes the defining feature of the diasporic imaginary. The space implies both geographical and psychic space. Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1969) leads to a general understanding that geographical space is a synthesis of ‘home’ and ‘nonhome’ while ‘self’ and ‘other’ represent the two contradictory aspects of psychic space. The idea of home is associated with a sense of warmth and feeling of oneness with the surroundings. Therefore, the separation from home besieges the immigrant by nostalgia, homesickness, a desire to return to homeland particularly to the ancestral home. The concept of home focuses home as a desirable place associating idea of home to a stable refuge and shelter - a place where one can feel a sense of belonging, a sense of being wanted – a place which offers the possibility of being loved as well as of loving. In fact, the word ‘home’ implies sweetness, comfort, love, friendship, safety, and stability. The expatriate, travelling in the desire of new world often finds himself in the suspended state dangling between the past and the present, memories and the immigrant life, the ancestral home and the new adopted home. The desire to maintain the traditions and culture of the ancestral land and the pull of the new culture change the sensibility of the immigrant and take him to the uncertain world.

## 7.5 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS (MCQs)

1. When did Meena Alexander published the poetry collections *House of a Thousand Doors* ?  
a. 1988   b. 1987   c. 1985   d. 1967
2. In \_\_\_\_\_ she earned her doctorate degree.  
a. 1977   b. 1973   c. 1990   d. 1999
3. In which year she won the Altrusa International Award ?  
a. 1973   b. 1988   c. 1999   d. 1956
4. When did she win Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York Research Foundation Awards ?  
a. 1988   b. 1989   c. 1995   d. 1991
5. When did she get McDowell Colony Fellowships ?  
a. 1977   b. 1988   c. 1998   d. 1993
6. In the year 1999, she got \_\_\_\_\_ for the Arts Poetry Award.  
a. The New York State Foundation   b. The Rockefeller foundation  
c. New York Research Foundation   d. Open book award
7. Meena Alexander won PEN Open Book Award in.  
a. 2001   b. 2002   c. 2003   d. 2004
8. Meena Alexander got a Residency at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Study and Conference Center in.  
a. 2005   b. 2006   c. 2007   d. 2008
9. At the age of \_\_\_\_\_, Meena Alexander entered Khartoum University.  
a. 13   b. 14   c. 15   d. 16
10. Meena Alexander began to write at the age of \_\_\_\_\_ .  
a. 10   b. 11   c. 12   d. 13
11. Meena Alexander celebrated the fifth birthday on \_\_\_\_\_ during her first ocean crossing.

- a. The Arabian sea    b. Indian ocean
  - c. Dubai                      d. Goa
12. Meena Alexander spent her childhood in\_\_\_\_\_ in North India.
- a. Allahabad    b. Haryana    c. Maharashtra    d. Banguluru
13. Meena Alexander has tackled the questions of exile, race, gender, sexuality, violence, cultural differences, and \_\_\_\_\_ in her poems.
- a. Nationality    b. Patriotism    c. Multi identities    d. Subjugation

**Answers**

**1.1988 2. 1973 3. 1973 4.1989, 5. 1993 6. The New York State Foundation 7. 2002, for *Illiterate Heart* 8. 2005 9. 13 10. ten 11. The Arabian Sea 12 .Allahabad 13. Multiple identities**

**7.6 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

- Q1. Give a critical appreciation of the poem “Migrant Memory”
- Q2. Is the poetry of Alexander highly complex and symbolic like T.S. Eliot ? Comment.
- Q3. Place, memory, and language helps in identity formation according to Alexander. Discuss.
- Q4. Explain the thematic aspects of Meena Alexander’s peom “Migrant Memory”.
- Q5. Alexander is an Indian writer whose poetry and fiction reflect her multicultural life experiences among diverse ethnic and religious communities. Elaborate.
- Q6. How has Meena Alexander made use of her various cultural experiences and memories of the past to cope with present?
- Q7. Discuss Alexander as a poet with reference to the poem prescribed in your syllabus.

**7.7 LET US SUM UP**

Critics often have recognized Alexander’s poetry for articulating some of the linguistic dilemmas confronting native writers of formerly British-administered

colonies, noting that her imagery and formal structures, though reminiscent of European Romanticism and Modernism, are inflected by complex Indian rhythms, dense syntax, and South-Asian mythology. Consequently, Alexander has engaged the attention of postcolonial literary scholars. Critics also have read Alexander's impulse to question her identity for signs of emergent feminism, responding particularly to her experiences as a woman in both an occidental and oriental context. "Alexander treats her writing as a search for a homeland, which is less physical than psychological, in particular her poetry, as a means of making sense of her multiple cultural, geographical and psychological positionalities," according to Helen Grice, adding that "it is [Alexander's] very ethnicity, gender, and exilic status that make her the person she is, and that it is partly the fault lines that exist between these identities that define her."

## **7.8 SUGGESTED READING**

Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines* (New Delhi: Penguin Publishers, 1993). All the textual quotations are drawn from this edition of the text.

Uma Parameswaran, "Literature of the Indian Diaspora in Canada, "Common Wealth Literature, Theme and techniques. Ed. P.K. Rajan et al., (Delhi: Ajana, 1993), p.102.

D.K. Pabby, "Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines*: A Study," *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*, Ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001), p.153.

Neerja Chand, "An Aesthetic of Dislocation: Meena Alexander," *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001), p.151.

R. Partha Sarathy, *Rough Passage* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1977). P. 117.

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**MANIJULA PADMANABHAN: *LIGHTS OUT***

**STRUCTURE**

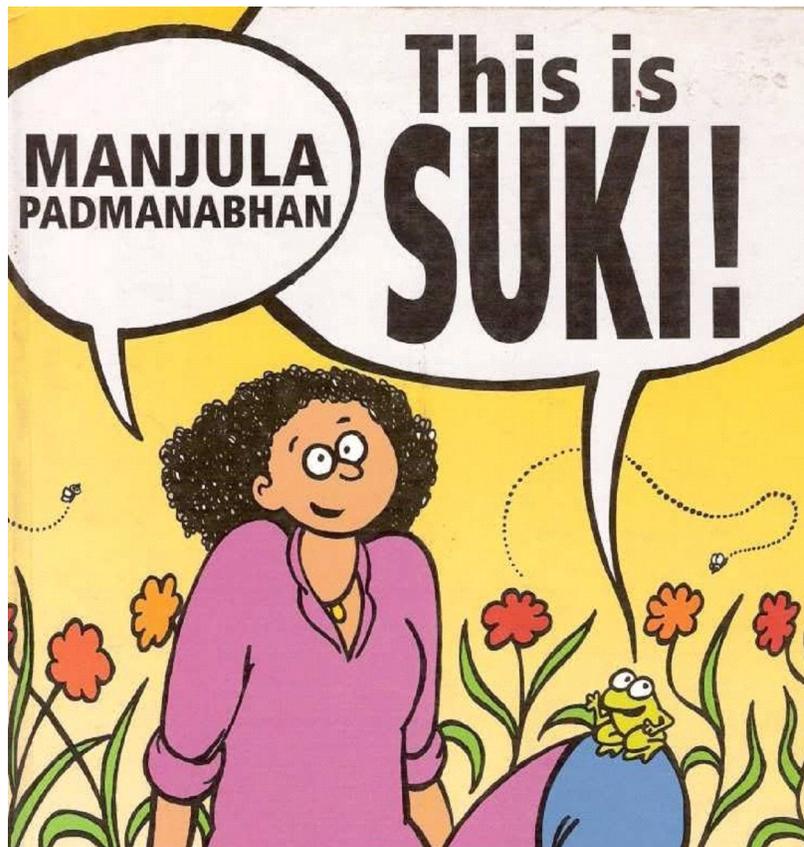
- 8.1. Objectives**
- 8.2. About the Author**
- 8.3. Author's Works**
- 8.4. Manijula Padmanabhan as a Playwright and her plays**
- 8.5. Multiple Choice Questions**
- 8.6. Answer Key**
- 8.7. Short Answer Questions**
- 8.8. Long Answer Questions**
- 8.9. Let Us Sum up**
- 8.10. Suggested Reading**

**8.1 OBJECTIVES:**

Dear learner, the objective of this lesson is to acquaint you with the playwright Manijula Padmanabhan and her works. The lesson provides a short introduction to the author, a brief summary of her works and the subjects she writes about. The lesson also gives you the information about the setting and a brief summary of the play *Lights Out*.

## 8.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Manjula Padmanabhan was born in Delhi in 1953. She went to the boarding school. After college, she decided to be a writer and made a prominent place as a playwright, a cartoonist, journalist, novelist and a children's book author in Indian Media and literary world. Apart from writing newspaper columns she also created comic strips such as Suki, an Indian female comic character.





In the year 1997, she won the Greek Onassis Award for her play *Harvest* which was published in 2003. Apart from this, she has written various important works like *Lights Out!* (1984), *The Artist's Model* (1995), *Sextet* (1996), *Hidden Fires* (2003) and *Escape* (2008). She has also authored a collection of short stories, called *Kleptomania* (2004). Her works focus on social issues mainly the patriarchal society which suppresses women and curbs her movements. Her works include concerns related to women, alienation, rapes, dowry deaths, domestic violence, etc., in the patriarchal discourse.

### 8.3. AUTHOR'S WORKS:

Manjula Padmanabhan is a writer and cartoonist living in New Delhi. She illustrates children's books and her comic strip character, Suki, appeared in *The Sunday Observer* between 1982 and 1986 in Mumbai, then later in a daily strip in *The Pioneer* in New Delhi for six years, ending in late 1997. Her collection of short stories, *Hot Death, Cold Soup* has been published in India, the UK and the Netherlands. She writes a fortnightly column in the *Pioneer. Harvest*, her fifth play, won the Onassis International Cultural Competitions Prize for Theatrical Plays in 1997, in Greece. It was published by *Kali for Women* in India, was performed in Greece (in Greek) in 1999 and as readings in Australia, Canada and USA.

#### a. As playwright

- 1984 - *Lights Out!*
- 1997. *Harvest.*

#### b. As Author and Illustrator

- 2013. *Three Virgins and Other Stories*
- 2015. *Island of Lost Girls.*
- 2011. *I am different! Can you find me?*
- 2008. *Escape.*
- 2005. *Unprincess!*
- 1986. *A Visit to the City Market*
- 2003. *Mouse Attack*

#### c. As Illustrator

- 1979. *Indrani and the enchanted jungle.*
- 1984. *Droopy dragon.*

#### d. Comic Strips

- 2005. *Double talk.*

#### **8.4 ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT AND HER VARIOUS PLAYS**

Drama is a powerful medium in the English literature because of its audiovisual means of expression. M.K. Naik in his article says, "Drama is a composite art in which the written words of the playwright attains complete artistic realization only when it becomes the spoken word of the actor on the stage and through that medium reacts on the mind of the audience. A play in order to communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience thus needs a Real theatre and a live audience". In short, it is a narrative made visible. The origin of Indian drama can be traced back to the Vedic Period and is still popular in Indian society.

Women writers have also played an important role in the development of Indian plays. However, their visibility and contribution was acknowledged only in the 1940s and 50s. It was only in this period that women playwrights came to spotlight. However, it was only in the last three decades of the twentieth century the plays by women became a dominant strain in the literary and cultural life of the nation.

The violence in a woman's life often has no outward signs, like a gash on the body or a bullet in its crevices. It can seem bloodless, often. When theatre is used as a space to deal with violence, from it must emerge words and forms that will cut free woman from this brutality. The stage must become the body transformed into a sign, signifying a thousand meanings, creating a thousand texts.

Manjula Padmanabhan in her plays focuses on female characters and oppression by patriarchy. They deal with the lives of women, their status in society as well as family and their mind set. Her plays expose the piteous condition of women in Indian society.

In her play *Lights Out* (1984), Manjula Padmanabhan takes up the issue of sexual violence on women by patriarchy, gender inequality and makes an appeal for realizing the women's emotions in a world where she hardly finds herself to be free, independent and resistant, and an individual with brain to think. She is seen as dummy, a sexual object and she is forced to to be silent even if she is a victim of gang rape because some perverts it is just the matter of "little sex" ("*Lights Out*" 39). Women often go through the incidents of brushing and touching in public as well as private

space and they are forced not to speak about it to anyone because the society finds fault only in the victim which again motivates the harasser.

*Lights Out* is a play based on the real incident that has taken place in Santa Cruz, Mumbai in 1982. The play is based on an eye-witness account. The characters are fictional but the incident is a truth. In real life, as in the play, a group of ordinary middle-class people chose to stand and watch while a woman was being brutalized in a neighbouring compound. As in the play, in real life too, no one went to the aid of the victim.

Padmanabhan exhibits a world in which women face sexual exploitation. However, they are forced to keep mum. The play is set in sixth floor apartment, in Mumbai which belongs to upper middle class married couple Leela and Bhaskar. They have been hearing sounds of sexual crimes and cries from their neighbouring building. The dramatist explicitly displays the reactions of women and men regarding the sexual assault and an urgent need to look to the issue for the sake of humanity.

*Harvest* (first published in 1997) is an ironic examination of the relations between developing and developed countries. The play is set in the future. She imagines a gruesome pact between the first and third world desperate people who can sell their body parts to wealthy clients in return for food, water, shelter and riches for themselves and their families.

*Harvest* is an ironic examination of the relations between developing and developed countries. The play shows how the “first” world cannibalizes the “third” world to fulfill its own desires. The third world provides the raw material that the first world consumes for its own survival and expansion.

*Harvest* is about an impoverished part of the world where people agree to let their bodies become available for harvest by wealthier Westerners who offer all kinds of luxuries in return. The play is a metaphor for the globalized affects of capitalism on Third World workers. Padmanabhan represents both ends of this equation in a single family in a small apartment in India. As the character Om spirals into fear inspired, in part, by the people who obsess over his health and control his life, his mother gradually sedates herself in the luxuries brought to her by his sacrifice. The person who owns Om, represented by weird holographic apparitions, believes herself to be generous

and helpful to him. Through these, and other characters, the audience is forced to watch magnified versions of the different mercenary parts of themselves. Even Om ends up dishonest, the victim.

The play is set in a Mumbai chawl in the year 2010. In a cramped one room tenement, reside four members: Om Prakash, the tense and jobless clerk, his wife Jaya, who has succumbed to the tense life of privation and insecurity, his old mother, the frustrated, ill-natured and satiric figure and his younger brother Jeetu who works surreptitiously as a gigolo. Om is dismissed from his petty clerical job and hence the family is thrown into economic and emotional disarray. Om and Jaya are only maintaining the semblance of a meaningful marital relationship. Jaya is carrying on a clandestine affair with her brother-in-law Jeetu. Mother's love extends only to the eldest son, Om, the bread-winner. She is also jealous of her daughter-in-law. These four characters are locked in a loveless relationship, claustrophobically confined within the four walls of a one-room apartment.

The play *Harvest*, with an apt title, describes how one such family fall victim to the flesh-market controlled by the Western world. An attempt made herein is to describe how the machine world governs the human world and how the playwright has used the electronic devices turning them into characters.

The play demonstrates that how globalization can be evil because it does not foster the humanity of things in the world. What it drives towards is for the greater benefit of the developed or the First World countries. The economic losses and social dislocation that are being caused to many developing countries by rapid financial and trade liberalization, the growing inequalities of wealth and opportunities arising from globalization; and the perception that environmental, social and cultural problems have been made worse by the workings of the global free-market economy and the soaring degree of attack by elements of terrorism are some of what have characterized globalization today. The play illustrates that developing nations have faced more problems than ever as a result of the phenomenon of globalization.

## **8.5 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS:**

- Q1. Manjula Padmanabhan was born in \_\_\_\_\_
- Mumbai

- b. Delhi
  - c. Karnataka
  - d. Chennai
- Q2. Manjula Padmanabhan has created the comic strip \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Suki
  - b. Meena
  - c. Naina
  - d. Seenu
- Q3. \_\_\_\_\_ is Manjula Padmanabhan's first play
- a. *Harvest*
  - b. *Lights Out*
  - c. *Escape*
  - d. *Sextet*
- Q4. \_\_\_\_\_ is Manjula Padmanabhan's fifth play
- a. *Harvest*
  - b. *Lights Out*
  - c. *Escape*
  - d. *Sextet*
- Q5. \_\_\_\_\_ play is based on the real incident which took place in \_\_\_\_\_
- a. *Lights Out*, Mumbai 1982
  - b. *Harvest*, Delhi 1997
  - c. *Escape*, Russia 1998
  - d. None of the above
- Q6. The play *Lights Out* is set in \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Mumbai
  - b. Delhi

- c. Bihar
- d. Chennai

Q7. The theme of the play *Lights Out* is \_\_\_\_\_

- a. Violence against women
- b. Exploitation of women in patriarchal society
- c. Social Realization
- d. All of the above

Q.8. \_\_\_\_\_ is Manjula Padmanabhan sci-fi play.

- a. *Harvest*
- b. *Lights Out*
- c. *Escape*
- d. *Sextet*

## **8.6 ANSWER KEY**

1.(b); 2 (a); 3 (b); 4 (a); 5 (a); 6 (a); 7 (d); 8 (a)

## **8.7 SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS**

- A. Briefly discuss violence against women in Indian society and its affect on women's lives.
- B. Critically comment women as victims of sexual violence and their silence.
- C. Discuss the setting of the play *Lights Out*.

## **8.8. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS**

- A. Describe Manjula Padmanbhan as an author.
- B. Discuss Manjula Padmanbhan as a playwright.
- C. Discuss the themes and subjects of Manjula Padmanabhan's works with illustrations.

## **8.9 LET US SUM UP**

Manjula Padmanabhan is an established playwright in the Indian media as

well as literary scene. Her plays are based on the issues like identity crisis, alienation, globalization, problems of postmodern society, violence against women, social realization, etc. Her play *Lights Out* focuses on the brutality of rape on women and society's reaction to it.

### **8.10 SUGGESTED READING**

Tandon, Neeru, ed. *Perspectives and Challenges in Indian-English Drama*. Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd., 2006.

Gnanamony, S. Robert. *Literary Polyrythms: New Voices in New Writings in English*. Sarup & Sons, 2005.

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**MANUJULA PADMANABHAN : *LIGHTS OUT***

**STRUCTURE**

- 9.1. Objectives
- 9.2. Introduction
- 9.3. List of the Characters
- 9.4. Detailed Summary and Critical Analysis of the Play *Lights Out*
- 9.5. Multiple Choice Questions
- 9.6. Answer Key
- 9.7. Short Answer Questions
- 9.8. Long Answer Questions
- 9.9. Let Us Sum Up
- 9.10. Suggested Reading

**9.1. OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to introduce the learners to the play *Lights Out*. The lesson provides a detailed summary and critical analysis of the play, helping the learners to analyse the play's various aspects and themes.

**9.2. INTRODUCTION**

*Lights Out* is Manjula Padmanabhan's first play. The play was first performed in 1986 by Sol Theatre Company, at Prithvi Theatre, Bombay. *Lights out* displays

the savagery of gang rape of a slum dweller lady while the upper middle class people gain a voyeuristic pleasure from it. To their utter inhumanity and apathy, they even do not bother to make an attempt to stop it instead they make a tea-table discussion of it.

### **9.3. LIST OF THE CHARACTERS**

1. Frieda—House Maid
2. Bhaskar—Leela's husband
3. Leela—Bhaskar's wife
4. Mohan—Bhaskar's friend
5. Naina—Leela's friend; Surinder's wife
6. Surinder—Naina's husband

### **9.4. DETAILED SUMMARY AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY *LIGHTS OUT***

Leela is worried about the crime that takes place every night in her neighbour's compound. The fear in her is so much that she cannot sleep at night when her husband Bhaskar is away. Bhaskar dismisses her plea of complaining to the police as he cannot get involved and the police would not take necessary action.

Bhaskar tells Leela that they have a guest that night for dinner and she must ignore what she hears. The guest Mohan has already been told by Bhaskar about the screaming next door before he steps in. When he comes, he is interested in knowing more about what happened rather than offering assistance to the victim. This pains Leela deeply as both Bhaskar and Mohan take pleasure in just discussing rather than performing. Both of them consider the happening to be a religious ritual.

Soon Naina, Leela's schoolmate joins the group. Like Leela, she is horrified at the indifferent attitude of the men and upset at the sounds that she hears. When Surinder, Naina's husband enters and witnesses all that is happening, he is exasperated and announces that they better go and kill the troublemakers but takes no action. Thus, no one ventures to help the victim. Suddenly, the screaming comes to an end and the rapists leave the place.

The dramatist has raised issue of sexual violence, silence, social responsibility

and sensitivity which are very relevant in the contemporary times. Through the characters of Mohan and Bhasker an ugly picture of the society emerges which is highly irresponsible, insensitive, cold and unaffected by the pain and sorrow of people around them. There are also people who have the heart to view such spine chilling incidents as gang rape and physical violence and yet remain unaffected and unconcerned. This reflects very well in Bhasker's suggestion to his wife Leela who is perturbed and feeling low because of those agonizing screams that she hears every night:

BHASKER: “. . . not let them disturb you like this. Pretend they are not there”. (8)

Bhasker emerges as a selfish man who finds fun and pleasure in such brutal activity and this becomes evident when he responds to Leela's exclamation:

LEELA: No one could enjoy such awful things!

BHASKER: Except those involved . . . (9)

BHASKER: Baby, you must learn to ignore it now, I insist. (11)

Mohan complements Bhasker in his temperament and perception when instead of sympathizing and empathizing with the victim he becomes excited:

MOHAN (more seriously): I mean, how often can you stand and watch (hurried glance at Bhasker) a crime being committed right in front of you? (15)

These utterances reveal the psyche of the majority of Indian men who derive sensual pleasure even at the sight of such brutal act like gang rape just because it involves a woman and her body. Between the silence and the screams, Manjula Padmanabhan creates the characters like Leela who want it all to stop only because they find it very intrusive:

LEELA: . . . tell the police the goondas must go away and take dirty whore somewhere else. I don't care what they do or who they are, or what they are –I just want them far away, out of my hearing . . . out of my life . . . (44)

Padmanabhan points out that watching a crime taking place and doing nothing is equivalent to committing the crime. She puts this in the mouth of Leela:

LEELA: That we're part of . . . what happens outside . . . That by watching it we are making ourselves responsible. (6)

The mentality of the majority of Indian people who keep waiting for the causality to finally take place and then talk about action is very well reflected in the play through the words of Mohan:

MOHAN: Well, then, unless its murder, I don't think anyone should come between the members of the family. (20)

The men who carry out this heinous act of raping and beating the poor woman have instructed the inhabitants of the nearby buildings to "turn off" their lights at night. Here turning off of lights has symbolical meaning. Turning off the light in one way facilitates for the people so that they can stand and watch while these men exhibit their wrongly interpreted masculinity. The woman being raped represents all women in the community and, therefore, threat and dread is very well portrayed in the persona of Leela. The turning off of the lights is also symbolic in the sense that by turning off the lights the people are closing their eyes to whatever is happening around them.

BHASKER: They've asked us to turn off our lights, after all . . .

LEELA: They wouldn't have done that unless they wanted us to watch!  
(22)

Padmanabhan has also attacked the heinous crimes which people let go and perform in the name of religion. The situation is brought out through the conversation between Leela, Mohan and Bhasker when Bhaskar and Mohan try to convince Leela that it is under some religious ceremony that the four males are inflicting pain on the woman and maybe it is some purification ceremony, hence they must keep out of it:

LEELA: But isn't it wrong to be in pain?

MOHAN: Not if it is in the name of religion look at sadhus? They sit willingly on nails or walk across smouldering coal . . . (26)

The conversation reflects that they are forcibly trying to justify their stance of being watchful bodies that it is a religious activity.

When Leela's friend Naina looks out of the window she immediately points out the activity of the goons outside is rape which Leela had not been able to look out for till that point of time. Bhaskar and Mohan refuse to accept this categorization. It is clear that Bhaskar and Mohan themselves have been enjoying the horrifying spectacle of rape. To stop the women from calling the police they come up with the fantastic explanation that the activity could be a religious ceremony and any attempt to interfere would be construed as intrusion.

Again and again being questioned by Leela and Naina, they associated the incident with superstition and black magic. Mohan terms the process as some kind of "exorcism". Describing the inhuman act in details Mohan explains that from being dragged about on tar and concrete there is blood in her mouth and this explains the gurgling sound of the screaming. And when Bhasker enquires about the source of the energy with which the woman is screaming Mohan's reply astonishes the readers:

MOHAN: They say that the people under a demon's power, even women, have the strength of three big men . . . (38)

Leela and Mohan discuss the need to enter, to interrupt and stop an anti-social activity even if it is taking place in the name and shelter of religion:

LEELA: But even if it's something religious, can't it be stopped? If they are doing something really horrible? (26)

MOHAN: That's the whole point about being a secular nation! No one has the right to decide this is horrible and that is not! (26)

Bhasker says that "Our Constitution guarantees us the freedom to worship as we please . . ." (26). To this Mohan replies, ". . . so long as we don't offend the sensibilities of others" (26). This is again a strong message put across for those people of the society who take undue advantage of the rights and facilities provided by the Indian Constitution for the welfare of its people, they have to unlearn the practice of taking refuge under the umbrella of religion, or secularism to hide or justify their destructive and anti-national and anti-social activities.

Padmanabhan has made use of very crude and visual words in order to convey to the readers the horrifying condition of the woman and the agony that she gets into, during and after her physical exploitation. She also indirectly portrays the sick male

mentality that derives pleasure from a situation where the object of pleasure is wriggling in pain, shouting and crying for help.

NAINA: Three men, holding down one woman, with her legs pulled apart, while the fourth thrusts his — organ— into her! What would you call that— a poetry reading (39)

BHASKER: And they usually perform under the lights, in front of an audience of decent, respectable people? (39)

When Naina finally convinces these men that it is actually a rape then Padmanabhan discloses another face of male hypocrisy. They now try to explain that since the victim is with four men at a time hence she cannot be a decent woman. The men change tracks and say that even if they accept that the incident has sexual overtones it cannot be a rape as the woman being tortured seems to be cheap and probably a whore:

BHASKER: If she's a whore, Leela, then this isn't rape . . . so on what grounds could we call the police?

NAINA: Why? A whore can't be raped? Is that the law? (40)

Again this reveals the dark and hypocritical face of patriarchy that if four men are attacking a woman then it is the woman who is the culprit and not the men. The culprits are not being criticized even once either by Bhasker or by Mohan. Naina succeeds in satirizing and pinching Mohan when she reframes Mohan's own words, that finally according to men, the difference between men and women is that women are more vulnerable to rape.

The social security system is also questioned and criticized when Surinder says that the police will not lift a finger— what do they care if some poor woman is being raped? He says even if they call the police the police officials will come two weeks later, make a little noise and go. The pain also becomes a way of minting money for the media and the various commissions and committees that are formed to inquire details. Mohan, cruel and inconsiderate, goes to the extent to suggest, that by selling the camera shots of this rape incident to the media or newspaper they can make good money:

MOHAN: Hey, come on! Any newspaper! Pictures like these, even the foreign press would snap them up – I'm telling you, we'd make a lot of money — after all, how does anyone see authentic pictures of a gang rape in action. (52)

Silence is another aspect that is prominent in this play. Women's silence in the public sphere can be explained to a certain extent by their powerlessness and subordinate position relative to men. However, it is also a strategy of resistance to the oppressive power. Padmanabhan uses it further as a route to escapism when the world becomes too hard to handle for the women living in it.

In *Lights Out*, the presence of Frieda, the domestic maid, on stage, is only visual and she is not heard at all. All through the play she goes about her work as unobtrusively as possible. Her silence amid other vocal characters highlights her presence on stage effectively. Even when there is a heated debate among the four members, Frieda quietly continues to perform her daily chores. The audience are made to think and guess the reason behind her silence and this keeps them constantly contemplating and trying to find out the reason behind her silence. Frieda's robotic quality can also be treated symbolically where she symbolizes the silence of the Indian people who face crimes and evils like murder, gang rape, bomb blasts, and socio-political problems like—poverty, foeticides, unemployment, etc., but choose to remain silent because they have learnt it with experience that raising their voices would not make much of a difference and in this process they have become accustomed and habituated to the pain.

The sounds that traumatize Leela have no visible effect on Frieda. It raises another question; does she know the source of the sounds? Or whether she has seen and experienced more pain herself in life that has forced her to act like a stone devoid of any feeling or action? Frieda's silence can also be suggestive of her fear of being abused because of her being a woman of lower economic strata. Her coming into the public space to earn a livelihood shows her resolve to lead an independent life despite all odds. She might also be wearing her silence as a cloak against subjugation, or it could just be a means of escapism.

Padmanabhan has used Frieda's silence to convey multiple messages and to

make the audience think. Silence speaks louder than words; this comes true with Naina who exemplifies how silence can be utilized as a useful tool of subversion. Naina comes to Leela's house and her husband Surinder goes to park the car. With Naina, Leela gets the much needed support to fight the male duo and convince them that an intervention on their part is required. Naina is bold, confident and outspoken, confronts Bhaskar and Mohan when they try to dissuade her. But her deportment changes subtly when her husband Surinder overshadows her and Naina suddenly becomes very subdued. The reason for this becomes evident when Surinder's reaction to the rape is observed. Seeing him raging in anger provides the audience with some relief but it is only short lived because his anger does not result or change into effective action.

He plans to attack the culprits with acid or knock them down. Naina who does not want the violence tries to pacify Surinder and tells him to resort to other ways but soon she is rebuked harshly by Surinder who seems to be another male hypocrite who does not feel sorry for insulting and shouting at his wife in public but considers the open show of a woman being raped as his insult. He shouts and asks his wife to shut up. Naina simply keeps quiet in order to avoid further confrontation. As the men are still in a fix as to what means they should resort to, Naina looks out of the window and sees the goons and the rape victim leaving but she does not inform Surinder or the others about it. Her silence works to prevent further violence, just as she had wanted. Naina's silence works as a tool to subvert the hegemony of power.

Silence does not necessarily mean acceptance rather it can be a powerful tool for denial. Bhasker's silence is an example of this; he neither says no to Leela nor responds according to her directions. For days he keeps postponing Leela's entreaties of calling the police despite the traumatic effect on her being apparent. Unable to take the horror of the brutality, when Leela almost becomes psychotic, and starts wailing repeatedly "call the police", it is only then that he responds and tries to contact the police. Being a husband gives him the power to negate his wife's (Leela's) wishes and he uses it to silence her or stop her from taking an alternate or different path from the one chosen by him :

MOHAN: “My! You must’ve seen a lot of rape, Naina, to recognize it at one glance. (173)

But Naina refuses to be bullied and replies—“Three men . . . It can only be rape . . . not poetry reading . . . What? What’s left? (39)

Naina’s ironical words challenge the authority of male hegemony. They negate the derogatory inference in Mohan’s words regarding Naina’s character and thereby subvert control through implication. The irony prods the audience to question the motive behind the men’s arguments. Padmanabhan’s use of irony and humour makes the audience view the situation in a different light because when the characters open dialogues, in tones, which the viewer perceives as untrue, they substitute their own meanings to the statements of the author.

Alienation effect and distancing effect is a tool to enable the audience to analyze the problem being presented rather than becoming emotionally involved in the story of the characters. In a drama, it can be in the form of props, songs, direct interaction by the actors with the audience, etc. A good example of this is— the screams of the rape victim in *Lights Out*. The screams are not so loud as to appear too near which makes inaction unacceptable to the audience nor are they too low that they can be ignored. The ragged, unpleasant screams—“let me go, help me . . .” could easily be understood to be addressed to the audience and hence make them active participants in the theatrical process.

Leela and Naina are the female characters who have at least raised their voice and created ripples in the otherwise unaffected stagnant waters of the society represented by men like Bhasker and Mohan. Though both the female characters still lacked the zeal, power and independence to act without depending too much on their husbands but the change from absolute state of inertia to action, however small in magnitude is a welcome change. Manjula Padmanabhan belongs to that generation of Indian women writers in English who have boldly stepped out of the conventions that define respectability to address issues of gender, woman, her body and its exploitation in a family and social setting.

## 9.5. MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. The play *Lights Out* was first performed in the year \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. 1982
  - b. 1882
  - c. 1986
  - d. 2003
2. \_\_\_\_\_ is the housemaid at Leela and Bhaskar's house in the play *Lights Out*.
  - a. Naina
  - b. Susheela
  - c. Freida
  - d. Madhu
3. Who does not speak any word in the play *Lights Out*?
  - a. Naina
  - b. Susheela
  - c. Freida
  - d. Leela
4. \_\_\_\_\_ is Naina's husband
  - a. Bhaskar
  - b. Mohan
  - c. Surinder
  - d. None of the above
5. Who says to Leela, "Baby, you must learn to ignore it now, I insist"
  - a. Mohan
  - b. Surinder
  - c. Naina
  - d. Bhaskar
6. \_\_\_\_\_ says, "If she's a whore, Leela, then this isn't rape . . . so on what grounds could we call the police?"
  - a. Mohan
  - b. Surinder
  - c. Naina
  - d. Bhaskar
7. How many female characters in the play *Lights Out* are active on the stage?
  - a. Two
  - b. Three
  - c. Four
  - d. One
8. The gang rape in the play *Lights Out* took place every night at \_\_\_\_\_ neighbour's compound.

- a. Mohan's
- b. Leela's
- c. Naina's
- d. None of the above

### **9.6. ANSWER KEY**

1 (c); 2 (c); 3 (c); 4 (c); 5 (d); 6 (d); 7 (b); 8 (b)

### **9.7. SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS**

- Q1. Write a short note on the symbolic meaning of goons telling the people of the colony to “turn off” their lights.
- Q2. Critically analyse the silence of Freida in the play *Lights Out*.
- Q3. Compare and contrast the physical silence of Frieda with the silence of colony's people about the incident of gang rape which was repeatedly happening in their neighbourhood.
- Q4. Compare and contrast the reaction of male duo Bhaskar and Mohan and female duo Leela and Naina in the play to the screaming which they hear from the building in their neighbourhood.
- Q5. Comment on the theme of voyeurism in the play *Lights Out*.

### **9.8. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS**

- Q1. Critically analyse the various themes in the play *Lights Out*.
- Q2. Discuss the theme of violence as portrayed in the play *Lights Out*.
- Q3. Critically comment on the brutality of gang rape and its effect on women's lives. And how society reacts towards it?
- Q4. What image you get of the character Bhaskar, Mohan and Surinder from their discussion in the play *Lights Out*.

### **9.9 LET US SUM UP**

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* presents the tragic spectacle of daily rape of a woman, watched at a distance by the residence of the nearby apartment. Leela and Naina are anguished by the cries for help but the men Bhasker and Mohan quite their conscience by arguing that the victim is after all only a prostitute, not a decent woman and, therefore, needs no help. The play *Lights Out* presents a

horrifying picture of a inhumane society in which people prefer to watch the cruelty but do not want to take action until and unless it is not harming them.

### **9.10 SUGGESTED READING**

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**MANJULA PADMANABHAN: *LIGHTS OUT***

**STRUCTURE**

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**10.1 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to explore and discuss the various issues raised in the play *Lights Out* and the technique which the playwright has used in the play *Lights Out*.

**10.2 TECHNIQUE & LANGUAGE IN THE PLAY *LIGHTS OUT***

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* is important in the canon of Feminist theatre. *Lights Out*, as the title suggests, focuses on activities associated with

darkness, both, of the physical world as well as that of the mental. The darkness of the physical world is represented here by the rape of a woman while that of the mind is reflected in the attitude of the people who are not only mute spectators to this horrific crime but also seem to enjoy watching it.

The play shows how feminist playwright Padmanabhan has not only used innovative techniques but has also adapted some conventions of the proscenium to effectively establish their agenda. Realism, socialism and alienation effects are yoked together to achieve the motive.

Padmanabhan's play *Lights Out* is realistic in style and content. It portrays the lives of common people. She uses realism but circumvents the element as the issue discussed is totally women centric and told from their point of view. In *Lights Out* the reaction of women to rape, that is of repugnance and horror at the crime, are given cognizance. Juxtaposition and continuity of incidents is maintained from scene to scene and through references to popular culture like newspaper reading, tea, gossip sessions, cooking and childcare. This makes the audience forget the difference between the stage and themselves and end up caring about it as much as their own lives.

Like other feminist plays *Lights Out* start *media res*, at a point where a crucial decision has to be taken. *Lights Out* is set in the affluent upper floor apartment of Leela and Bhaskar. The first scene establishes the fact that Leela is traumatized by the disturbing activities and cries for help emanating from the neighboring building. Her disheveled appearance and tense words are proof of her fear which she describes as a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. As soon as she sees her husband Bhaskar her first words are to find out whether he has informed the police about the disturbance which has been going on.

In total contrast, Bhaskar is relaxed and interested only on let everything go. He asks their servant, Frieda, for his evening tea as he starts reading the newspaper and casually informs Leela that he had forgotten to call the police. Leela gets agitated at his words and attitude as she had been able to convince him only after a lot of arguments. But her agitation and anger have no effect on her husband who tells her to relax with some Yoga.

The playwright shows the limbo that the two women, that is Leela and Naina

are in. They have no autonomy or deciding power in their own homes and are prime examples of, in psychoanalyst Jean Baker Miller's words, "the submissive group". They are bogged down by female passivity, inability to act, to decide and to think. The women show a reluctance to voice their disagreement and frustration strongly. Their sentences are, at this point, hesitant, broken and incomplete, for example Leela's "Did you.....do it?", "Oh.....Bhaskar", etc. The dramatization of their helplessness serves the dual purpose of creating empathy of shared experience with the women in the audience as well as emphasizes their future transformation more effectively.

An important aspect of language, the naming process, can be observed in the play *Lights Out*. When Leela's friend Naina looks out of the window she immediately pins the activity of the goons outside as rape which Leela had not been able to do up to that point of time. Bhaskar and Mohan refuse to accept this categorization. Gauging their reactions it is clear to the audience that they themselves have been enjoying the horrifying spectacle of rape. To stop the women from calling the police they come up with the fantastic explanation that the activity could be a religious ceremony and any attempt to interfere would be construed as "restriction of religious freedom". To give credence to their words they compare it to religious rituals and liken the pain of the victim to that of *sadhus*' walking on fire, nose piercing and circumcision.

Padmanabhan goes a step further to show how this process has become a double edged sword in the hands of men. When the women refuse to be distracted from their conviction of going to the police the men change tracks and say that even if they accept that the incidents may have sexual overtones it cannot be rape as the women being tortured seem to be cheap "whores". In their opinion prostitutes who sell themselves have no right over their bodies and so cannot be raped and only decent women can be raped.

Silence is the other aspect of language that is prominent in the play *Lights Out*. While women's silence in the public sphere can be explained to a certain extent by their subordinate position relative to men, silence in everyday life is a little more complicated. It is interesting that the manifestations of silence, powerlessness (Frieda), power (male characters) and subversion (Leela and Naina) can be observed in this play. Padmanabhan uses it further as a route to escapism when the world becomes too hard to handle for the women living in it.

In *Lights Out* Frieda's presence on stage, the author's note says, is to be only visual and not to be heard at all. All through the play she goes about her work as unobtrusively as possible. Her silence amid other vocal characters highlights her presence on stage effectively while provoking the audience to think about her reactions to the developments on stage. Frieda's behaviour has a robotic quality to it. She is seen bringing tea and cleaning the broken shards of glass even before anyone asks her to do it. One can assume that she does this to avoid rebuke and abuse because of her status as the servant of the house. The sounds that traumatize Leela have no visible effect on Frieda. It raises the question does she know the source of the sounds? And what has she faced in life that makes her remain calm in the face of all the commotion? While Frieda's silence suggests her fear of being abused because of her being a woman of a lower economic strata, her coming into the public sphere to earn a livelihood shows her resolve to lead an independent life despite all odds. She wears her silence as a cloak/protection against subjugation.

Naina illustrates how silence can be utilized as a useful tool of subversion. Her entry on stage provides the much needed support and female community to Leela. Together they argue for police intervention as the solution to the problem. Naina is outspoken, bold and does not shy away from confronting Bhaskar and Mohan when they try to distract the women with spurious arguments to justify the rape. But her behavior changes subtly when her husband Surinder enters the scene. His dominating personality overshadows Naina who suddenly becomes very subdued. The reason for this becomes evident when we observe Surinder's reaction to the rape. He becomes very angry and it becomes clear that the reason for his anger is not the pain of the violated woman but at the insult that he perceives in the goons' activities. He immediately calls for an attack on them. Though Naina is surprised to see Leela eagerly becoming a part of his plans she cautions the group against taking the law into their hands. "Shut up- or I'll kick your teeth in" "you shut up. This is no time for women's nonsense" is how Surinder reacts to her suggestion of waiting for the police. One assumes that being used to her husband's violent ways she knows that overt confrontation will only result in his anger deflecting to her so she simply keeps quiet at that point of time. As the others continue planning the attack with knives and acid she looks out of the window and sees the goons and the rape victim leaving but she does not inform Surinder

or the others about it. Her silence works to prevent further violence, just as she had wanted. So for Naina silence works as a tool to subvert the hegemony of power.

Silence being used to show power is evident in Bhaskar's attitude. For days he ignores Leela's entreaties to call the police despite the traumatic effect on her being apparent. Unable to take the horror of the brutality, when Leela almost becomes psychotic, and starts wailing repeatedly "call the police", it is only then that he responds and tries to contact the police. Being her husband gives him the power to negate Leela's wishes and he uses it to silence her from taking an alternate path from that chosen by him.

Padmanabhan does not shy away from using strong language. The female characters utter bold words like arse, pimping rascal and wetting yourself without any inhibition. The dialogues, hard as shrapnel, do not allow any margin for the sensibilities of the audience. The playwright uses a language with no circumlocution and adopts a language of power/men.

The use of irony and humor, by Padmanabhan, as subversive devices is an important area of interest. When Leela and Naina confirm that it is rape that is taking place outside the men refuse to accept this. "My, You must have seen a lot of rape, Naina, to recognize it at one glance" says Mohan trying to put her on the defensive. But Naina refuses to be bullied. Naina's ironical words "It can only be rape..... not poetry reading", "What? What else is left?" challenge the authority of male hegemony. They take us back to the previous arguments and reject them. They negate the derogatory inference in Mohan's words regarding Naina's character and thereby subvert control through implication. The irony prods the audience to question the motive behind the men's arguments.

These techniques have been used ably by Padmanabhan in the play *Lights Out* which problematizes both gender and class. When Naina, brushing aside the objections of the men, looks out of the window to ascertain for herself what actually is happening, she is horrified to see three men holding down a woman while the fourth violates her mercilessly. The sight of this extreme torture shocks her into inarticulateness. Saying "some one's being.....They're- they're" she starts retching. This reaction is very important because while it underlines the horror and revulsion

that Naina feels for the crime it also gives a hint to the reaction that the playwright hopes to provoke in the spectator. The reaction works to shock the spectator into stepping back and analyzing about all the horrific stories s/he reads and hears about instead of passively slotting it away as another statistic in the everyday hurly burly of life.

The vignette where Leela is seen collecting arms for a retaliatory attack. In a matter of minutes she arranges for acid and knives. There is an expression of glee on her face as she does this. Leela is a woman who is caught between her abject fear and the denial of autonomy to find a solution to the circumstances responsible for those fears. Given the total invalidation of her wishes by her husband, Surinder's idea of a violent response gives her a sense of validation. The scene dramatizes and warns society about the reactions one can expect from women who are continually denied a voice.

A good example of this is the screams of the rape victim in *Lights Out*. The stage directions are that the screams should not be so loud as to appear too near which makes inaction unacceptable to the audience nor are they to be so low that they can be ignored. The ragged, unpleasant screams of "let me go" "help me" could easily be understood to be addressed to the audience and so make them active participants in the theatrical process. They make the horror of rape a real experience and bring the pain, trauma and helplessness of the victim into the personal thinking space of each and everyone in the theatre. The screams and the words break up the narrative and serve as pointers to the issue of violence against women and lay bare the passive acceptance of it by society. The sounds weakening as if the person screaming is tired and then starting with renewed vigor as if in response to a new assault works to provoke the audience into thinking about possibilities of change and intervention. Another important purpose served by the screams representing the rape is that they remove any need for the dramatization of the violation and in turn the possibility of it being used as a means of titillation and sensationalism. The interruption creates awareness in the audience about the various connotations of crimes against women.

All the above aspects that have been observed and studied enhance the social relevance of the play *Lights Out*. The study reveals how situations that one encounters

in everyday life can be a source to create awareness regarding the marginalization of women.

### **10.3 RAPE AND BODY POLITICS IN THE PLAY *LIGHTS OUT***

*Lights Out* protests against physical vulnerability of women. Like her other plays Manjula Padmanaban has confronted with the realistic issue that disturbs her as an individual. Though the time has changed the globalized world is of no aid to women of any class. The playwright through this play focuses on an urgent need to address this treatment and vulnerability quotient in women.

The third scene of the play opens with the ragged sound that pierces Leela's ear creating a palpable tension. The cry for help and escape makes no difference in the attitude of Bhasker and Mohan. These screams and the consequent indifference are the leitmotif signifying the loud anonymity of urban voices. These voices are usually freighted but unheard.

MOHAN. Personally I'm against becoming entangled in other people's private lives. Outsides can never really be judge of who is right and who is wrong.

Further,

BHASKER. And now... they're holding her legs apart—

MOHAN. One man each leg, spread wide apart...

*They both watch in silence, for a few moments, as a fresh bout of screaming starts.*

BHASKAR. Hmmm. Well, you know, illiterate people believe that when a demon possesses a woman, it is always via the—uh—*lower orifice*—

These comments are symptomatic of their attitude towards women and their positioning in society. The later comments are more shocking as they throw more light on these educated hypocrites who negate the truth so easily without feeling shame or disgust on their “second rape”, a term used by Madigan and Gamble to describe the act of violation, alienation and disparagement a survivor receives when she turns to others for help and support.

Society is least concerned about the violence of sexual assault and the impact it has on the victims. The playwright depicts this same idea of 'second rape' through the male characters.

BHASKAR. Funny, how it is most often women who become possessed...

*Pause while screams intensify.*

MOHAN. They are more susceptible...

BHASKAR. The weaker sex, after all...

Another character Naina is introduced by the playwright to create a microcosm of the urban ceiling in that room. She shows her concern towards the victim and tries to call police but she is stopped by Bhaskar and Mohan who call the rape a "religious ceremony" and later call the victim a whore. Even then Naina shows her concern for the victim saying:

NAINA: Why? A whore can't be raped? Is that the law?

The play poses a question that is being a sex worker makes a person not even worthy of being human. Society deprives them of their basic human rights, robbing them of their basic identity as women. The play voices a concern for the rape victims and whores who undergo the same trauma when it comes to forced sex. The play also highlights the patriarchal views of society.

Cities as they grow are always seen as male spaces primarily. Even global cities such as London and New York, host to various ethnic groups are equally inhospitable to women. While illustrating this Mona Domosh says, "Behaviour on the streets of Victorian cities are governed by strict social codes for men and women, for working class and middle class, for blacks and whites. For women the implications often revolve around their sexuality. One of the most common terms for prostitute after all is 'streetwalker' ". Padmanabhan admits that the rape in all conditions is a violation of the dignity of woman's will and desire.

Rape is not mere a physical torture but a violation of the female consciousness. It simply disintegrates the inner self of the woman. Susan Giffins in her book *Rape: The Power of Consciousness* writes, "Legally rape is recognized as a crime with physical aspects only, namely the penetration of the vagina by the penis against the

will of the victim. In effect, however, the real crime is the annihilation by the man of the woman as human being”.

BHASKER: Whatever rights a woman has, they are lost the moment she becomes a whore.

The two different worlds coexist in urban setting. People living in the comfort zone usually have only approximation of the tough situation of poor people. Though they seem to know certain facts, they still want to remain aloof from it especially when it comes to bridging these gaps. Bhasker tries to convince the ladies about the two different worlds in the city.

BHASKER: It’s a hard world out there, Naina, a hard world. People like us—there’s just no contact at all.

After a while Surinder, Naina’s husband reaches there. He poses to be very agitated about this crime in the neighbourhood and suggests killing the assailants: “Let’s go and wipe them out.” At the same time he is deeply prejudiced towards the marginalized:

SURINDER (*silencing the others with his voice*): I’m telling you—these bastards understand only one thing: violence!

The play ends on an ironic note when all of them come to know the rape and torture is over. Leela replies “Oh! Then it must be over for tonight”

Padmanabhan’s play bears out that there is a thin line between onstage action and the real life incident.

The significance of the motif of the scream in the play is one of the most significant theatrical devices used by the playwright. Scream as a sound, loud, anonymous, frightening, and unsettling, yet not visibly ascribed to any specific character on the stage is the central feature of the play. It is also suggested that the alleged act of torture, which is supposed to create the screams from the victims, is viewed as ‘drama’, ‘a staged performance!’ by the callous male onlookers:

Leela (turns to Bhaskar): Well, but what about the *screaming*!

Mohan: Is it for help?

Leela (turns to Bhaskar): Isn’t it for help?

Mohan: Or is it just in general? That matters, you know. After all- it could just be some, you know, drama...

In the above instance Padmanabhan makes a direct allusion to the theatrical aspect of the act, which in itself is being discussed, described and narrated to the spectators by the characters of this play. The scream is described as 'different' every night while the tormentors are described as 'looking exactly alike', which refers to a faceless, de-individualized, collective force of violence. The theatrical devices also account for the element of exaggeration implied in the production, reception, and depiction of the scream and its loudness, its vulgarity, its frightening afterlife for 'sensitive souls' like Leela, who find it a torture.

The play presents the entire dramatic situation in terms of "insider/outsider dichotomy" and poses a question on the idea of urban spectatorship. Leela and Bhaskar are presented as prototypes of spectators in the city. Their characterization raises the question whether they are located outside or inside of what they are watching as Leela says that whatever they are watching they are making themselves responsible for that act. For Leela the idea of witnessing rape was horrible but Mohan and Bhasker do not share the same feeling. For them it is crazy on the part of Leela to be oversensitive on such 'petty' issues.

Bhasker admits this when he says "These intellectuals always react like that, always confuse simple issues; after all, what's the harm in simply watching something? Even when there's an accident in the street, don't we all turn heads to look?"

Bhaskar's insensitivity and inability as he compares the act of rape to a road accident speaks volumes about patriarchal apathy towards a horrific crime. Similarly Mohan reveals his mind, "Personally, I am against becoming entangled in the other people's private lives. Outsiders can never really be the judge of who's right and who's wrong".

The play underscores the concept of the responsibility of the audience as well. Watching a play, we constantly negotiate between the inside and the outside of the dramatic text. The concept of seeing without responsibility is thus interesting enough akin to the dominant idea of spectatorship in the contemporary urban space.

Leela knows that just being an onlooker is not the solution of this problem. As

she says, “That, I will absolutely not permit whatever the secular laws of this country. I will not allow my children to be harmed by disgusting sights”.

Through this play Padmanabhan presents three different viewpoints of the urban spectators towards the horrors of rape. One is represented by Leela and Naina who empathize with the victim. They see the crime as an inner crisis but do not take any action on their own and keep pleading to the male characters to call police or take some action.

The second one is represented by Mohan and Bhaskar who were indifferent towards the victim. They come up with the idea for propaganda through photographs and newspaper reports.

The third perspective is presented by Surinder who suggests killing the miscreants with knives to decode the apathy of the society.

Even for Surinder, rescuing the victim is not more important than accepting the challenge thrown by the rapists upon the self-respect of the inhabitants of the area. Mohan is shown as the most cruel and inconsiderate as he goes to the extent of suggesting, “Pictures like these...we’d make a lot of money-after all, and how often does anyone see authentic pictures of a gang-rape in action?”

The play ends on a note of utter despair, without suggesting any kind of solution to the problem of coercive violation of a female body. Rape is a way of controlling female body by proclaiming the rights of body as a commodity. This notion offers a very strong critique to the situation in the play by offering the opinions of men towards the situation where the women should take a lead as they were neither subdued nor inefficient to voice against the recurrent rape.

Padmanabhan unmasks the indifferent and spineless middle class men joining hands and paralyzing the system in general. Through this play the playwright mirrors the society that affirms that there are people like Bhaskar and Mohan within us. Our indifference amounts to our complicity in the crime.

#### **10.4. MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *LIGHTS OUT*: A CASE OF SOCIAL APATHY/ SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY/ SELF-REALIZATION**

Women's cause and women's issues are the debatable subject not only amongst scholars but also amongst the common men. Efforts are made on political as well as at socio-cultural level to protect the rights of women and to check their exploitation in the name of male hegemony. In spite of all this women suffer incessantly under the existing social code of conduct. They are raped, murdered, assaulted physically mainly for no fault of their. One of the main reasons behind the continuation of the cycle of exploitation is the growing apathy which has gradually become the part of the psyche of modern man of metropolitan culture.

The followers of this culture are no better than merely the passive observers who are not at all desirous of involving themselves in the matters which are not related to their personal life but are well connected to their existence as a social being.

*Lights Out* a play by Manjula Padamnabhan, realistically portrays the social apathy/ social responsibility/ self-realization which has obviously become the part of human existence in the modern era.

As a society how responsive are we to other's needs? This is the question Manjula Padamnabhan addresses in her play *Lights Out*.

Obviously, the dramatist's purpose is to highlight man's growing indifference towards his social commitments.

The play opens, revealing the drawing – dining area of a sixth floor apartment of a building in Bombay, inhabited by a middle class family. The focal point of the space is a large window to the rear through which the sky and just a suggestion of the roof top of the neighbouring building can be seen. The building is under construction with windows without glasses. The building has a chowkidar but not the owner of the building. Some suspicious activities which from the distance seem to be incidents of gang rape, have been going on for many days. Though it is a much debatable topic amongst the inhabitants of the nearby building, nobody is ready to do anything for the solution of the problem.

The discussion in the play begins at the evening tea table between the husband and wife, regarding the troublesome incident of the neighbourhood. Bhaskar, the husband does not seem to be least bothered about it but Leela “feels tense” and “frightened” all through the day due to it. She psychologically feels disturbed so much that her whole day passes under the shadows of these horrifying incidents:

“At first it was only at the time it was going on. Then, as soon as it got dark. Then around tea-time, when the children came home from school. Then in the middle of the day, whenever the door bell rang. Then on the morning, when I sent the children off to school. And now from the moment I wake up...”

She persistently requests her husband to call police to settle the matter but he avoids the idea saying that they should not bother about these little offences. She even hints at their responsibility as a social being saying: “That we’re part of ... of what happens outside. That by watching it we’re making ourselves responsible ...” but he reacts coldly and calls such ideas “Rubbish”.

Through indifference of Bhaskar, the dramatist exposes the neglect of duty of a social being in these bleak conditions. Bhaskar rejects the very idea of calling police not because he is incompetent but he does not “want to stick my neck out” as “who has the time for all this”. In fact such incidents go on unnoticed and unchecked as people have become so self-centered and engrossed in themselves that they intentionally want to forget their responsibility towards the society in which they live. They do not bother to complain about them to authorities and further even to justify their behavior often give the plea when others are not worried regarding these problems ‘So why should we’.

This tendency and gradually growing indifferent attitude of people are mainly responsible for the increasing crime rate in the society. Manjula Padamnabhan’s purpose in the play is mainly to highlight this social apathy, especially amongst the members of middle class society. They themselves shirk from their duties as social beings and blame others for not fulfilling their duties well.

“What about the owners of that building? Really it’s their responsibility...”

Leela’s behavior gradually becomes neurotic and she does not wish to call any guest at her home for the fear of those voices being detected by them. Her peace

of mind completely shatters and she rejects the idea of listening to music because “The sound will make me tense, I can’t bear any sound any more”.

To relax herself, she takes recourse to yoga but could not ignore the impact of the cries of the woman, coming from the nearby unfinished building. She gets disturbed with the voices so much as she asks her husband, “Am I going mad?”

Her disturbed state of mind proves the fact that she has gradually started to identify herself with that woman. She feels the intensity of her pains in the horrifying situations of life. Being a woman, she sympathizes with her and wishes to do something for her but her husband remains unable to understand her plight and considers her merely “over-sensitive”. Undoubtedly, in the rush of modernism, man’s life has become prosaic having no place for natural sympathies.

Arrival of Bhaskar’s friend, Mohan to their house further heightens the prevalent social apathy amongst the so called dignified members of the middle class. He is adamant on looking at the crime while it is going to be committed just to prove himself to be the true and practical observer of life. He makes a lot of discussion to find truly the nature of the crime without his least intention to help the woman or check the crime. When Leela quotes her friend’s remark regarding man’s role as a social being – “If you can stop a crime, you must – or else you’re helping it to happen”, Mohan flings a bitter comment on insensitivity of intellectuals:

“These intellectuals always react like that, always confuse simple issues. After all, what’s the harm in simply watching something”.

Obviously that he wants to see the crime happen only out of his curiosity not due to his social responsibility. Leela is of the opinion if we look at the crime being committed we should try our best to check it but he does not bother about that. The things that Leela never wants to talk about are discussed aimlessly by Mohan and Bhaskar. They consider it no more than a “drama” and begin to analyze its various parts bit by bit as how many people are involved in the act or if every day the same people come or if their dresses are same or to which status they belong or what kind of screams are uttered during that heinous act – are the sounds like “hysteria”, “gurgly” or “crying” or what had been their purpose after all.

The dramatist’s purpose in highlighting this long discussion is just to expose

social concern of these two characters who on one hand feel proud of being civilized and on the other hand do not bother about their social responsibility. In their futile discussion they predict that these acts may be some domestic fight for some private cause. They deliberately avoid it to be a case of gang rape and conclude it to be an instance of domestic violence and in a sophisticated manner come to the conclusion:

“Personally, I’m becoming entangled in other people’s private lives. Outsiders can never really be the judge of who is right and who is wrong.”

They do not discuss the gravity of the crime, rather quickly change the direction of thinking and easily convert the case of gang rape to that of domestic violence. This shows that they deliberately avoid the situations in which they would be compelled to do something. Presentation of such a long discussion successfully conveys the dramatist purpose to tickle the sensibility of audience through these insensible characters. They have got time enough to find out the appropriate words which may define the true nature of the crime but they do not get time to call the police or other concerned authorities to check the crime.

The discussion gradually shifts from one direction to other and the crime of gang rape has easily been converted to a religious ceremony, screams and cries of the victim are considered the painful screams during nose piercing and ear piercing. Mohan even calls it a new religion: “New cults can be quite violent at the outset – especially their initiation rites.”

Meanwhile, one of Leela’s friends Naina and her husband Surinder arrive at their home unexpectedly. They too get involved in the discussion and begin to interpret things on the basis of the available proofs. On one hand, Leela is mentally upset to such an extent that she could not eat anything on the dining table while on the other side her husband with his friends is apathetic towards the cries that are approaching the room so much as they want only to enjoy food first and postpone such a serious matter to be discussed later on. In spite of being competent and respectable citizens of the nation, they show their helplessness before Leela saying, “There’s nothing we can do about it. We just have to ignore it.”

With the arrival of Bhaskar, their line of thinking changes and they begin to find out possibilities of this act of being a case of “exorcism” where the body of a

woman is possessed by some evil spirit and violence is inflicted on her to push out that spirit from her body. These far-fetched explanations of the simple act of rape by these men hint at their negligence and carelessness as social beings. Leela and Naina stand in true contrast of these men and they agree about the incident as being the case of rape of some women. They are desirous to do something regarding it while the men present there continue to discuss the incident from different angles. Now they begin to analyze the character of the woman. They try to find out whether the woman is a whore or a decent woman because they believe:

“Whatever right a woman has, they are lost the moment she becomes a whore”.

Leela and Naina oppose the idea as being females they can easily understand the condition of the helpless woman therefore, they persistently request to call the police. When Leela’s requests remain unheard, she gradually turns hysterical but the males present there remain unaffected by it. They suggest some unpractical solutions to the problem like to have a face to face fight with the persons involved in the act. They reject the idea of calling the police because they do not want to get involved in formalities of police and are not assured about the desired and timely action of police. In their excessive enthusiasm they want to take matter in their own hands. They do not seem to be interested in time bound solution of the problem rather begin to discuss about the weapons, they would like to use in their fight like knives, towels, homemade little acid bombs, steel rods, etc. Through this long discussion Manjula Padanamabhan, in fact, succeeds in creating feeling of irritation amongst the audience. They are compelled to think about the inactivity of these characters which somehow is reflective of their own mode of behavior.

Obviously they begin to ruminate over gradually increasing social apathy. Ultimately the discussion comes to a state when they get ready to take advantage of this sinful activity. They now decide to take photographs of this scene of gang rape, which would not only give them fame but also assist them to earn money – “All right – first the pictures, then the beating up.” As soon as they get ready to go out to take photographs and to beat the culprit, the screams cease and when they try to look out of the window, nothing can be seen in the neighbouring building. Such a dramatic end of the play further intensify the passivity of these characters and leaves an ineradicable

impression on the audience regarding a lot of discussion with little action in relation to an incident taking place in neighbourhood.

### **10.5 GENDER SUBJUGATION IN THE PLAY *LIGHTS OUT***

Through the play *Lights Out*, Manjula Padamnabhan not only exposes growing apathy amongst the so called civilized people but also wants to make audience perceive its evil consequences. The play has a long discussion which deepens step by step and consequently makes the reader understand the hidden purpose of sensitizing them towards this apathy. In the world of growing technology when distances gradually shrink and modern means of communication have lessened the distances amongst the people, one thing is disheartening that people are drifting away from one another at the level of humanity. The bonds which used to link one human being with another are gradually weakening. Man, especially belonging to the middle class, though aware of his duty as a social being, avoids it, living contentedly in his self-imposed bondages. Even the pitiable cries of a woman become a matter of discussion rather than action. The drama, based on a real life incident, as it has been mentioned at the end, further affects audience's sensibility positively and they really understand the hazardous supersession of the growing social apathy in modern man's life. The drama successfully achieves its aim and certainly inspires audience not to follow the path, adopted by the characters of the drama.

Manjula Padmanabhan is a prominent feminist dramatist of modern Indian drama. *Lights Out* by Padmanabhan draws attention to the suffering of women and how they are exploited in this male chauvinist society. The dramatist displays an unambiguous impression of gender inequality and creates a dominant appeal for comprehending the women's emotions in a world where she hardly finds herself to be free, independent, resilient, well thought out. The play is based on a real life incident which took place in Mumbai suburb in 1982. Padmanabhan portrays a world in which woman is deprived of her identity, her voice, her freedom, her rights. She has to implore unto men to hear to her concerns, this further leads to gender discrimination/ subjugation in every sphere of life.

*Lights Out* opens at a point where a critical decision has to be taken. Leela and Bhaskar, a higher middle class married couple, have been hearing strange sounds

of sexual harassment of a woman from their neighbouring building very often. Leela is terrified and traumatised because of these sounds. These sounds make Leela hysterical; she is able to hear the voice of the victim and her cries in her subconscious mind.

Leela implores Bhaskar to take action against the perpetrators but all her pleas falls on deaf ears. Bhaskar is least disturbed by all these actions and sounds. It is because for a woman the very thought of purity of her body and soul, and right over her own body is intensely embedded in her mind and conscious but for a man a woman is an object of play and to have pleasure with her body. This is the main reason why the men in the play never try to see the matters associated with woman's honour and respect from female perspective. Leela begs her husband Bhaskar to call the police but he brushes away her request by saying that the sounds merely cannot hurt her:

LEELA: But I can hear them.....

BHASKAR: (As if to a child.) But sounds can't hurt you.....

LEELA: Oh, but they do, those dirty, ugly sounds .....

BHASKAR: So shut your ears, see? Like this – (Places his hands over hers.) There! Is that better?

The most ghastly offence which no women in the world can accept is body-abuse. In the play, for Leela rape symbolizes the most heinous crime and voice out to help her stop it but for Bhaskar it is just an event. Further he advises Leela to practice yoga through which she can reduce her fear instead of thinking of this incident.

Naina, Leela's friend, is told that the strange sounds that she hears are the sounds of local slum religious ceremony. But Naina grows inquisitive and looks out of the window to know what kind of religious ceremony is taking place and finds to her horror four men assaulting a woman sexually. She is shaken to see three men holding a woman as the fourth attacks her brutally.

NAINA: Someone's being..... (She fights for her voice.) They're— they're (She dry- retches.)

BHASKAR: Don't say anything out loud – Leela will be upset!

(Mohan remains at the window, mesmerized)

NAINA: Someone's being .....(She still cannot complete her statement. She dry- retches again.) There's woman being —

MOHAN : (Over his shoulder.) Dragged around by the foot.

(Leela, who has been sitting motionless, now holds her head with both hands, Covering her ears.)

BHASKAR: (Brightly.) Do you think it can be a part of the ritual, Mohan?

NAINA: What ritual? That's no ritual! That's a — a———(112)

Where Naina denies to call it a religious ritual, men in the play deny to call it a rape.

Through the casual attitude of Bhaskar and other male characters in the play Padmanabhan tries to project the mind set of male, usually men try to control woman. Men are the one to decide what a woman should think, what a woman should do, what a woman should sense, etc. The chief intention of the unconcerned outlook by Bhaskar, his two friends Mohan and Surinder is to build internal dread in the minds of Leela, her friend Naina and Leela's domestic help, Frieda.

By doing so, they can uphold and sustain the ever reigning patriarchal power inside as well as outside the home. The display of male dominance and women subversion is evidently seen in *Lights Out*. There is no relation of the victim with the characters of the play but still her pain is seen through the suffering of Leela, Naina and also Frieda. These three being women feel affinity with the victim, through Leela's trauma of the rape, through Naina's subversion of women, through Frieda's silence the fear of being abused because of her economic status.

Freida's very presence on the stage and her acute silence raises many questions like: Can she hear the terrible sounds of the rape victim? Why she is not disturbed like others? Freida has a robotic quality, she comes at every beck and call of her master and is seen attending to the works even when she is not told. She arranges for knives and acids while the discussion to attack the goons is on among the characters. She indirectly tells that the crime needs to be stopped. Through her, the dramatist tries to show, despite belonging to economically poor background she strives to come out into an open society to earn her living and live independently under odd circumstances.

But at the same time her silence acts as shield against subjugation. Feminist writer like Padmanabhan try to project the injustice done to women for centuries by male dominance and patriarchy in society through *Lights Out*. Woman is considered inferior to man and has been suppressed for thousands of years in human history. Challenging this male superiority and the consequent subjugation and suppression of women, the play raises certain questions relating to psychology, society, culture and male-dominated economic ideology.

The heated conversation between Bhaskar and Mohan leads to a worthless excuses for not taking any initiation to stop the crime. This nature of man makes the woman to perturb their sensibilities. The choice of words used by men in the play to describe rape as a local slum religious ceremony. No highlights their patriarchal mindset.

BHASKAR: Often, in an exorcism, the possessed person is already in pain great agony, has convulsions and screams loudly and recklessly, sometimes in a hoarse, unnatural voice.....

MOHAN: There we go! That explains the ugly sound of the voice!

BHASKAR: Look at her struggle!

MOHAN: Like the very Devil!

BHASKER: And there's so much blood!

MOHAN: Oh yes! From being dragged about on that concrete, I suppose. Blood around her mouth as well – which explains the gurgling sound of the screaming

BHASKAR: Isn't it astounding that someone in such a condition has the energy left to scream? MOHAN: They say that people under a demon's power, even women, have a strength of three big men.....

BHASKER: Funny, how it is most often women who become possessed.....

The words used by men like “exorcism”, “possessed” reflects their cadence of male potent to judge the event and term them.

BHASKAR: She could be a whore, you know!

LEELA: Ugh!

NAINA: A whore! Do you think that's what she is?

MOHAN: Of course – she’s with four men at once!

NAINA: (Uncertainly.) Is it enough to prove that she is a whore?

BHASKER: A decent women would not be with four men at once.

The male characters act as adjudicators to tag women with different words like whore, decent, possessed, respectable, etc. Such reactions of men roots revulsion in women and they detest seeing the fictitious discrimination. However, for men, women are mere instrument of pleasure. Down the history women are relegated as “weaker sex” which puts them always in an inferior base to man. Such a treatment leads to identity crisis in woman which is deftly showcased in *Lights Out*.

Padmanabhan provokes host of questions on gender identity and its impact on woman’s identity, her autonomy and her decision making. The unanswered questions are: On what account men is superior to woman? On what basis male and female are built in the name of gender? How a man is master and a woman subservient?

Naina is shown as a much awaited and essential help for Leela but even her voice is made silent. She initially argues to call the police but the arrival of her husband Surinder, changes her faintly. Surinder’s dominating demeanor overshadows Naina’s personality and she becomes silent.

NAINA: Surinder, please! Now stop all this nonsense!

SURINDER: (Turns on her suddenly and says with quiet malevolence.) Shut up—or I’ll kick your teeth in! (Turning back.) We’ll take these— (Naina subsides, embarrassed. Neither she nor the others notice that the sounds outside have ceased.). The play exposes the reality that the world one lives in is a man’s world and the gearstick is in their hands, woman must wrestle for her space. Man from time immemorial has treated woman as a liability, source of necessity and an object of pleasure to meet his requirements. This undemocratic attitude of man disturbs woman to the core. Violence and assault against a woman is not a women’s issue but it is human rights issue.

The play at the end provokes the observers to comprehend where the society stands when the question of woman’s safety, independence and her identity is

concerned. Today one can see how the honour of educated and employed women is being outraged in a traditional and democratic societies like India and the plight of illiterate and poor women is worst. Padmanabhan has successfully uncovered the follies of the people and made them aware through her work.

### **10.6 SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS**

- Q1. Critically comment on Bhaskar's behavior towards Leela's plea.
- Q2. Critically analyse Mohan's response to the screaming from the neighbouring building.
- Q3. Comment on Naina's submission to her husband Surinder.
- Q4. How do you see the character Surinder in the play *Lights Out*?
- Q5. Do you think that Bhaskar and Mohan are educated hypocrites? Justify your answer.
- Q6. Who is whore according to Bhaskar and Mohan? And why the woman crying for help does not deserve any aid from them?

### **10.7 LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS**

- Q1. Describe critically the subject of rape taken up in the play *Lights Out*.
- Q2. Analyse the theme of subjugation of women in the play *Lights Out*.
- Q3. Violence against women is violence against humanity. Comment.
- Q4. Comment on the theme of social responsibility in the play *Lights Out*.
- Q5. What is body politics? How it is presented in the play *Lights Out*?
- Q6. Critically analyse the character of Leela in the play *Lights Out*.
- Q7. The play *Lights Out* is replete with the characters who are social hypocrites. Discuss.
- Q8. Discuss the play *Lights Out* as a realistic play.
- Q9. Discuss the play *Lights Out* as a woman-centric play.
- Q.10. Discuss the play *Lights Out* as a socialistic play.

## 10.8 LET US SUM UP

The rules and codes in the Indian society are patriarchal rules and codes in which a woman is always pushed to the periphery and is seen as a sexual object. Based on a real incident that happened in Santa Cruz, Mumbai in 1982 the play exposes how insensitive the society is towards the misery of weaker sex and weaker sections of the society. Even in modern society, the way of looking towards the woman still has not changed. Most of the rape cases in India go unreported because of the stigma around the rape. It is still the victim who is questioned not the culprit. The society asks question only to woman why it happened to her and labels her as a woman of loose morals which is clearly explicit in the play. The play is open ended and the audience is left to ponder where the fault is and what the wrong is.

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## **URMILA PAWAR : “ARMOUR”**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 11.1. Objectives**
- 11.2. Introduction**
- 11.3. Urmila Pawar: Life and Background**
- 11.4. Urmila Pawar’s Works**
- 11.5. Summary and Analysis of the story “Armour”**
- 11.6. Multiple Choice Questions**
- 11.7. Answer Key**
- 11.8. Examination Oriented Questions**
- 11.9. Let Us Sum Up**
- 11.10 Suggested Reading**

### **11.1 OBJECTIVES**

Our objective in this lesson is to introduce you to Urmila Pawar as a Dalit woman writer: her life and works. Further, summary and analysis is provided to acquaint you with the plot of the short story “Armour”. In the end, multiple choice questions (MCQs) and examination oriented questions (EOQs) are provided to prepare you for your semester end examination.

## **11.2 INTRODUCTION**

Dalit women are thrice marginalised in patriarchal caste ridden Indian society. They suffer because of gender, caste and class. They become further marginalised as the Dalit male occupies the central position within the family as well as within the Dalit community. The severe discrimination Dalit Women face from being both Dalit and woman makes them a key target of violence and sexual aggression and denies them choices and freedom in all spheres of life whether it is family or society which is necessary for an individual to maintain self-esteem. Dalit women suffer from severe limitations in access to justice and there is widespread impunity in cases where the perpetrator is a member of a dominant caste. Dalit women, therefore, become easy targets of sexual violence and other crimes, because the perpetrators always get away with it.

## **11.3 URMILA PAWAR: LIFE AND BACKGROUND**

Urmila Pawar is a Dalit woman writer born in 1945 in the Konkan district of Maharashtra. She belongs to Mahar caste, an untouchable caste. At Babasaheb Ambedkar's call her parents converted to Buddhism. Urmila Pawar was never able to forget her caste identity as she faced numerous repeated humiliations at school as well as at work place. She narrates an incident of her life when she was invited at a potluck lunch arranged by her classmates but she was clearly told not to bring any lunch by herself. Further, post lunch she was humiliated for having eaten so much. The pain of humiliation inflicted on her by her teacher who made fun of her clothes and appearance became a persisting unforgettable memory. Her life remained a struggle as she went through the worst in order to make her identity out of the shadows of her husband and prove her worth despite being a lower caste woman.

Urmila Pawar is a renowned Dalit feminist writer who gives expression to brutal patriarchy within Dalit communities and caste oppression in the Indian social structure. Her works are famous for the depiction of the plight of women, especially Dalit women in the contemporary age. Her autobiographical work *Aaydaan* (originally written in Marathi in 2003) translated as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Maya Pandit in 2008 is a much celebrated work.

## 11.4 URMILA PAWAR'S WORKS

*Aaydan* translated as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* in 2008: The memoir presents her life struggle as a Dalit woman.

*We also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (2008): It was originally published in Marathi in 1989. This contemporary classic recounts the history of Dalit women's participation in the Dalit movement led by Dr B.R. Ambedkar. Focusing on the involvement of Dalit women in the various Dalit struggles since the early twentieth century, the book goes on to consider the social conditions of Dalit women's lives, daily religious practices and marital rules, the practice of ritual prostitution, and women's issues. Drawing on diverse sources including periodicals, records of meetings, and personal correspondence, the latter half of the book is composed of interviews with Dalit women activists from the 1930s. These first-hand accounts from more than forty Dalit women make the book an invaluable resource for students and researchers of caste, gender, and politics in India besides, a rich store of material for historians of the Dalit movement and gender studies in India, *We Also Made History* remains a fundamental text of the modern women's movement.

***Mother Wit* (2013):** Urmila Pawar's *Mother Wit* is a collection of selected short stories translated by Veena Deo, who in her introduction to the book claims: "Pawar's feminism is evident. Think of the presence in almost every story of strong and clever women" (pp.x). Being a Dalit, a Buddhist and a feminist, Urmila Pawar's self-definition as all three identities informs her stories about women who are brave in the face of caste oppression, strong in the face of family pressures, defiant when at the receiving end of abuse, and determined when guarding their interests and those of their sisters. Pawar draws strong and clever women who drive the reader to laughter, anger, tears or despair at the same time. Her harsh and hard-hitting language subverts another stereotype—that of the soft-spoken woman writer. Although, Pawar's protagonists may not always be Dalit, and the mood not always one of anger, but caste is never far from the context and informs the subtext of each story. As critic Eleanor Zelliot notes there is 'tucked in every story, a note about a Buddhist vihara or Dr Ambedkar....All her stories come from the Dalit world, revealing the great variety of Dalit life now.'

## 11.5 SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF THE STORY “ARMOUR”

Urmila Pawar in her short story “Armour” gives the bold depictions of ambiguous words used as comments by men to tease and humiliate Dalit women vendors. She was severely criticised by the critics who regarded the story as obscene. The short story is based on her childhood observations of Mahar women of Phansawale who would come to the market of Ratnagiri to sell their wares to earn their livelihood. Her story not just traces the injustice but also highlights the gendered relations of every day. Through the story, she tries to expose the harsh circumstances Dalit women face daily while trying to survive in an oppressing patriarchal world.

The short story “Armour” is based on Indira and her son Gaurya. Indira is a lower caste mango seller. One day, Gaurya accompanies her mother to the market. He is introduced to the harsh world that her mother deals daily. Gaurya struggles to come to terms with the vulgarity he has just come to associate with his mother’s profession of selling mangoes in the marketplace. Indira, a humble mango seller, is subjected to numerous taunts and ridicules. Gaurya tries hard to protect his mother from casteist abuse. He feels ashamed of Indira’s tattered clothes and the way she dresses when she goes to the market to sell mangoes. However, he is unable to see the penury and poverty in which his mother is living. He has no bad words for his father who is a drunkard whose only work is to drink, sleep and utter abuses. He completely ignores the compulsion of her mother being the sole bread winner. He feels offended at how she lets the customers misbehave with her without answering back. He wants her mother to be courageous like his upper caste female teacher who reacted sharply against the male teacher in the school for insulting her. The story beautifully brings out the implicit sexual undertones of the language itself used by the customers. When the men in the market say, “Where are your mangoes from? *Choli* (blouse in English, also the name of Gaurya’s village) mangoes?...let me try with my own hands.”

Gaurya fights and strives hard to stop his mother from going to market. However, Indira gets ready which also forces Gaurya to take the bag and follow her. In the market, two drunken men try to harass Indira: “Indira spoke up firmly, ‘Yes,

yes. These are mangoes from a *choli*, but your mother's *choli*. If you are so interested in checking them out, go and find your mother's *choli*. Go.” Gaurya is ecstatic when he hears his mother talk back to these men, bravely standing her ground when he himself is frightened and feels helpless in their presence. Indira defends herself against the two drunken louts by boomerang the shame they attempt to throw at her. Gaurya ponders over how “words had a way of changing meaning quickly” (pp.86.).

The reluctant son who wished his mother were more dignified like his more upper-caste school teacher learns a lesson in true grit. Gaurya suddenly saw his mother not as slippery, sloppy, cooked greens, but one who “had a hard core inside her like the seed inside the mango — hard, strong and solid like a shell. In his mind that shell grew bigger and bigger like the big sky that hugged Seeta's field to its side. ‘Armour’”. Gaurya's way of looking at his mother shifts from being weak and sticky (like a mango) to strong and hard like the mango seed.

“Armor” (“Kavach”) not only explores how a schoolboy learns that his mother deflects sexual harassment, but also hints at complexities of the issue and the risks that women take challenging sexism at the workplace.

## 11.6 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

- i) Urmila Pawar was born in the Konkan district of Maharashtra in \_\_\_\_\_
- |         |         |
|---------|---------|
| a) 1942 | b) 1943 |
| c) 1944 | d) 1945 |
- ii) “Armour” was published in English in \_\_\_\_\_
- |         |         |
|---------|---------|
| a) 2012 | b) 2013 |
| c) 2014 | d) 2016 |
- iii) Indira is a lower caste woman who sells \_\_\_\_\_
- |            |           |
|------------|-----------|
| a) apples  | b) peas   |
| c) mangoes | d) grapes |
- iv) Gaurya is ashamed of his mother due to her \_\_\_\_\_



struggles to come to terms with the vulgarity he has just come to associate with his mother's profession of selling mangoes in the marketplace. Indira, a humble mango seller, is subjected to numerous taunts and ridicules. Gaurya tries hard to protect his mother from casteist abuse. He feels ashamed of Indira's tattered clothes and the way she dresses when she goes to the market to sell mangoes. However, he is unable to see the penury and poverty in which his mother is living. And has no bad words for his father. He completely ignores the compulsion of her mother being the sole bread winner. He feels offended at how she lets the customers misbehave with her without answering back. He wants her mother to be courageous like his upper caste female teacher who reacted sharply against the male teacher in the school for insulting her. The story beautifully brings out the implicit sexual undertones of the language itself used by the customers. When the men in the market say, "Where are your mangoes from? *Choli* (female top/blouse in English, also the name of Gaurya's village) mangoes?...let me try with my own hands," he fights and strives hard to stop his mother from going to market as he feels humiliated and sorry for his mother's exploitation and fears. However, Indira gets ready which also forces Gaurya to take the bag and follow her. In the market, two drunken men try to harass Indira: "Indira spoke up firmly, 'Yes, yes. These are mangoes from a *choli*, but your mother's *choli*. If you are so interested in checking them out, go and find your mother's *choli*. Go.'" Gaurya is ecstatic when he hears his mother talk throw back to these men, bravely standing her ground when he himself is frightened and throw feels helpless in their presence. Indira defends herself against the two drunken louts by boomerang the shame they attempt to throw at her. He ponders over how "words had a way of changing meaning quickly" (pp.86.).

The reluctant son who wished his mother were more dignified like his upper caste school teacher learns a lesson in true grit. Gaurya suddenly saw his mother not as slippery, sloppy, cooked greens, but one who "had a hard core inside her like the seed inside the mango — hard, strong and solid like a shell." In his mind that shell grew bigger and bigger like the big sky that hugged Seeta's field to its side like 'Armour'. The boy's way of looking at his mother shift from being weak and sticky (like a mango) to strong and hard like the mango seed only explores how a school boy learns that his mother deflects sexual harassment, but also hints at complexities of the issue and the risks that women face challenging sexism at the workplace.

**Q2. Why is Gaurya unhappy and disappointed?**

**Ans.** Refer to answer no. 1 and Summary and Analysis.

**Q3. What makes Gaurya change his perspective about his mother, Indira?**

**Ans.** Refer to answer no. 1 and Summary and Analysis.

**Q4. Discuss Urmila Pawar as a Dalit feminist writer.**

**Ans.** Refer to section 2, 3,4 and 5

**Q5. Critically analyse the character of Indira as a strong and bold woman.**

**Ans.** Refer to section 5

**Q6. Comment on the male character in the short story “Armour”.**

**Ans.**

## **11.9 LET US SUM UP**

The story “Armour” question the burden of caste, class and gender. It gives a glimpse of Dalit women’s resistance and dissent against the caste and sexist oppression. Urmila Pawar makes a rebellious act against the triple oppression of Dalit women through her short story “Armour” .

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**M.A.ENGLISHSEM-III      LESSONNO.12**  
**COURSECODE:ENG315      FEMALE LITERARY**  
**MAHASWETADEVI:“DRAUPADI”      UNIT-V**  
**TRADITION IN INDIA**

## **STRUCTURE**

- 12.1. Objectives**
- 12.2. AbouttheAuthor**
- 12.3. ListofAuthor’sWorks**
- 12.4. AbouttheStory“Draupadi”**
- 12.5. TextSummaryoftheStory“Draupadi”**
- 12.6. CriticalAnalysisoftheStory“Draupadi”**
- 12.7. MultipleChoiceQuestions**
- 12.8. AnswerKey**
- 12.9. ExaminationOrientedQuestions**
- 12.10. LetUsSumUp**
- 12.11. SuggestedReading**

### **12.1 OBJECTIVES**

TheobjectiveofthislessonistoacquaintthelearnerswiththeauthorMahasweta Devi and her works. The lesson gives the summary and presents different aspects of the story “Draupadi” to help the learners to develop a critical appreciation of the story.

### **12.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

#### **Life and Works of Mahasweta Devi**

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was a Bengali fiction writer, a social activist, a feminist and a crusader for the tribal communities. She was born in 1926 at Dhaka,

## 12.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Life and Works of Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was a Bengali fiction writer, a social activist, a feminist and a crusader for the tribal communities. She was born in 1926 at Dhaka, Bangladesh in a family of litterateurs and social workers. Manish Ghatak, her father, was a well-known poet and novelist of Kallol movement and her mother Dharitri Devi was a writer and social-worker. Mahasweta Devi's family included several culturally distinguished members. Ritwik Ghatak, a renowned filmmaker, was her paternal uncle and famous sculptor Sankha Chaudhury and Sachin Chaudhury, the founder-editor of the *Economic and Political Weekly of India* were her maternal uncles. She completed her schooling from Dhaka, but after the partition, she moved with her family to West Bengal. She completed her high school and graduated in English Honours from Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati University in Shantiniketan, where she came in touch with Rabindranath Tagore who taught her to be self-reliant and inspired her to put her thoughts and observations into words. Thereafter, she completed her Masters in English from the University of Calcutta.

Mahasweta Devi married an eminent playwright Bijon Bhattacharya in 1947, who was one of the founders of the Indian People's Theatre Association movement and writer of the historic play *Nabanna* which presented a shocking picture of the Great Bengal Famine. Her son, Nabarun Bhattacharya was born in 1948 who became a famous writer and political critic. He died on July 31, 2014 leaving behind a rich volume of works and a band of students and followers. She divorced Bijon Bhattacharya in 1962 and married the author Asit Gupta. Their relationship ended in 1976.

Before becoming a full-time writer, Mahasweta Devi went on to do various jobs such as selling soaps and writing letters in English for illiterate people. In 1964 she started working as a journalist and began teaching at Vijaygarh Jyotish Ray College. Her first book, *Jhansi'r Rani (The Queen of Jhansi)*, came in 1956 while she was still teaching at Vijaygarh College. Mahasweta Devi has written about 100 novels and has over 20 collections of short-stories to her credit, primarily written in Bengali. She is also famous for her pioneering work among the most downtrodden in the Indian

society—the lodhas, the dhikaros, the sabars, the tribals and the marginalized segments of West Bengal. She is remembered for her work with the Sabars (aka Saora), a scheduled tribe in the Purulia district of West Bengal, which earned her the title of “The Mother of the Sabars”. In her works, she has depicted the brutal oppression faced by the tribal people and untouchables because of powerful upper caste people. She became part of these tribal communities both as a social worker and writer. The inspiration for her stories stemmed from their struggles and discrimination. She worked with organisations like the West Bengal Oraon Welfare Society and the All Indian Vandhua Liberation Morcha for tribal welfare. She was also the founding member of Aboriginal United Association and a quarterly tribal magazine named *Bortika*, which she started in 1980. In her 90-year-long life, Devi won several awards such as the Sahitya Academy award (1979), the Padma Shree (1986), the Jnanpith (1997), the Magsaysay award (1997) and the Deshikottam award (1999). She was also shortlisted for Man Booker International Prize in 2009. Devi suffered a major heart attack and was admitted to Belle Vue Clinic in Kolkata where she died of multiple organ failure on 28 July 2016.

Mahasweta Devi is one of the boldest female writers of India. She wrote mainly in her mother tongue, Bengali. She has written over 175 books, of which a considerable number to date remains unpublished. Major part of her works include novels, novellas, collections of short stories, journalistic writings and plays, have been published in English. She wrote about the downtrodden, poor and the untouchables.

### **12.3 LIST OF MAHASWETA DEVI’S WRITINGS:**

- *Jhansir Rani* (1956, biography) *The Queen of Jhansi*
- *Hajar Churashir Maa* (No. 1084’s Mother) is one of her most widely read works, written during the height of Naxalite agitation—a militant communist uprising that was brutally repressed by the national government and led to the widespread murder of young rebels across Bengal. The novel focusses on the trauma of a mother (Sujata) who awakens one morning to the shattering news that her son (Brati) is lying dead in the morgue and her struggle to accept his decision to be a Naxalite. The story starts on the eve of Brati’s death anniversary when Sujata recollects her son starting from his birth. She meets Brati’s close

accomplice and tries to justify Brati's actions and his revolutionary mentalities. Throughout the story she is portrayed as a strong woman who fights against the odds. She is advised to forget her son, as people like her son are perilous for the nation. It's a story of a mother as she relives, years later, the death of her son in the political upheaval that left almost no home untouched. *Hajar Churashir Maa* also portrays the other faces of the human stories that emanated from the restless political adventure of the vibrant Bengali youth, which was ruthlessly cowed by the then Congress government until the Communist Party subsequently displaced them and again themselves ruthlessly cowed its opponents.

- *Aranyer Adhikar* (1979, novel)
- *Agnigarbha* (1978, short stories collection)
- *Murti* (1979, short stories collection)
- *Neerete Megh* (1979, short stories collection)
- *Stanyadayani* (1980, short stories collection)
- *Chotti Munda Evam Tar Tir* (1980, short stories collection).
- **Breast Stories:** Originally written in Bengali the work was translated into English by feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1997. Her *Breast Stories* is a collection of three short stories titled: "Draupadi", "Behind the Bodice", and "Breast Giver". In the stories Devi represents the breast as more than a symbol of beauty or motherhood. She presents the body part as a harsh indictment of an exploitative social system and a weapon of resistance. Violence towards women in India has risen and Devi exposes the vicious system because of which such violence grows.

**"Draupadi":** It is the story of a tribal woman who lives in Bengal and her current status is described to be that of a Naxalite. She is an activist of the Naxalite movement of seventies in the West Bengal and also a fugitive on the run from the police. Dopdi Mejhan the protagonist of the story "Draupadi" is the incarnation of the epical Draupadi. She belongs to lower strata of society and being a woman suffers double marginalisation. Dopadi Mejhan and her husband Dulna Mejhan are representatives of their native community (Santhal

tribe) who are forced to serve their masters and get petty wages. Dulna and Dopdi worked as farmland labourers under Suraj Sahu their landlord. Dopdi and Dulna played important part in the murder of Suraj Sahu as he occupied all the upper caste wells and tube wells during the draught in the village. Lower caste people were not allowed to take water even to quench their thirst. Government used all force available on them including kidnapping, murder and rape to evacuate the villages. People in villages were cordoned off and gunned down. Dopdi and Dulna faked their deaths and escaped. Government officials got frustrated over their escape and in rage butchered many Santhals in various parts of West Bengal but could not locate Dulna and Dopdi. They kept hiding and communicating vital information. Ultimately Dulna is shot dead while drinking water in a pool at Jharkani forest, the hide out for activists. Posters regarding escape of Dopdi and Dulna are everywhere. At last Dopdi who is hiding in the forest area of Jharkhani belt is captured by Senanayak, the army official. She gets stripped in the dark and dreadful wild world of a jungle where no divine power comes to her rescue. Dopdi is tortured, gangraped by the army mercilessly on Senanayak's order but no one comes to her rescue. Next morning, she is brought to camp and her white piece of cloth is thrown over her naked body, but she tears it into pieces and remains naked. She is given a pot of water but instead of drinking the water she pours it. Ironically, the rapists tell her to cover herself up, but dopdi defies them and remains naked in public. Senanayak is perplexed as she stands naked with her thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Senanayak shouts but she laughs at him. She comes closer to Senanayak and pushes him with her wounded breasts. Through her strong step it becomes clear that army could not succeed in breaking her psychologically through their weapon of rape. It is not male leadership but Dopdi's strength and courage to stand against patriarchy that brings resolution to the story.

**“Behind the Bodice”:** The story is about a migrant labourer Gangor and a photographer Upin who makes Gangor's breasts as an object of photography. The plot spins around Upin's obsession with Gangor's breasts. He compares her breasts with unnatural objects like his wife's silicone implants. He gets

stuck into series of events and eventually pushes Gangor with him which leads to Gangor's downfall and ultimately his own.

**“Breast-Giver”:** Jashoda the protagonist of the story is a marginalised Brahmin woman. Her husband loses both his feet and she has to work as a wet nurse for upper class family. She is given names like Mother and Milk-Mother during her service to the family. While she is useful, she is admired by the patriarchal society but as she reaches middle age she is no longer useful and thus is rejected by the families and forgotten by the society.

Many works of Mahasweta Devi have been adapted into Hindi films. *Sunghursh* (1968), a Hindi film was based on short story *Layli Asmaner Ayna*. *Rudaali* (1993) and *Hazaar Chaurasi Ki Maa* (1998) were also adapted into movies. *Maati Maay* (2006), was a Marathi film based on short story *Baayen*. *Gangor* (2010) was an Italian film based on short story *Choli Ke Peeche*. *Ullas* was a Bengali film based on three short stories—*Daur*, *Mahadu Ekti Rupkatha* and *Anna Aranya* released in 2012.

## 12.4 ABOUT THE STORY

“*Draupadi*” is a short story of around 20 pages originally written in Bengali by Mahasweta Devi. It was anthologised in the collection, *Breast Stories*, translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1981.

## 12.5 TEXT SUMMARY OF THE STORY “DRAUPADI”

Name Dopdi Mejhen, age 27, husband Dulna Majhi (deceased), domicile Cherakhan, Bankrahjarh, information whether dead or alive and/or assistance in arrest, one hundred rupees...an exchange between two medallioned *uniforms*.

FIRST MEDALLION. What's this, a tribal called Dopdi? The list of names I brought has nothing like it! How can anyone have an unlisted name?

SECOND MEDALLION. Draupadi Mejhen. Born the year her mother threshed rice at Surja Sahu (killed)'s at Bakuli. Surja Sahu's wife gave her the name.

FIRST. These oúcers like nothing better than to write as much as they can in English. What's all this stuff about her?

SECOND. *Most notorious* female. *Long wanted in many . . .*

*Dossier:* Dulna and Dopdi worked at harvests, *rotating* between Birbhum, Burdwan, Murshidabad and Bankura.

In 1971, in the famous *Operation Bakuli*, when three villages were *cordoned* off and *machine gunned*, they too lay on the ground, faking dead. In fact, they were the *main* culprits. Murdering Surja Sahu and his son, occupying *upper caste* wells and tube wells during the *drought*, not *surrendering* those three young men to the police. In all this they were the chief instigators. In the morning, at the time of the body count, the couple could not be found. The *blood sugar* level of Captain Arjan Singh, the *architect* of Bakuli, rose at once and proved yet again that diabetes can be a result of anxiety and depression. Diabetes has 12 husbands – among them *anxiety*.

Dulna and Dopdi went underground for a long time in a *Neanderthal* darkness. The Special Forces, attempting to pierce that dark by an armed search, compelled quite a few Santhals in the various districts of West Bengal to meet their Maker against their will. By the Indian Constitution, all human beings, regardless of caste or creed, are sacred. Still, accidents like this do happen. Two sorts of reasons:

(1) The underground couple's skill in self-concealment; (2) not merely the Santhals but all tribals of the Austro-Asiatic Munda tribes appear the same to the Special Forces.

In fact, all around the ill-famed forest of Jharkhani, which is *under* the jurisdiction of the police station at Bankrajharh (in this India of ours, even a worm is under a certain police station), even in the southeast and southwest corners, one comes across hair-raising details in the eye-witness records put together on the people who are suspected of attacking police stations, stealing guns (since the snatchers are not invariably well educated, they sometimes say 'give up your *chambers*' rather than give up your gun), killing grain brokers, landlords, moneylenders, law officers and bureaucrats. A black-skinned couple ululated like police *sirens* before the episode. They sang jubilantly in a savage tongue, incomprehensible even to the Santhals. Such as:

*Samaray hijulenako mar goekope*

and,

*Hendre rambra keche keche pundi rambra keche keche*

This proves conclusively that they are the cause of Captain Arjan Singh's diabetes.

Government procedure being as incomprehensible as the Male principle in Sankhya philosophy or Antonioni's early films, it was Arjan Singh who was sent once again on *Operation Forest Jharkhani*. Learning from intelligence that the above mentioned ululating and dancing couple was the escaped corpses, Arjan Singh fell for a bit into a *zombie*-like state and finally acquired so irrational a dread of black-skinned people that whenever he saw a black person in a ball-bag, he swooned, saying 'they're killing me', and drank and passed a lot of water. Neither uniform nor scriptures could relieve that depression. At long last, under the shadow of a *premature* and *forced retirement*, it was possible to present him at the desk of Mr Senanayak, the elderly Bengali *specialist* in combat and extreme-left politics.

Senanayak knows the activities and capacities of the opposition better than they themselves do. First, therefore, he presents an encomium on the military genius of the Sikhs. Then he explains further: is it only the opposition that should find power at the end of the barrel of a gun? Arjan Singh's power also explodes out of the *male organ* of a gun. Without a gun even the "five Ks" come to nothing in this day and age. These speeches he delivers to all and sundry. As a result, the fighting forces regain their confidence in the *Army Handbook*. It is not a book for everyone. It says that the most despicable and repulsive style of fighting is guerrilla warfare with primitive weapons. Annihilation at sight of any and all practitioners of such warfare is the sacred duty of every soldier. Dopdi and Dulna belong to the *category* of such fighters, for they too kill by means of hatchet and scythe, bow and arrow, etc., in fact, their fighting power is greater than the gentlemen's. Not all gentlemen become experts in the explosion of *chambers*; they think the power will come out on its own if the gun is held. But since Dulna and Dopdi are illiterate, their kinds have practised the use of weapons generation after generation.

Whatever Senanyak *practice*, in *theory* he respects the opposition. Respects them because they could be neither understood nor demolished if they were treated with the attitude, 'it's nothing but a bit of impertinent game-playing with guns'.

*In order to destroy the enemy, become one.* Thus, he understood them by

(*theoretically*) becoming one of them. He hopes to write on all this in the future. He has also decided that in his written work he will *demolish* the gentlemen and *highlight* the message of the harvest workers. These mental processes might seem complicated, but actually he is a simple man and is as pleased as his third great-uncle after a meal of turtle meat. In fact, he knows that, as in the old popular song, turn by turn the world will change. And in every world he must have the credentials to survive with honour. If necessary he will show the future to what extent he alone understands the matter in its proper perspective. He knows very well that what he is doing today the future will forget, but he also knows that if he can change colour from world to world, he can represent the particular world in question. Today he is getting rid of the young by means of ‘*apprehension and elimination*’, but he knows people will soon forget the memory and lesson of blood. And at the same time, he, like Shakespeare, believes in delivering the world’s *legacy* into youth’s hands. He is Prospero as well.

At any rate, information is received that many young men and women, *batch by batch* and on jeeps, have attacked police station after police station, terrified and elated the region, and disappeared into the forest of Jharkhani. Since after escaping from Bakuli, Dopdi and Dulna have worked at the house of virtually every landowner, they can inform the killers about their targets and announce proudly that they too are soldiers, *rank and file*. Finally the impenetrable forest of Jharkhani is surrounded by real soldiers, the *army* enters and splits the battlefield. Soldiers in hiding guard the falls and springs that are the only source of drinking water; they are still guarding, still looking. On one such search, army informant Dukhiram Gharari saw a young Santhal man lying on his stomach on a flat stone, dipping his face to drink water. The soldiers shot him as he lay. As the .303 threw him off spread-eagled and brought bloody foam to his mouth, he roared ‘Ma-ho’ and then went limp. They realized later that it was the redoubtable Dulna Majhi.

What does ‘Ma-ho’ mean? Is this a violent *slogan* in the tribal language? Even after much thought, the Department of Defence could not be sure. Two tribal-specialist types are flown in from Calcutta, and they sweat over the dictionaries put together by worthies such as Hoffman–Jeffer and Golden–palmer. Finally the omniscient Senanayak summons Chamru, the water carrier of the *camp*. He giggles when he sees the two specialists, scratches his ear with his bidi, and says, the Santhals of

Maldah did say that when they began fighting at the time of King Gandhi! It's a battle cry. Who said 'Ma-ho' here? Did someone come from Maldah?

The problem is thus solved. Then, leaving Dulna's body on the stone, the soldiers climb the trees in green camouflage. They embrace the leafy boughs like so many great god pans and wait as the large red ants bite their private parts. To see if anyone comes to take away the body. This is the hunter's way, not the soldier's. But Senanayak knows that these brutes cannot be dispatched by the approved method. So he asks his men to draw the prey with a corpse as bait. All will come clear, he says. I have almost deciphered Dopdi's song.

The soldiers get going at his command. But no one comes to claim Dulna's corpse. At night the soldiers shoot at a scûe and, descending, discover that they have killed two hedgehogs copulating on dry leaves. Improvidently enough, the soldiers' jungle scout Dukhram gets a knife in the neck before he can claim the reward for Dulna's capture. Bearing Dulna's corpse, the soldiers suffer shooting pains as the ants, interrupted in their feast, begin to bite them. When Senanayak hears that no one has come to take the corpse, he slaps his *anti-Fascist paperback* copy of *The Deputy* and shouts, 'What?' immediately one of the tribal specialists runs in with a joy as naked and transparent as Archimedes' and says, 'Get up, *sir!* I have discovered the meaning of that 'hende rambra' stuff. It's Mundari *language*.

Thus, the search for Dopdi continues. In the forest *belt* of Jharkhani, the *Operation* continues – will continue. It is a carbuncle on the government's backside. Not to be cured by the tested ointment, not to burst with the appropriate herb. In the first phase the fugitives, ignorant of the forest's *topography*, are caught easily, and by the law of confrontation they are shot at the taxpayer's expense. By the law of confrontation, their eyeballs, intestines, stomachs, hearts, genitals, and soon become the food of fox, vulture, hyena, wildcat, ant and worm, and the untouchables go off happily to sell their bare skeletons.

They do not allow themselves to be captured in open combat in the next phase. Now it seems that they have found a trustworthy *courier*. Ten to one it's Dopdi. Dopdi loved Dulna more than her blood. No doubt it is she who is saving the fugitives now. 'They' is also a *hypothesis*.

Why?

How many went *originally*?

The answer is silence. About that there are many tales, many books in press. Best not to believe everything.

How many killed in six years' confrontation?

The answer is silence.

Why after confrontations are the skeletons discovered with arms broken or severed? Could armless men have fought? Why do the collar bones shake, why are legs and ribs crushed?

Two kinds of answer. Silence. Hurt rebuke in the eyes. Shame on you! Why bring this up? What will be will be . . .

How many left in the forest? The answer is silence.

A *legion*? Is it *justifiable* to maintain a large battalion in that wild area at the taxpayers' expense?

Answer: *Objection*. 'Wild area' is incorrect. The battalion is provided with supervised nutrition, arrangements to worship according to religion, opportunity to listen to "Bibidha Bharati" and to see Sanjeev Kumar and the lord Krishna face-to-face in the movie *This is Life*. No. The area is not wild.

How many are left? The answer is silence.

How many are left? Is there anyone *at all*? The answer is long.

Item: *Well, action* still goes on. Moneylenders, landlords, grain brokers, anonymous brothel keepers, ex-informants are still terrified. The hungry and naked are still defiant and irrepressible. In some *pockets* the harvest workers are getting a *better wage*. Villages sympathetic to the fugitives are still silent and hostile. These events cause one to think . . .

Where in this picture does Dopdi Mejhen fit?

She must have connections with the fugitives. The cause for fear is elsewhere. The ones who remain have lived a long time in the primitive world of the forest. They keep company with the poor harvest workers and the tribals. They must have forgotten

book-learning. Perhaps they are *orienting* their book-learning to the soil they live on and learning new combat and survival techniques. One can shoot and get rid of the ones whose only recourse is extrinsic book-learning and sincere intrinsic enthusiasm. Those who are working practically will not be exterminated so easily.

Therefore, *Operation Jharkhani Forest* cannot stop. Reason: the words of warning in the *Army Handbook*.

Catch Dopdi Mejhen. She will lead us to the others.

Dopdi was proceeding slowly, with some rice knotted into her belt. Mushai Tudu's wife had cooked her some. She does so occasionally. When the rice is cold, Dopdi knots it into her waist cloth and walks slowly. As she walked, she picked out and killed the lice in her hair. If she had some *kerosene*, she'd rub it into her scalp and get rid of her lice. Then she could wash her hair with baking soda. But the bastards put traps at every bend of the falls. If they smell *kerosene* in the water, they will follow the scent.

Dopdi!

She doesn't respond. She never responds when she hears her own name. She has seen in the panchayat oûce just today the notice for the reward in her name. Mushai Tudu's wife had said, what are you looking at? Who is Dopdi Mejhen! Money if you give her up!

How much?

Two – hundred!

Oh God!

Mushai's wife said outside the oûce: a lot of preparation this time. All new policemen.

Hm.

Don't come again.

Why?

Mushai's wife looked down. Tudu says that sahib has come again. If they catch you, the village, our huts . . .

They'll burn again.

Yes. And about Dukhiram.

The sahib knows?

Shomai and Budhna betrayed us. Where are they?

Ran away by train.

Dopdi thought of something. Then said, Go home. I don't know what will happen, if they catch me don't know me.

Can't you run away?

No. Tell me, how many times can I run away? What will they do if they catch me? They will *kounter* me. Let them.

Mushai's wife said, we have nowhere else to go. Dopdi said softly, I won't tell anyone's name.

Dopdi knows, has learned by hearing so often and so long, how one can come to terms with torture. If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue. That boy did it. They *kountered* him. When they *kounter* you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound. *Killed by police in an encounter . . . unknown male . . . age 22 . . .*

As she walked thinking these thoughts, Dopdi heard someone calling, Dopdi!

She didn't respond. She doesn't respond if called by her own name. Here her name is Upi Mejhen. But who calls? Spines of suspicion are always furred in her mind. Hearing 'Dopdi' they stiffen like a hedgehog's. Walking, she *unrolls the film* of known faces in her mind. Who? No shomra, shomra is on the run. Shomai and Budhna are also on the run, for other reasons. Not Golok, he is in Bakuli. Is it someone from Bakuli? After Bakuli, her and Dulna's names were Upi Mejhen, Matang Majhi. Here no one but Mushai and his wife knows their real names. Among the young gentlemen, not all of the previous *batches* knew.

That was a troubled time. Dopdi is confused when she thinks about it. *Operation* Bakuli in Bakuli. Surja Sahu arranged with Bididi Babu to dig two tube wells and three wells within the compound of his two houses. No water anywhere,

drought in Birbhum. Unlimited water at Surja Sahu's house, as clear as a crow's eye.

Get your water with *canal* tax, everything is burning.

What's my profit in increasing cultivation with tax money?

Everything's on fire.

Get out of here. I don't accept your panchayat non-sense. Increase cultivation with water. You want half the paddy for sharecropping. Everyone is happy with free paddy. Then give me paddy at home, give me money, I've learned my lesson trying to do you good.

What good did you do?

Have I not given water to the village?

You've given it to your kin Bhagunal.

Don't you get water?

No. The untouchables don't get water.

The quarrel began there. In the drought, human patience catches easily. Satish and Jugal from the village and that young gentleman, was Rana his name? Said a land-owning moneylender won't give a thing, put him down.

Surja Sahu's house was surrounded at night. Surja Sahu had brought out his gun. Surja was tied up with cow rope. His whitish eyeballs turned and turned. Dulna had said, I'll have the first blow, brothers. My great-grandfather took a bit of paddy from him, and I still give him free labour to repay that debt.

Dopdi had said, his mouth watered when he looked at me. I'll put out his eyes.

Surja Sahu. Then a *telegraphic message* from Shiuri. *Special train. Army.* The *jeep* didn't come up to Bakuli. *March-march-march.* The *crunch-crunch-crunch* of gravel under hobnailed boots. *Cordon up.* Commands on the *mike.* Jugal Mandal, Satish Mandal, Rana *alias* Prabir *alias* Dipak, Dulna Majhi–Dopdi Mejhen *surrender surrender surrender.* *No surrender surrender.* *Mow-mow-mow down the village.* putt-putt-putt-putt – *cordite* in the air – putt-putt – *round the clock* – putt-putt. *Flame thrower.* Bakuli is burning.

*More men and women, children...fire...fire. Close canal approach. Over-over-over by nightfall.* Dopdi and Dulna had crawled on their stomachs to safety.

They could not have reached Paltakuri after Bakuli. Bhupati and Tapa took them. Then it was decided that Dopdi and Dulna would work around the Jharkhani *belt*. Dulna had explained to Dopdi, Dear this is best! We won't get family and children this way. But who knows? Landowners and moneylenders and policemen might one day be wiped out!

Who called her from the back today?

Dopdi kept walking. Villages and fields, bush and rock – *Public Works Department* markers – sound of running steps at the back. Only one person running. Jharkhani forest still about two miles away. Now she thinks of nothing but entering the forest. She must let them know that the *police* have set up *notices* for her again. Must tell them that that bastard sahib has appeared again. Must change *hide-outs*. Also, the *plan* to do to Lakkhi Bera and Naran Bera what they did to Surja Sahu on account of the trouble over paying the field hands in Sandara must be cancelled. Shomai and Budhna knew everything. There was the *urgency* of great danger under Dopdi's ribs. Now she thought there was no shame as a Santhal in Shomai and Budhna's treachery. Dopdi's blood was the pure unadulterated black blood of Champabhumi. From Champa to Bakuli the rise and set of a million moons. The blood could have been contaminated; Dopdi felt proud of her forefathers. They stood guard over their women's blood in black armour. Shomai and Budhna are half-breeds. The fruits of war. Contributions to Radhabhumi by the American soldiers stationed at Shiandange. Otherwise crow would eat crow's flesh before Santhal would betray Santhal.

Footsteps at her back. The steps keep a distance. Rice in her belt, tobacco leaves tucked at her waist. Arijit, Malini, Shamu, Mantu – none of them smokes or even drinks tea. Tobacco leaves and limestone powder. Best medicine for scorpion bite. Nothing must be given away.

Dopdi turned left. This way is the *camp*. Two miles. This is not the way to the forest. But Dopdi will not enter the forest with a cop at her back.

I swear by my life. By my life Dulna, by my life. Nothing must be told.

The footsteps turn left. Dopdi touches her waist. In her palm the comfort of a half-moon. A baby scythe. The smiths at Jharkhani are fine artisans. Such an edge we'll put on it Upi, a hundred Dukhirams – thank god Dopdi is not a gentleman. Actually, perhaps they have understood scythe, hatchet and knife best. They do their work in silence. The lights of the *camp* at a distance. Why is Dopdi going this way? Stop a bit, it turns again. Huh! I can tell where I am if I wander all night with my eyes shut. I won't go in the forest, I won't lose him that way. I won't outrun him. You fucking jackal of a cop, deadly afraid of death, you can't run around in the forest. I'd run you out of breath, throw you in a ditch, and finish you off.

Not a word must be said. Dopdi has seen the new *camp*, she has sat in the *bus station*, passed the time of day, smoked a bidi and found out how many *police convoys* had arrived, how many *radio vans*. Squash four, onions seven, peppers fifty, a straightforward account. This information cannot now be passed on. They will understand Dopdi Mejhien has been kountered. Then they'll run. Arijit's voice. If anyone is caught, the others must catch the *timing* and *change* their *hideout*. If *Comrade* Dopdi arrives late, we will not remain. There will be a sign of where we've gone. No *comrade* will let the others be destroyed for her own sake.

Arijit's voice. The gurgle of water. The direction of the next *hideout* will be indicated by the tip of the wooden arrowhead under the stone.

Dopdi likes and understands this. Dulna died, but, let me tell you, he didn't lose anyone else's life. Because this was not in our heads to begin with, one was kountered for the other's trouble. Now a much harsher rule, easy and clear. Dopdi returns – good; doesn't return – *bad*. *Change hideout*. The clue will be such that the *opposition* won't see it, won't understand even if they do.

Footsteps at her back. Dopdi turns again. These three and a half miles of land and rocky ground are the best way to enter the forest. Dopdi has left that way behind. A little level ground ahead. Then rocks again. The *army* could not have struck *camp* on such rocky terrain. This area is quiet enough. It's like a maze, every hump looks like every other. That's fine. Dopdi will lead the cop to the burning 'ghat'. Patitpaban of Saranda had been sacrificed in the name of Kali of the Burning Ghats.

*Apprehend !*

A lump of rock stands up. Another. Yet another. The elder Senanayak was at once triumphant and despondent.

*If you want to destroy the enemy, become one.* He had done so. As long as six years ago he could anticipate their every move. He still can. Therefore he is elated. Since he has kept up with the literature, he has read *First Blood* and seen approval of his thought and work.

Dopdi couldn't trick him, he is unhappy about that. Two sorts of reasons. Six years ago he published an article about information storage in brain cells. He demonstrated in that piece that he supported this struggle from the point of view of the field hands. Dopdi is a field hand. *Veteran fighter. Search and destroy* Dopdi Mejhen is about to be *apprehended*. Will be *destroyed*. Regret.

*Halt !*

Dopdi stops short. The steps behind come around to the front. Under Dopdi's ribs the *canal* dam breaks. No hope. Surja Sahu's brother Rtoni Sahu. The two lumps of rock come forward. Shomai and Budhna. They had not escaped by train.

Arijit's voice. Just as you must know when you've won, you must also acknowledge defeat and start the activities of the next *stage*.

Now Dopdi spreads her arms, raises her face to the sky, turns towards the forest, and ululates with the force of her entire being. Once, twice, three times. At the third burst the birds in the trees at the outskirts of the forest awake and flap their wings. The echo of the call travels far.

Draupadi Mejhen was *apprehended* at 6.53 pm. It took an hour to get her to *camp*. Questioning took another hour exactly. No one touched her, and she was allowed to sit on a canvas camp stool. At 8.57 Senanayak's dinner hour approached, and saying, *Make her. Do the needful*, he disappeared.

Then a billion moons pass. A billion lunar years. Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon. Slowly the bloodied nail heads shift from her brain. Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood. Only the gag

has been removed. Incredible thirst. In case she says 'water' she catches her lower lip in her teeth. She senses that her vagina is bleeding. How many came to make her?

Shaming her, a tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. In the muddy moonlight she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she's made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven – then Draupadi had passed out.

She turns her eyes and sees something white. Her own cloth. Nothing else. Suddenly she hopes against hope. Perhaps they have abandoned her. For the foxes to devour. But she hears the scrape of feet. She turns her head, the guard leans on his bayonet and leers at her. Draupadi closes her eyes. She doesn't have to wait long. Again the process of making her begins. Goes on. The moon vomits a bit of light and goes to sleep. Only the dark remains. A compelled spread-eagled still body. Active *pistons* of flesh rise and fall, rise and fall over it.

Then morning comes.

Then Draupadi Mejhén is brought to the tent and thrown on the straw. Her piece of cloth is thrown over her body.

Then, after *breakfast*, after reading the newspaper and sending the radio message 'Draupadi Mejhén apprehended,' etc., Draupadi Mejhén is ordered to be brought in.

Suddenly there is trouble.

Draupadi sits up as soon as she hears 'Move!' and asks, where do you want me to go?

To the Burra sahib's tent. Where is the tent?

Over there.

Draupadi fixes her red eyes on the tent. Says, Come, I'll go.

The guard pushes the water pot forward.

Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth. Seeing such strange behaviour, the guard says, she's gone crazy, and runs for orders. He can lead the prisoner out but doesn't know what to do if the prisoner behaves incomprehensibly. So he goes to ask his superior.

The commotion is as if the alarm had sounded in a prison. Senanayak walks out surprised and sees Draupadi, naked, walking towards him in the bright sunlight with her head high. The nervous guards trail behind.

What is this? He is about to cry, but stops.

Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds.

What is this? He is about to bark.

Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, the object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?

Where are her clothes?

Won't put them on, *Sir*. Tearing them.

Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as her ululation, what's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?

She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, there isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, *kounter* me – come on, *kounter* me – ?

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed *target*, terribly afraid.

## **12.6 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE STORY “DRAUPADI”**

“Draupadi: A Story of Subaltern/Outcaste” or

“Draupadi: A Story of Rebel/Resistance against Oppression” or

A Feminist Reading of the story “Draupadi” or

“Draupadi”: A Story of Tribal Woman/ Marginalized Woman

Mahasweta Devi situates her story against the Naxalite movement (1967-71), the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) of West Bengal and the ancient Hindu epic of Mahabharata, engaging with the complex politics of Bengali identity and Indian nationhood. The tribal uprising against wealthy landlords brought upon the fury of the government which led to *Operation Bakuli* that sought to kill the so-called tribal rebels.

“*Draupadi*” is the story about Dopdi Mehjen, a woman who belongs to the Santhal tribe of West Bengal. She is a Robin Hood-like figure who with her husband, Dhulna, murders wealthy landlords and usurps their wells, which is the primary source of water for the village. The government attempts to subjugate these tribal rebel groups through many means: kidnapping, murder, rape. Dopdi is captured by Officer Senanayak who instructs the army officers to rape her to extract information about the rebel uprising.

Ironically, the same officers who violated her body, insist that she covers up once she is ‘done with’. Intransigently, Dopdi tears off her clothes and walks towards officer Senanayak, “...*naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts. Two wounds*”. Senanayak is shocked by her defiance as she stands before him “*with her hand on her hip*” as “*the object of [his] search*” and exclaims, “*There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed.*”

The story is stripped away from the Mahabharata’s grand narrative and royal attributes and situated in Champabhumi, a village in West Bengal. The ‘cheerharan’ of Draupadi is reconstructed in Devi’s story, subverting the narrative where Draupadi is rescued by Lord Krishna. Instead, in Devi’s narrative, Dopdi is not rescued, yet she continues to exercise her agency by refusing to be a victim, leaving the armed men “*terribly afraid*”.

Dopdi is a woman of strong mind and will as she defied the shame associated with rape and sexual abuse: which is extremely relevant to India today. Devi’s representation of Dopdi encapsulates what Spivak means by a gendered subaltern. Through the dislocation of the epic princess Draupadi to the tribal rebel Dopdi, Mahasweta Devi is able to present voices and perspectives otherwise unspoken and unheard of.

The Hindu mythology of the subaltern female body which is never questioned and only exploited is rejected by Devi. For example Goddess Durga in her form of Sati, 'a good wife,' self-immolates her body in pain over her father's abuse of her husband, Lord Shiva. Enraged, Lord Shiva dances over the universe with Sati's body on his shoulder. Lord Vishnu then dismembers her body, and her body parts are strewn over the universe. Each relic of Sati's body becomes a place for worship and pilgrimage. Also in the Mahabharata, Draupadi's marriage to all the Pandavas and her re-virginisation is another way in which the female body is exploited. In both, the case of Durga and Draupadi, what happens to their body is a result of patriarchy which denies them agency.

The character of Dopdi allows us to view the subaltern's identity vis-à-vis the hegemonic structures seen through the policemen and Officer Senanayek. Thus, Dopdi's body becomes a site of both the exertion of authoritarian power and of gendered resistance. Dopdi bears the torture as she is raped by many men through the encouragement of the voice of another man Arijit that urges her to save her comrades and not herself. However, the attack on her body fades this male authority's voice as she candidly reacts to the police. Her refusal to be clothed goes against the phallogocentric power, and the exploitation of her body gives her the agency to step away from the hegemonic patriarchy of the policemen.

Devi illustrates how any conflict or war results in the women's body being the primary targets of attack by men. In the contexts of both the Naxalite movement and the Bangladesh Liberation war, both men and women are tortured, but it is much worse for women as they additionally undergo sexual abuse. Thus, with Spivak's concepts on the subaltern in mind, through Dopdi, Devi represents the gendered subaltern subject who exists at the periphery of society and dares to go against the existing patriarchal structures.'

"*Draupadi*" is a narrative that is universal in its portrayal of women as the most brutal victims of conflict and war. This approval on the part of Officer Senanayak in the story for the officers to 'make her' is reminiscent of the situation of Bangladesh's Birangona and Japan's comfort women. At the end of the story as she confronts the army officers with her bare body, the body that was violated and tortured is also in

reverse used as a weapon. Even though Dopdi has been physically abused, she refuses to be emotionally wounded.

In “*Draupadi*”, Mahasweta Devi presents a strong woman who despite being marginalised and exploited transgresses conventional sexual and societal standards. Dopdi subverts the physicality of her body from powerlessness into powerful resistance. “*Draupadi*” recognises a woman’s body as an asset through which they can resist the socio-political objectification of their bodies and overcome oppression.

### 12.7 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. \_\_\_\_\_ is the protagonist of the short story “Draupadi”.  
(a) Senanayak (b) Dulna Mejhan  
(c) Suraj Sahu (d) DopdiMejhan
2. \_\_\_\_\_ is the husband of Dopdi Mejhan.  
(a) Dulna (b) Senanayak  
(c) Suraj Sahu (d) Government officer
3. Dopdi belongs to.....tribe.  
(a) Santhal (b) Lodhas  
(c) Sabars (d) Dhikaros
4. \_\_\_\_\_ captures Draupadi.  
(a) Dulna (b) Suraj  
(c) Government (d) Senanayak
5. Who controlled the water of the village and did not let the untouchable to touch the wells?  
(a) Surja Sahu (b) Budhna  
(c) Arjit (d) Dopdi
6. \_\_\_\_\_ gave Dopadi name Draupadi  
(a) Surja Sahu (b) Surja Sahu’s wife  
(c) Madhu (d) Maethili

7. In the story, who is called as the architect of Bakuli?
- (a) Arjit (b) Arjan Singh  
(c) Dulna (d) Surja Sahu
8. \_\_\_\_\_roared *Ma-ho* in the story when shot by army man.
- (a) Surja Sahu (b) Arjit  
(c) Arjan Singh (d) Dulna

### 12.8 ANSWER KEY

1. (d) 2. (a). 3 (a). 4. (d) 5. (a) 6. (b). 7 (b). 8 (d)

### 12.9 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

- Q1. Discuss Dopadi as a marginalized tribal woman.
- Q2. Comment on the ending of the story.
- Q3. Analyse the Dalit feminist issues presented in the story “Draupadi”
- Q4. Comment on the role of Senanayak.
- Q5. Discuss Dopadi’s struggle and resistance against oppression

### 12.10 LET US SUM UP

“Draupadi” is a short story written by Mahasweta Devi in Bengali. It is translated into English by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In the story, Dopdi Mejhen, around whom the story revolves, is portrayed as an illiterate, uneducated tribal woman. Yet she leads the politicized life amongst all because she is engaged in an armed struggle for the rights and freedom of the tribal people. The story presents the modern breaks with tradition and the development of new forms of discourse and harmonious with the women’s cause for the problems that in rejecting the binary structures of patriarchal discourses which are sight of the political, social and ideological forces of racism in our society.

### 12.11 SUGGESTED READING

Devi, Mahasweta. “Draupadi.” Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Writing and Sexual Difference. Critical Inquiry*. Winter 1981. pp. 381-402

“‘Draupadi’, Mahasweta Devi’s memorable short story, and still chillingly relevant.” 31 July 2016. <https://scroll.in/article/811931/draupadi-mahasweta-devi-memorable-short-story-and-still-chillingly-relevant>

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## INDIRA GOSWAMI'S "THE SIN"

### STRUCTURE

- 13.1 Objectives
- 13.2 About the Author and her works
- 13.3 Summary of the story "The Sin"
- 13.4 Multiple Choice Questions
- 13.5 Answer Key
- 13.6 Examination Oriented Questions
- 13.7 Let Us Sum up
- 13.8 Suggested Reading

### 13.1 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this lesson is to introduce the learner with Indira Goswami as an author and her literary works. The lesson provides a short summary of the story "The Sin" by Indira Goswami.

### 13.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND HER WORKS

Indira Goswami popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami is a prolific writer who has been mentioned as the greatest women writer in Assamese in the book *Masterpiece of Indian Literature*. She was born in the year 1942 to Shri Uma Kant Goswami and Smt. Ambika Devi, a well-known family of Amranga satra in Assam.

Her mother named her Mamoni which means mother's jewel and her father named her Indira as she was born on 14<sup>th</sup> of November. He felt her name would be a celebration on Nehru's birthday.

Indira Goswami started her schooling in the year 1946 from Latasil Primary School in Guwahati where she studied for two years. She appeared for her Matriculation examination in the year 1957 from Tarini Charan Girl's School, Guwahati and passed her intermediate examination from Handique Girls College, Guwahati in the year 1959. She was awarded bachelor's degree in Assamese Literature from Cotton College, Guwahati in 1962 and earned her master's degree in Assamese Literature from Guwahati University in 1964.

The literary journey of Indira Goswami started early in her life. In the year 1955, her short stories started appearing in the newspaper "Natun Asamiya". Editor Kirtinath Hazarika bought a turning point in her literary life. He encouraged and helped her to get grounded as a good short story writer. Indira Goswami's early stories were mostly translations of English stories. In the year 1960, after completing her intermediate examination, she wrote a radio play 'Bana Hansini', which was broadcast from Guwahati Radio Station that year.

In 1961, Indira Goswami's literary endeavours continued and her short story "Sei Aandhar Puhararu Adhik" ("That Darkness is Brighter than Light") was published in the Gauhati University journal. Her sincere and persistent efforts resulted into the publication of her first collection of short stories, "Chinaki Maram" ("The Familiar Love") by the well-known publisher of Guwahati, Lawyer's Book Stall, in the year 1962.

Indira Goswami met an engineer Madhavan Raisom Iyenger from Mysore, Karnataka. He worked on the construction of a bridge on river Brahmaputra. They became good friends and later decided to get married in the year 1965. She accompanied her husband on his different official postings all over the country. During her stay in Gujarat and Jammu and Kashmir she had a deep experience about the life in the construction camps and of the migratory labourers who came to work for the construction companies. In 1966, she wrote her first complete novel *Chenabor Shrota* (*The Chenab's Current*) based on the hard life of the workers who were brought by

the subcontractors to the work site for work. This novel published later in the year 1972 by Lawyer's Book Stall, Guwahati.

Unfortunately in the year 1967, Indira Goswami's husband was killed in an accident in Jammu and Kashmir State. This incident changed her life: she was gripped in depression and tried to commit suicide several times. However, with the passage of time, she realized she could come out of her pain and agony by giving vent to her emotions through writing.

In the year 1968, she left for Vrindavan to pursue her research under Prof. Upendra Chandra Lekharu. Her research was on the comparative study of the two Ramayanas of Madhav Kandali and Goswami Tulsidas. She was awarded the PhD degree by Gauhati University in 1973 for the thesis 'Comparative Study of Goswami Tulsidas's Ramcharit Manas and Madhav Kandali's Assamese Ramayana'. She did extensive research on the spread of *Ramayana* in Assam and other north-eastern region of India to show how the text reflects the social, political and cultural uniqueness of the region. Her substantial work *Ramayana from Ganga to Brahmaputra* published in 1996 received the International Tulsi Award in the year 1999.

During her stay at Vrindavan she witnessed the wretched condition of poor widows who came from across the country to the holy city of Lord Krishna in search of peace and salvation. Her novel *Neelkanthi Braja* on the miserable lives of the widows was published in 1970 in the special edition of Assam Bani. Her autobiography *Adhalekha Dastabez (An Unfinished Autobiography)* also contains a chapter on the Vrindavan widows. This autobiography was published in the year 1989 and Nepalese translation of it received the Sahitya Akademi award in the year 2000.

Indira Goswami's fiction generally deals with pain and sufferings of the oppressed and underprivileged. She lived at the construction sites to collect data and observe the life of the people about whom she was writing. While writing her novel *Mamore Dhara Taruwal (The Rusted Sword)*, she went through the papers of the workers' manifesto, their demands and the grievances not redressed. She won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for *Mamore Dhara Taruwal* in 1982.

Another novel *Datal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah (The Moth Eaten Howdah of Tusker)* written in 1988 deals with the lives of the share-croppers and Brahmin

widows in Assam. The novel boldly depicts the misery of these deprived classes in the background of the decaying social order of the Satra institution. Indira Goswami received the Basanti Devi Memorial Award of the Sahitya Sabha for this novel.

*Chinnamaster Manuhu (The Man from Chinnamasta)* is another significant novel on the social issues of Indian society. It is based on the Kamakhya Temple and its practice of sacrifice. In the earlier times, human sacrifice was performed but the British banned it. Animal sacrifice still practiced is defended by the temple priests. This novel raised a great deal of controversy and was severely opposed by the temple priests but the novel became one of her best sellers lately.

Novel *Tej aru Dhulire Dusharit Pristha (The Blood Stained Pages)* published in the year 1995 is based on the political violence and social unrest in the city of Delhi. It talks about the communal riots which broke out in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination. The narrative is told through the diary of a women protagonist, living alone in Delhi, and recording her first hand experience during the riots of 1984.

Indira Goswami has written several short stories. The subjects of her stories are generally the outcaste or the downtrodden of the society. Whether it be the Brahmin Widows, or the share croppers and poor peasants, or forsaken lovers, despondent youth, victims of riot or helpless animals, there has always been an element of pathos in her characters and her fictions. Her famous short stories collections are "Chinaki Maram" (1962), "Kaina" (1966), "Hridayek Nadir Nam" (1990), "Nirbachita Galpa" (1998) and "Priya Galpa" (1999).

In recognition of her contribution to Indian Literature, she was awarded the Jnanpith award, the highest literary award in India, in 2000. In the year 2002, Government of India decided to confer "Padma Shri" (fourth highest civilian award in India) to Indira Goswami but she refused to accept it. In an Interview with *The Times of India*, she said: "After getting the Jnanpith, my readers felt I deserved more than a Padma Shri. So in all humility I decided not to accept this award....I thanked the home minister for the award but told him that my reader's reaction to the award was not good and that I cannot accept it" (1 Feb. 2002). In the year 2008, Indira became the first Indian to get the esteemed "Principal Laureate Prince Claus Award"

in Netherland and in the year 2011, “Asom Ratna”, the highest civilian award in the state of Assam was bestowed on her.

Indira was an active social worker and she continued her social and community reach out activities till her death. She donated all her savings for the welfare of the people. She donated all the money she got from the “Prince Claus Award”, for building a hospital at her birthplace in Assam.

Besides fiction and research, she has contributed a lot at bringing the Government of India and the militant outfit United Liberation Forum of Assam (ULFA) to the negotiation table. The militant outfit had been fighting for secession of Assam from India. She had issued a public appeal to refrain from violence and start building a road of peace in Assam. Peace for her was not merely a settlement for two parties. It is peace for the people that she has spoken for. She tried to portray some of the impactful aspects of violence through her writings. Stories like *The Journey* or novellas like *Breaking the Begging Bowl* are the best examples of how lives of people transform and get affected under the shadow of violence.

On 29<sup>th</sup> November 2011, Indira Goswami left this world at the age of sixty-nine after earning for herself a distinctive place among Assamese writers. She has extended the horizon of Assamese novel through unusually fresh subjects and backgrounds.

### **13.3 SUMMARY OF THE STORY “THE SIN”**

A major reality for Indira Goswami seems to be voluptuousness. She juxtaposes it with death: the voluptuousness of life with the voluptuousness of death. The ecstatic longings, fulfilment and deprivations of life are traced by Goswami to their very terminations. And at this cul-de-sac, the sensations seem to rebound, developing a momentum in the reverse, and they swell death with the tumescence of life. In the psyche and personality of the Hindu young widow, cracked by thwarted voluptuousness, Goswami has undoubtedly hit upon the right ground for her explorations. In the short story, “The Sin”, this belief in the power of voluptuousness and its befogging of death comes in for forceful portrayal. In “The Sin”, the voluptuous appeal of Damayanti, the young widow, is a complement to the primitive urge of Pitambar to beget a son. Since his own wife is physically disabled, he is bent upon to

have one through any suitable-seeming, available woman. Damayanti is available. But she aborts the foetus, as she must, to make a living and avoid inconvenience. Pitambar digs up the buried foetus for a glimpse of his unborn son. In his act of exhumation, in the secrecy and underhandedness of it, we see, as through a row of backview mirrors, the same secrecy and underhandedness that mark the voluptuous temper and its gratification. In the exhumation, in short, we see encapsulated, the whole story of Damayanti and her illicit passions. If she is a goddess of fertility in secret, Pitambar's unearthing the earthed is also an act of fertilization in its significance, performed in secrecy

Note: the above extract is a review of the story "The Sin" by Raji Narasimhan published in 1987.

### 13.4 MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. Indira Goswami's works are originally written in \_\_\_\_\_ language
  - a. Assamese
  - b. English
  - c. Marathi
  - d. None of the above
2. \_\_\_\_\_ is her first complete novel
  - a. *The Chenab's Current*
  - b. *The Black Necked-Braja*
  - c. *The Rusted Sword*
  - d. None of the above
3. *The Chenab's Current* was first published in \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. 1968
  - b. 1966
  - c. 1967
  - d. None of the above
4. \_\_\_\_\_ is the protagonist of the story "The Sin"
  - a. Damayanti
  - b. Pitambar
  - c. Pitambar's wife
  - d. None of the above

### 13.5 ANSWER KEY

1. a; 2. a; 3. b; 4. a

### **13.6 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

- Q1. Attempt a character sketch of the character Damayanti.
- Q2. Critically analyse the victimization of Damayanti as widow.
- Q3. Comment on ending of the story “The Sin”.
- Q4. Write in detail about the theme of the story “The Sin”.
- Q5. Discuss the symbolism in the story “The Sin”.

### **13.7 LET US SUM UP**

Indira Goswami who has endured the sufferings of widowhood articulates the pain of widows in her most of the works. The story “The Sin” revolves around the victimization of a widow Damayanti who becomes an easy sexual prey at the hands of a man Pitambar who sees her as an available woman.

### **13.8 SUGGESTED READING**

Khaund, Malaya. *Indira Goswami (Mamoni Raisom): A Critical Study of Her Writings*. B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1994.

Narasimhan, Raji. “Voluptuousness of Life and Death.” *Indian Literature*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (118) (March-April, 1987), pp. 147-150.

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