

Block

4

SHORT STORY

UNIT 1**Introduction to the Short Story** **5**

UNIT 2**“The Lost Child” by Mulk Raj Anand** **17**

UNIT 3**“The Other Woman” by Dina Mehta** **27**

UNIT 4**“Swimming Lessons” by Rohinton Mistry** **45**

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BLOCK 4 INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Block 4 – the last Block of this course. In the previous three Blocks we discussed two novels and poetry by various Indian poets. In this Block we will be taking up the short story as a literary form.

Unit 1 deals with the main characteristics of a short story and some general guidelines on how to read a short story analytically. These will be of great help when you read the three stories prescribed in your course.

Unit 2 is devoted to a very popular story “The Lost Child” by Mulk Raj Anand.

Unit 3 deals with a story entitled “The Other Woman” by Dina Mehta.

In **Unit 4** we give you a story by Rohinton Mistry– “Swimming Lessons.”

All these stories are very interesting and readable as you will find out when you begin to actually read them. We hope that your reading of these stories will motivate you to read more short stories from India and around the world.



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UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE SHORT STORY

Structure

Objectives

Introduction

Characteristics of a Short Story

What is a Short Story?

How 'Short' is a Short Story?

What is a Short Story About?

What is it that Matters in a Short Story?

The Short Story and the Novel

The Rise and Development of the Short Story

The Rise of the Short Story

The Development of the Short Story

Some Hints on Reading a Short Story

Plot

Characters

Time and Place

Style

The Techniques of Story-Telling

Let Us Sum Up

Check Your Progress

OBJECTIVES

You will read three short stories in this Block. But before we begin to read them, let us look at the characteristics of the short story briefly, in this Unit. This will provide us with general guidelines on how to read a short story analytically. If you read this Unit carefully, you should be able to:

- explain what a short story is;
- outline the rise and development of the short story as a literary form;
- distinguish between a short story and a novel; and
- analyze the elements of a short story.

INTRODUCTION

In this Block, we shall read three short stories. But before we do that, we shall give you an introduction to the short story as a literary form. What is a short story? When was it first written? When we read a short story, what must we look for in order to decide whether it has artistic merit or not? These are some of the questions we shall address in this Unit.

We shall also discuss the main features of a short story. This will give you some idea about how to read a short story analytically. We must, however, point out that literary appreciation does not proceed like a mathematical exercise. We cannot acquire a set of critical formulae and apply these to each and every story that we come across. Such guidelines can only be of partial help. It is only by extensive reading and close analysis of a large number of short stories that we find we are getting better with practice.

We hope that you will not only read the stories in your course but will also read other stories from anthologies and magazines. We suggest that you complete the given exercises before looking at the answers provided at the end of the Unit.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SHORT STORY

You must have noticed that most discussions of literature concentrate on the novel, drama and poetry. The short story is often regarded as a sort of poor relation, not worth consideration. Katherine Mansfield a famous short story writer was once asked:

‘What do you do in life?’

‘I am a writer’.

‘Do you write dramas?’

‘No’. it sounded as if she were sorry she did not.

‘Do you write tragedies, novels, romance?’ I persisted, because she looked as if she could write these. ‘No’, she said, and with still deeper distress; ‘only short stories; just short stories’.

Later on she told me she felt so wretched at that moment she would have given anything if she could have answered at least one ‘yes’ to the ‘big’ things. (Quoted in Anthony Alpers, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (1980, p. 381).

It is clear that Mansfield is apologetic about writing short stories. On the other hand, there is another practitioner of the art, Edgar Allan Poe, who believes that the short story is superior to the novel. It is not necessary to agree with either of these opinions. Let us begin with the notion that the short story is equal to any other literary genre be it poetry, drama or the novel.

What is a Short Story?

We can all recognize a short story when we see one. But when it comes to defining a short story, there are problems. There are so many different kinds of short stories, that no single definition would cover all. So, at best, we can only attempt to define a short story in the most general terms.

A short story is a piece of prose fiction complete in itself and of a moderate length. This definition excludes all stories written in verse. For example, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, written in the closing years of the fourteenth century, can be seen as an interesting collection of stories, but as they are written in verse they cannot be taken as examples of the short story.

Moreover, a short story is different from a tale or **fable** because it is not just a story but a complex and developed literary form that can be traced only to the early nineteenth century. A **tales** is primarily an oral form. The oral tradition of story telling still exists in the villages of India where generations of children, sitting round the fire on a winter evening, still listen in awe to stories of fairies, gods and demons.

A **fable** is a short tale which usually conveys a moral. The characters in a fable are usually animals talking like human beings. Perhaps you are familiar with the tales of *Panchtantra* which is a collection of fables. Short stories are also different from parables. A **parable** is a story which presents a moral. The contemporary short story also has meaning, a point to be made, but it is not a parable because that meaning in itself is not important. A short story is also different from an **anecdote**. An anecdote relates an interesting happening or a series of happenings or events. A short story may also present these events. But the difference lies in the fact that in a short story these happenings or events are not important in themselves but are a manifestation of the true nature and significance of a character or situation.

How 'Short' is a Short Story?

It is difficult to establish the average length of a short story. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), an American short story writer, says that it requires 'from half an hour to one or two hours in its perusal'. Let us look at this prize-winning short story:

I was on the train from London to Edinburgh.
There was this man, seated across from me.
'Do you believe in ghosts?' he said,
'No', I said,
He disappeared.

Do you think this is a short story? It seems more like an anecdote. You will find that most stories are anecdotal but as we know, in a short story the events are not, in general, important in themselves but usually highlight a character/characters or situation. The point that has to be stressed here is that we can either find very short stories or rather long ones like those of Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) which can be called **novellas**. A novella is somewhere between a short story and the novel in length. Whatever the length, it should generally be possible to complete a short story at one sitting, as Poe has suggested.

What is a Short Story About?

A short story has an unlimited range of possible themes just like any other literary genre. A short story may be about a particular scene, a series of connected incidents, a moral issue, an aspect of life, a phase of character or an interesting experience. In sum, a short story can be about anything.

The modern short story may not even have a story, but it is certainly fictional. A short story illuminates some aspects of life or characters. A well-written short story must convey the impression of completeness. In

Short Story

some stories there is no clear cut ending or resolution of the crisis; yet the effect is one of organic unity. What do we mean by organic unity? It is not just a unity of a beginning, a middle and an end. The unity lies in the way the writer has given shape to a mass of details. As we know, a writer is faced with a range of possible ways in which to write the story. S/he must select the relevant details as it is not possible to narrate everything. The writer then works these selected details into a complete organic whole. What do we mean by 'organic whole'? for example, if we cut an arm off a body, the body is no longer an organic whole but is mutilated. Just as it is not possible to remove a single limb without mutilating the body, similarly in a well-constructed short story, it should not be possible to remove a single detail.

What is it that Matters in a Short Story?

Is it the writer's preoccupation with form? Or does the greatness of a story depend on the extent to which it has depicted the range of human experience? Is a short story great because of the writer's technique? Or does a short story have literary merit because of its originality of theme and style/ or is because a certain kind of story is in fashion? Or does a story matter because it has the power to move us? A short story defies exact definition. However, an effective short story must arouse and hold the reader's interest and must convey a sense of completeness, in a style that suits the content. All these elements then contribute to the final effect that the story may have.

Check Your Progress 1

Read the following questions and write your answers in the space provided. In case you have some doubts, you may go back to the previous section. Please try to write the answers in your own words.

- 1) Define the characteristics of a short story.

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- 2) What is the difference between...

- a) A short story and a tale.

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- b) A short story and an anecdote.

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c) A short story and a parable

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3) How short is a short story?

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4) What in your opinion are the elements that make a short story effective?

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THE SHORT STORY AND THE NOVEL

Let us now examine the similarities and differences between the short story and the novel. The novel and the short story are both written in prose, both are fictional and make use of varieties of prose such as narrative and descriptive. But it is in scope that they differ. A novel is wide-ranging and long, the short story is brief and deals with a limited subject. A short story is not a novel in a condensed form. You cannot summarize a novel and call it a short story.

In the novel, you will notice, the interest is spread over a larger area. In a short story, you will find a narrower focus, but a greater concentration of interest. For instance, in a novel there are many characters whereas in a short story you have only a very few characters or in some, only one. A novelist has the time and space to make his/her characters unfold and develop gradually, but the short story writer must create and reveal the characters in a few suggestive strokes.

In a novel, there is usually a main plot and several sub-plots. But in a short story you will find only one plot with one main aim. Each word used, helps in furthering the aim of the story. A novel may extend over several years but a short story usually covers a more limited time span. In a novel, the narrator may indulge in meditative remarks, digressions and detailed descriptions, but the short story writer achieves his/her effects by brevity. A short story may dispense with the narrator completely and achieve his/her effects by presenting events as they occur. S/he makes use of suggestion rather than explanation. These then are some of the ways in which the short story differs from the novel. It also makes us appreciate the fact that the art of story writing is not as simple as it may appear. It demands great mastery of technique so that an effect of brevity, unity, concentration and intensity is achieved.

We have already mentioned that the short story as a literary form only came to be written in the early nineteenth century. Let us then survey its rise and development.

1.4 THE RISE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SHORT STORY

Stories have always held a great fascination for us and you may remember many stories told to you as young children. Interest in stories is as old as human history. Even before the art of writing was known, early human beings must have narrated tales of the day's hunting or stories of gods and demons to one another. These were probably transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to the next. The oldest recorded example is probably the Egyptian tale of *The Two Brothers* dating from 3200 B.C. The *Jataka* (a collection of stories of Buddha's earlier incarnations) and *Panchatantra* tales (Sanskrit tales that are designed to impart worldly wisdom and are about animals) are India's contribution to the world of stories and have continued to interest people through the ages. These along with fables of Aesop (Greek fables with animals as characters and having a moral), stories in the Bible and the tales from the *Arabian Nights* are all precursors or forerunners of the short story.

The Rise of the Short Story

The short story as a literary form began to be written in the early nineteenth century. However, it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that the term 'short story' was used. The rise of the short story can be attributed to:

- a) the rise of the reading public; more and more people were beginning to read fiction in the nineteenth century;
- b) the increase in the number of periodicals which could publish fiction;
- c) widespread literacy; education was now more widely accessible;
- d) hurry and pace of modern life.

The first three factors also contributed to the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century. The novels written in those days were rather lengthy. In fact, in the nineteenth century, the three-decker novel was a popular phenomenon. A single novel usually came in three volumes. These days people do not have the time to read such long stories. Short stories, on the other hand, can be read while traveling or relaxing and do not require a substantial investment of time.

The Development of the Short Story

The short story developed in the hands of writers many of whom were also novelists. But as you will notice, the techniques of the novelist and the short story writer are to some extent similar as well as different. This may sound a bit confusing at this stage, but it will get clearer as you continue to read short stories and novels.

Let us now tell you about some well-known story writers, who were masters of this art. **Nathaniel Hawthorne** (1804-1864) is an American novelist and short story writer. Another famous nineteenth century American short story writer is **Edgar Allan Poe** (1809-1849). Both have written about the unusual and the terrible. Their stories are full of horror and the supernatural. Poe's story 'The Masque of the Red Death' is worth reading.

Guy de Maupassant (1850-93), a French writer is considered one of the masters of the short story. He wrote about the private joys and sorrows of individuals rather than about momentous events. Because of his acute observation, Maupassant portrayed the world as he saw it, describing it in clear and simple prose. His stories move swiftly and logically giving only the essential details of character and situation. His stories end with a sting in the tail or an ironic twist that takes the reader by surprise. Consider, for example, the ending of his famous story 'The Necklace'. A pretty and vain young wife of a clerk aspires to a higher social status on account of her extraordinary beauty. She borrows a diamond necklace from a rich friend to wear at the Minister's ball. She is a tremendous success as even the Minister notices her. But the fabulous evening carries the seeds of tragedy, for she loses the necklace. What then follows is a ten-year period of drudgery and deprivation to buy a necklace to replace the lost one. When she finally reveals this to her friend, from whom she had borrowed the necklace, the friend remarks: 'But mine was fake!' This, then, is the sting-in-the-tail, a technique that Anton Chekov (1860-1904), the Russian master of the story also adopted.

Anton Chekov's stories probe the tragic element of the trivial things in life. 'The Kiss' is the story of a shy young man who, during the course of a dinner-party, ventures into a dark room. Here he is kissed by a young lady who had probably mistaken him for her lover. The young man builds up an absurd romantic dream around this incident which only shatters when he finally realizes that the kiss was not meant for him. Chekov explores the pathos of the situation.

There have been great English short story writers starting with **R.L. Stevenson** (1850-1894). His stories feature evil action and moral corruption. **Thomas Hardy's** (1840-1928) *Wessex Tales* carry a sense of tragedy that pervades all Hardy's work. **Henry James** (1843-1946) and **Joseph Conrad** (1857-1924) were interested not so much in brevity as in form. The conventional short story has a beginning, a middle and an end. Recent stories are more open-ended, in the sense that there is no clear beginning, middle and end, as you will discover when you read the stories prescribed for you.

What about Indian short story writers? The short story as a literary form is popular in all the Indian languages and many of these short stories are translated into English. In fact the Sahitya Akademi encourages the translation of regional literatures into English and vice versa. Penguin also publishes translated short stories and if you come across *Deliverance and Other Stories* by **Premchand** and translated by David Ruben, you will find the collection most interesting. **Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Anita Desai and Kamala Das** are some of the famous Indian short story writers in English. That the short story is alive in India is quite clear from the fact that serials like 'Ek Kahani' are popular on TV.

The short story has developed in so many directions that it is impossible to list all the varieties within it. There are the short stories that one can find in popular periodicals and 'literary' short stories that are found in anthologies. When we buy a magazine which has short stories in it to read on a railway journey,

we often find these stories racy and full of interesting incidents. We read them purely for enjoyment. On the other hand, when we read a 'literary' short story we often find that along with enjoyment, it also contributes to our understanding of life and human nature. This distinction is similar to the difference between 'lowbrow' and 'highbrow' categories that we find applied to separate the 'popular' from what is considered 'great'.

SOME HINTS ON READING A SHORT STORY

Whenever we read a piece of literature, whether it is a poem, a novel or a play, we respond to it in many ways. One of the responses may be that we either like it or we don't. In any case, we should be able to say why we liked it or why it did not appeal to us.

Different persons like different kinds of stories and for different reasons. One may like a story because it immediately engages our attention. But does that alone constitute the merit of a story? When we read a story, no doubt, the development of the plot arrests our immediate attention. But along with this we also notice the way language is used, the particular style, the use of images, irony and symbolism. How effectively are time and place used? Are the descriptions vivid, relevant or redundant? What is the theme and what are the effects that the author wishes to achieve? These are some of the questions that we must keep in mind while reading a story.

Plot

Every story has a plot. It is the sequence of events or incidents of which a story is composed. These events or incidents are inter-related as one thing happens because of another. A well-constructed plot would conflict either between individuals, groups, the individual and forces such as nature, society, etc. It would also have elements of surprise and mystery. But above all, the plot must have unity, each event must grow logically out of the previous one.

Characters

All stories have characters. The main character is called the protagonist. How does the author present character? S/he either tells us about the character or shows him/her interacting with other characters in the story or reacting to different situations. This gives us an idea about what the character is like. How do we know if the presentation of character is successful? When the author is able to create a life-like character, we know that s/he has achieved his/her aim. It should seem as if the fictional character is someone whom we could meet in real life. In detective stories or stories where the action is dominant, characters are not significant.

As we know, in real life there are no perfectly good or purely evil characters but persons with complex virtues and vices. Similarly, fictional characters must have a range of different traits. And when we are writing a character sketch, we should not repeat what a person has done but what a person is. In short, we have to pick out the traits in his/her characters and just give a summary of the story.

Time and Place

Each story is set in a particular time and place. The author can either tell the story in a chronological sequence or may start at the end and keep going back and forth in time. Place is equally important and you should try to identify the details that form part of the setting of the story. The next point is to try and discover how the author has tried to use setting in order to heighten the effect of the story. For example, in horror stories, the setting is usually a dark ancient castle or a bleak graveyard. Thus setting contributes to the *atmosphere or mood of the story*. But setting is not important in all stories. In some stories, character may be important, in others, the situation. When we are reading a story, we must keep this aspect in mind.

Style

Each author has his/her own style. For example, it is possible to say that Mulk Raj Anand has a certain distinct style of writing but even then we must be aware that each author uses a different style in different works. When we try to analyze an author's style, we should try and determine whether his/her selection of words (diction) is precise and clear and whether the ideas or actions are conveyed vividly and powerfully.

The Techniques of Story-telling

R.L. Stevenson (1850-94) has described three ways of writing a story. The writer can either begin with a plot and fit characters into it, or s/he can begin with a character and choose incidents and situations to develop it. Further, an author may try to create a particular atmosphere by getting his characters and action to realize it. In earlier stories, the story-teller's personality would intrude into the narrative. In the modern short story, the author may not wish to make his/her presence felt but tries to convey the impression that the reader is witnessing or overhearing the story. The writer can make him/herself totally unobtrusive by recording the dialogue and actions objectively. In a first-person narrative, the author disappears completely and the reader enters directly into the experiences of the character/s. The author may make use of the omniscient point of view or take recourse to selective omniscience whereby we experience events from the point of view of what one or two characters see and hear. Some of the techniques of the novelist are also the techniques of the short story writer. But the story is working within the limitations of space and form therefore his/her task is all the more difficult. In a short story the author must:

- a) convey the impression of spontaneity;
- b) avoid intellectual comments and digressions;
- c) know when enough has been said;
- d) avoid too many explanations.

In short, as a story has limited form, the writer must work by suggestion rather than by long-drawn explanations. Different elements, like character, style, point of view, setting, cannot be analyzed in isolation, but must be seen as part of the larger whole. What is important is how far these elements contribute to the final effect of the story.

Each story would necessarily have a different effect on different people. It is for this reason that there can be many interpretations of a particular story. What

we wish to stress here is that your response to a story is as valid as that of anyone else. And as you read the stories in your course, we hope that you will not only enjoy them but will also read them analytically.

Check Your Progress II

Read the following story and answer the questions given below.

A SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE

Premchand

(Translated into English by David Rubin)

The servant of the nation said, ‘there is only one way to redeem the country and that is to treat the low as brothers, the outcastes as equals. In the world we are all brothers; no one is high, no one is low’.

The world cheered. ‘How sublime a vision, how compassionate a heart!’

His beautiful daughter Indira heard and was plunged into a sea of care.

The servant of the people embraced a young man of low caste.

The world said, ‘He is an angel, an apostle, the pilot of the ship of state!’

Indira watched and her eyes began to glow.

The servant of the people brought the young man of low caste inside the temple into the presence of God and said, ‘Our God is in poverty, in misfortune and in degradation’.

The world said, ‘How pure in heart he is! How wise!’

Indira looked and smiled.

Indira went to the servant of the people and said, ‘Respected father, I wish to marry Mohan’.

The servant of the people looked at her with loving eyes and asked, ‘Who is Mohan?’

Indira said joyously, ‘Mohan is the honest, brave and good young man you embraced and brought into the temple’.

The servant of the people looked at her with the eyes of doom and turned away.

1) What do you learn about the character of “a servant of the people”?

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2) Is the title of the story ironical? If so, elaborate.

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- 3) Comment briefly on Premchand's technique in this story.

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LET US SUM UP

Let us now recapitulate what we discussed in this Unit, We have looked at:

- the main characteristics of the short story;
- the difference between a short story and a tale, fable, parable, anecdote, novella and novel;
- the rise and development of the short story as a literary form;
- the aspects to look for when reading a short story.

Why do we read short stories? No, not for getting through examinations. Not purely for enjoyment, but also because they deepen our awareness of life. By illuminating some aspect of human life or behaviour, a short story presents an insight into the nature and conditions of our existence. You will read the stories that we have selected for you in the next three Units. We hope you will find it an interesting and rewarding experience.

ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) Even though it is difficult to define a short story exactly, it is (a) a piece of prose fiction, (b) complete in itself, (c) of moderate length. A short story as a literary form only dates back to the early nineteenth century. It is different from a tale, an anecdote and a parable.
- 2) a) A **tales** is generally an oral form of story-telling and has a long history. A **short story** on the other hand, is a developed literary form that can be traced only to the nineteenth century.
- b) An **anecdote** relates an event or a series of events. Even a short story may relate an event or a series of events but in a **short story** the events are not important in themselves. The focus is mainly on the character/s and situation.
- c) a **parable** is a story with a moral. It is the meaning that is important. A **short story** has meaning, but here that is not the central point.
- 3) Roughly a short story should require half an hour to one hour to read.
- 4) It must arouse and hold the readers' interest and convey a sense of completeness. The style should suit the content.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) The servant of the people seems noble indeed. Not only does he declare that all men are equal but he also embraces a young man of low caste. The public cheers as he leads this young man into the temple. The importance of this action becomes clear when we realize that when Premchand was writing, untouchability was widely prevalent in society and persons of low caste were denied entry into temples. The public adulation seems justified. It is only when Indira his own daughter expresses her desire to marry Mohan, the young man of low caste, that the real character of the “servant of the people” is exposed.
- 2) The title of the story is ironical. The man is only masquerading as a servant of the people. The story effectively exposes the hypocrisy and double standards of politicians who fool the public by such fake acts of virtue.
- 3) When discussing the technique, you can take into account the following points:
 - a) how Premchand works by suggestion rather than detail;
 - b) the omniscient narrator who ‘shows’ the actions of the “servant of the people” on the one hand and the effect on the public on the other.
 - c) The final sting-in-the tail or surprise ending.

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UNIT 2 “THE LOST CHILD” BY MULK RAJ ANAND

Structure

Objectives

Introduction

The Text of “The Lost Child”

Text

Glossary

Plot

Interpretation

Background

Prose Style

Let Us Sum Up

Answers to Check Your Progress

OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit carefully, you should be able to:

- delineate the plot;
- describe the background; and
- draw out the main features of Mulk Raj Anand’s prose style.

INTRODUCTION

In the present unit, we shall analyse “The Lost Child”——a short story written by an Indian English writer, Mulk Raj Anand. The author was born in Peshawar in 1905 and educated at the Universities of Punjab and London. He has written a number of novels and short stories.

His short story, “The Lost Child” deals with the experiences of a child who goes to a fair with his parents and asks for toys, sweets, flowers, etc. When the child gets lost later, he refuses to accept the things he asked for earlier and insists only on getting back to his father and mother.

THE TEXT OF “THE LOST CHILD”

Let us now read the story. The glossary at the end of the text will provide meanings and explanations of difficult words and phrases. Please keep a dictionary on hand in case you need to look up meanings of other difficult words.

Text

It was the festival of Spring. From the wintry shades of narrow lanes and alleys emerge **gaily clad humanity**, thick as a crowd of bright-coloured rabbits issuing

from a **warren**, and entering the flooded sea of sparkling silver sunshines outside the city gates, sped towards the fair. Some walked, some rode on horses, others sat, being carried in bamboo and bullock-carts. One little boy ran between his parents' legs, **brimming over with life and laughter**, as the joyous, smiling morning, with its open greetings and unashamed invitations to come away into the fields, full of flowers and songs.

'Come, child, come', called his parents, as he lagged behind, **arrested by the toys** in the shops that lined the way.

He hurried towards his parents, his feet obedient to their call, his eyes still lingering on the receding toys. As he came to where they had stopped to wait for him, he could not suppress the desire of his heart, even though he well knew the old, cold stare of refusal in their eyes.

'I want that toy,' he pleaded.

His father looked at him **red-eyed in his familiar tyrant's way**. His mother, **melted by the free spirit of the day**, was tender, and giving him her finger to catch, said:

'Look, child, what is before you'.

The faint disgust of the child's unfulfilled desire had hardly been quelled in the heavy, pouting sob of a breath, 'M-o-th-e-r', when the pleasure of what was before him filled his eager eyes. They had left the dust road on which they had walked so far to wend its weary way circuitously to the north, and had entered a footpath in a field.

It was a flowering mustard-field, pale, like melting gold, as it swept across miles and miles of even land, a river of yellow light, ebbing and falling with each fresh eddy of wild wind, and straying at places into broad, rich tributary streams, yet running in a constant sunny sweep towards the distant mirage of an ocean of silver light. Where it ended, on a side stood a dense group of low, mud walled houses put into relief both by the lower forms of a denser crowd of yellow-robed men and women and by high pitched sequence of whistling, creaking, squeaking, roaring, humming noises that rose from it, across the groves, to the blue-throated sky like the weird, strange sound of Siva's mad laughter.

The child looked up to his father and mother, saturated with the shrill joy and wonder of this vast glory, and feeling that they, too, wore the evidence of this pure delight in their faces, left the footpath and plunged headlong into the field, prancing like a young colt, his small feet chiming with the fitful gusts of wind that came winnowing from the fragrance of more distant fields.

A group of dragon-flies were bustling about on their gauzy, purple wings, intercepting the flight of a lone black bee or butterfly in search of sweet-perfume from the hearts of flowers. The child followed them in the air, with his gaze, till one of them would fold its wings and sit down, and he would try to catch it. But it would go, fluttering, flapping, hovering in the air, when he had almost caught it in his hands. One bold black bee, having evaded capture sought to tempt him by whining round his ear, and nearly settled on his lips, when his mother made a cautionary call:

‘Come, child, come; come on the footpath’.

He went towards his parents gaily, and walked abreast of them for a while, being, however, soon left behind, attracted by the little insects and worms along the footpath that were coming out teeming from their hiding-places to enjoy the sunshine.

‘Come, child, come,’ his parents called from the shade of a grove where they had seated themselves on the edge of a well. He ran towards them.

An old banyan here outstretched its powerful arms over the blossoming jack and jaman and neem and champak, and cast its shadows across beds of crimson gulmohur, as an old grandmother spreads her skirts over her young ones. The blushing blossoms freely offered their adoration to the sun, however, in spite of their protecting chaperon, by half uncovering themselves; and the sweet perfume of their pollen mingled with the soft, cool breeze that came and went in little puffs, only to be wafted aloft by a stronger gust.

A shower of young flowers fell upon the child as he entered the grove, and forgetting his parents, he began to gather the raining, petals in his hands, but lo! he heard the cooing of the doves and ran towards his parents, shouting; ‘The dove The dove!’ the raining petals dropped from his forgotten hand. A curious look was in his parents’ faces, till a koel struck out a note of love and released their pent-up souls.

‘Come, child come,’ they called to the child, who had now gone running in a wild caper round the banyan tree and, gathering him, they took the narrow, winding footpath which led to the fair from the mustard-fields.

As they neared the village, the child could see many other footpaths full of throngs, converging to the whirlpool of the fair, and felt at once repelled and fascinated by the confusion of the world he was entering.

A sweetmeat-seller hawked, ‘Gulab-jaman, rasgula, burfi, jalebi, at the corner of the entrance, and a crowd pressed round his counter at the foot of an architecture of many-coloured sweets, decorated with leaves of silver and gold. The child stared open-eyed, and his mouth watered for the burfi that was his favourite sweet. ‘I want that burfi’, he slowly murmured. But he half knew as he made the request that it would not be heeded, because his parents would say he was greedy. So, without waiting for an answer, he moved on.

A flower-seller hawked, ‘A garland of gulmohur, a garland of gulmohur’. The child seemed irresistibly drawn by the implacable sweetness of the scents that came floating on the wings of the languid air. He went towards the basket where the flowers lay heaped and half murmured, ‘I want that garland’, but he well knew his parents would refuse to buy him these flowers because they would say they were cheap. So without waiting for an answer, he moved on.

A man stood holding a pole with yellow, red, green and purple balloons flying from it. The child was simply carried away by the rainbow glory of their silken colours, and he was possessed by an overwhelming desire to possess them all. But he well knew his parents would never buy him the balloons, because they would say he was too old to play with such toys. So he walked on farther.

A juggler stood playing a flute to a snake which coiled itself in a basket, its head raised in a graceful bend like the neck of a swan, while the music stole

into its invisible ears like the gentle rippling of a miniature water-fall. The child went towards the juggler. But knowing his parents had forbidden him to hear such coarse music as the jugglers play, he proceeded farther.

There was a roundabout in full swing. Men, women and children, carried in a whirling motion, shrieked and cried with dizzy laughter. The child watched them intently going round and round, a pink blush of a smile on his face, his eyes rippling with the same movement, his lips half parted in amazement, till he felt he himself was being carried round. The ring seemed to go fiercely at first, then gradually it began to move less fast. Presently, the child, rapt, his finger in his mouth, beheld it stop. This time, before his over-powering love of his anticipated sensation of movement had been chilled by the fact of his parents' eternal denial, he made a bold request: 'I want to go on the roundabout, please father, mother.'

There was no reply. He turned to look at his parents. They were not there, ahead of him. He turned to look on the side. They were not there. He looked behind. There was no sign of them.

A full, deep cry arose within his dry throat, and with a sudden jerk of his body he ran from where he stood, crying in fear, 'Mother, father'. Tears rained down from his eyes, heavy and fierce, his flushed face was convulsed with fear. Panic stricken, he ran to one side first, then to the other, before and aft in all directions, with a moist, shrill breath now, his throat being wet with the swallowing of his spittle. His yellow turban came untied, and his clothes, wet with perspiration, became muddy where the dust had mixed with the sweat of his body. His light frame seemed heavy as a mass of lead.

Having run to and fro in a sheer rage of running for a while, he stood defeated, his cries suppressed into sobs. At little distances on the green grass he could see, through his filmy eyes, men and women talking. He tried to look intently among the patches of bright yellow clothes, but there was no sign of his father and mother among these people, who seemed to laugh and talk just for the sake of laughing and talking. He ran again, this time to a shrine to which people seemed to be crowding. Every little inch of space here was congested with men, but he ran through people's legs, his little sob lingering, 'mother, father.' Near the entrance of the temple, however, the crowd became very thick: men jostled each other—heavy men, with flashing, murderous eyes and hefty shoulders. The poor child struggled to carve a way between their feet, but, knocked to and fro by their brutal paws, he might have been trampled underfoot, had he not shrieked at the highest pitch of his voice, 'Father, mother.' A man in the surging crowd heard his groan, and stopping with very great difficulty, lifted him up on his arms.

'How did you get there, child? Whose baby are you?' the man asked as he steered clear of the mass.

The child wept more bitterly than ever now and only cried,

'I want my mother, I want my father'.

The man tried to soothe him by taking him up to the round-about. 'Will you have a lift on the horses?' he gently asked as he approached the ring.

The child's throat tore into a thousand shrill sobs and he only shouted, 'I want my mother, I want my father.'

The man headed towards the place where the juggler still played on the flute to the dancing cobra.

‘Listen to that nice music, child,’ he pleaded.

But the child shut his ears with his finger and shouted his double-pitched strain, ‘I want my mother, I want my father.’

The man took him near the balloons, thinking the bright colours of the balls would distract the child’s attention and quieten him. ‘Would you like a rainbow-coloured balloon? He persuasively asked.

But the child turned his eyes from the flying balloons and just sobbed, ‘ I want my father.’

The man, still importunate in his kindly desire to make the child happy, bore him to the gate where the flower-seller stood.’ Look. Can you smell these nice flowers, child? Would you like a garland to put round your neck?’

The child turned his nose away from the basket and reiterated his sob, ‘ I want my mother, I want my father.’

Thinking to humour his disconsolate mind by a gift of sweets, the man took him to the counter of the sweet-shop. ‘What sweets would you like, child?’ he asked.

The child turned his face from the sweet-shop and only sobbed, ‘I want my mother, I want my father.’

Glossary

gaily clad humanity : colourfully dressed people going to the fair.

warren : piece of land where rabbits breed or abound.

brimming over with life and laughter : coverflowing with joy and laughter.

arrested by the toys : The child stopped, attracted by the toys.

red-eyed in his familiar tyrant’s way : As usual, his father looked stern and harsh with red, angry eyes.

melted by the free spirit of the day : softened by the gay and happy atmosphere.

PLOT

It is the festival of Spring. A child, who goes to a fair, is enchanted by the spectacle of shops, displaying various items on sale: The child first wants to buy a toy; but his intense desire to possess the toy remains unfulfilled because his father looks at him “red-eyed in his familiar tyrant’s way”; his mouth waters for the *burfi* which is his favourite sweet, but he suppresses his desire because “his plea would not be heeded”; next he is irresistibly drawn by the colourful garland of gulmohur sold by a flower-seller; but he knows very well that his parents would refuse to buy the garland for him. Later, he is possessed by an overwhelming desire to have the balloons with ‘the rainbow glory of their silken colours’, but he knows that his parents will forbid him on the ground that he is too old to play with such toys; he wants to listen to the juggler’s

Short Story

music that steals into the snake's invisible ears, but he knows that his parents will not permit him to hear such "coarse music". At last, forgetting for a moment the thought of "his parents eternal denial", the child makes a bold request to allow him to go on the merry-go-round and turns to them only to discover—to his dismay—that they are missing. "A full, deep cry arose within his dry throat, and with a sudden jerk of his body he ran from where he stood, crying in fear, 'Mother, Father'. Tears rained down from his eyes, heavy and fierce, his flushed face was convulsed with fear".

Here the story reaches a climax – a point of maximum emotional intensity or revelation.

A man takes pity on the panic-stricken boy and tries to console him by offering sweets, a garland, balloons, and a ride on the round-about. But the child is no longer tempted by such things as his foremost longing is to find his parents without whom he is lost. "I want my mother, I want my father".

Check your Progress 1

Having read the story now, you should be able to answer the following:

- i) Who is the narrator of this story? (2 sentences)

.....
.....
.....

- i) What is the mode of narration? (50 words)

.....
.....
.....

INTERPRETATION

At this stage we want to put some more questions:

- i) Can you interpret this story at different levels?

- i) If you say 'yes', answer the second question:

Do you think this story is symbolic?

Our answers to these two questions are in the affirmative. It means: It is possible to interpret this story at different levels; and this story has symbolic significance also. We presume that you agree with us on these points. Let us now proceed further in our discussion.

We have said that it is possible to interpret the story at least on two levels. They are as follows:

- a) **At the surface level**, it appears that the child in the story—like any child—longs for attractive things such as toys, sweets, balloons, and flowers; but once he loses his parents, he loses interest in the things he asked for earlier and insists on finding his father and mother.

- b) **At a deeper level** (or metaphysical level), the story is symbolic. The child represents human beings in general; the fair symbolizes the world. The attractions in the fair appeal to the senses, toys appeal to the eyes (and mind, in general), burfi appeals to the palate, flowers have visual and olfactory appeal, balloons have visual appeal, and music has aural appeal. In other words, these attractions represent several pleasures or these are the temptations that human beings come across in the fair of the world.

The parents in the story represent God. Finally, the lost child represents human beings who are lost in the pleasures/temptations of the world fair and have lost touch with God. With a relevant quotation from the author of the story, we shall end this discussion:

“remembering our aphorism of Guru Nanak that we are all children lost in the world-fair’, I wrote an allegory entitled ‘The Lost Child.....’”(Mulk Raj Anand, “Why I write?” *Perspectives on Mulk Raj Anand*, ed. K.K. Sharma (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1978, p. 3)

Have you noticed that the plot of ‘The Lost Child’ is based on a situation but not a character?

BACKGROUND

Background or physical setting evokes a particular atmosphere. ‘Atmosphere’ creates the psychological and the physical effects appropriate to the theme of the story.

In ‘The Lost Child’, the author blends the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the general, the individual and the collective to create the proper atmosphere for the development of the theme.

The child is a particular child; yet he does not have a name; he does not belong to any time nor does he belong to any particular locale. The experience unfolded is so concrete that it seems to be time-bound, but we do not know when it takes place. The child is every child. The locale is a specific place as well as a general location which can be any where in the world. The father and the mother are the child’s, at the same time they are the father, and mother of any child.

A discussion on the background would invariably include the analysis of prose style. So take a look at the expressions used by the author to create the atmosphere and come back to the Unit.

PROSE STYLE

We presume that you have read the story again. You must have noticed that the following expressions are used by Anand to create the proper festive mood:

Festival of spring; a gaily clad humanity; a crowd of bright-coloured humanity; flooded sea of sparkling silver sunshine; brimming over with life and laughter;

Also Anand uses the following **visual** images:

Bright-coloured rabbits; a flowering mustard field; ocean of silver light; holding of pale with yellow, red, green and purple balloons flying from it;

Short Story

Moreover, you can find the following **aural** images:

High-pitched sequence of whistling, creaking, squeaking, roaring, humming, noises; the gentle rippling of a miniature water-fall, the wind, strange sound of Siva’s mad laughter. Also, the following **olfactory** and **tactile** images are used by Anand: Sweet perfume from the hearts of flowers; the sweet perfume of their pollen mingled with the soft, cool breeze; the implacable sweetness of the scents that came floating on the wings of the languid air;

You must have noticed that the following Indian words are used by Anand: Jaman, neem; champak; gulmohur; koel; gulab-jaman; resgula, burfi, jalebi.

Further, with concrete details and with striking directness, Anand describes various scenes in the story. For instance, Anand describes the critical moment when the child is shocked into the realization that his parents have disappeared in the crowd as follows:

“There was no reply. He turned to look at his parents. They were not there, ahead of him. He turned to look on the side. They were not there. He looked behind. There was no sign of them.”

A full, deep cry rose within his dry throat, and with a sudden jerk of his body he ran from where he stood, crying in fear, ‘Mother Father’ Tears rolled down from his eyes, heavy and fierce; his flushed face was convulsed with fear. Panic-stricken, he ran to one side first, then to the other, before and after in all directions, knowing not where to go.

To recapitulate: with various types of images—visual, aural, and olfactory and with concrete details, Anand creates the proper atmosphere for the development of the theme.

Check Your Progress II

Read the following questions and write the answers in the space provided:

A i) What made the father angry with his child? (30 words)

.....
.....
.....

i) What did the child want after he had lost his father and mother? (20 words)

.....
.....
.....

ii) Write two interpretations of the story. (60 words)

.....
.....
.....
.....

iv) How does Anand create atmosphere suitable to his theme? (100 words)

“The Lost Child” By
Mulk Raj Anand

.....
.....
.....

B ii) Match the items in Column A with their meanings in column B.

A	B
1) denser	of inferior quality
2) weird	sacred place
3) gaily	wet
4) vast	divert
5) evaded	bending
6) blossom	dejected
7) prancing	tempting
8) adoration	care
9) heed	worship
10) irresistible	jumping playfully
11) coarse	flowers
12) shrine	avoided
13) moist	very big
14) distract	unearthly
15) stooping	thicker
16) disconsolate	happily

LET US SUM UP

The story “The Lost Child” is narrated by a third-person narrator who does not intrude into the action. He is the objective observer describing, narrating and recording the events himself. It is possible to interpret the story at different levels. In the story, the narrator blends the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the general, the individual and the collective to create the proper atmosphere for the development of the theme. The author uses a number of visual, aural and olfactory images to make the scene and situation come alive.

ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- i) This story is narrated by a third person narrator.
- ii) While relating the story, the narrator uses the technique of ‘showing’. It means: he describes the fair, the longing of the child for various things, the parent’s reluctance to buy the things, the panic-stricken state of the child when he loses his parents, and the child’s insistence on finding his parents. Moreover, the author does not comment on the happenings or characters, but just describes the scene.

Check Your Progress II

- A
- i) Perhaps because he kept lagging behind. Also because his father knew that he would keep demanding things.
 - i) He only wanted to be reunited with them.
 - ii) At the surface level it is the story of a small boy attracted to the things at a fair which he wants. But after getting separated from his parents, he loses interest in all the objects and only wants to get reunited with his parents. At a deeper level the child represents all humans; the fair represents the world; the parents represent God; and the lost Child represents the people who have lost touch with God by becoming so engrossed in the materialistic world.
 - iv) By using visual, aural, olfactory images, Anand creates a suitable atmosphere.

B.	A	B
	1) denser	thicker
	2) weird	unearthly
	3) gaily	happily
	4) vast	very big
	5) evaded	avoided
	6) blossom	flower
	7) prancing	jumping playfully
	8) adoration	worship
	9) heed	care
	10) irresistible	tempting
	11) coarse	of inferior quality
	12) shrine	sacred place
	13) moist	wet
	14) distract	divert
	15) stooping	bending
	16) disconsolate	dejected

UNIT 3 “THE OTHER WOMAN” BY DINA MEHTA

Structure

Objectives

Introduction

“The Other Woman”

Text

Glossary

Discussion

Characters

Maganlal

Vimla

Sunil

Background

Prose Style

Let Us Sum Up

Answers to Check Your Progress

OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you should be able to:

- outline the plot of “The Other Woman”;
 - draw character sketches;
 - describe the atmosphere; and
 - point out the main features of the prose style.
-

INTRODUCTION

Dina Mehta lives in Mumbai, India. She was fiction editor with the *Illustrated Weekly of India* from 1976 to 1982. She has published two books of short stories, *The Other Woman and Other Stories* (1981) and *Miss Menon Did Not Believe in Magic and Other Stories* (1993). Her stories have also appeared in *Cosmopolitan* (USA), the *London Magazine*, *Homes and Gardens* (UK), and have been translated into German, French, and Japanese. She has written prize-winning plays like *Brides Are Not For Burning* which won first prize in the BBC International Playwriting Competition (1979), *The Myth Makers*, *Tiger Tiger*, *Getting Away with Murder* and *A Sister Like You*. She has also distinguished herself as a playwright for radio and television. Dina Mehta has published two novels, *Some Take a Lover* (1992) and *Mila in Love* (2003).

We shall now read and discuss the story called 'The Other Woman,' published in *The Other Woman and Other Stories* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1981). This story is full of funny descriptions and if you read the story carefully, you shall both enjoy the humour and engage with the social commentary on our contemporary society.

“THE OTHER WOMAN”

Text

Maganlal was thirty-six years old, a little fat, a little bald, and because of his **insomnia** he had learnt to fear the dark. Some time after midnight he was in the habit of walking bare-foot from room to room, switching on all the lights till the dark retreated outside the window, a **thwarted, grimacing** shape, trying to press its way in.

At thirty-nine minutes past twelve on this Wednesday night (or early Thursday morning, for he was **punctilious** about these things), Maganlal entered his study and switched on his reading lamp. His flat was fully ablaze, except for the bedroom which was like a dim cave with Vimla asleep on his bed in the heart of it. How could she snore so rhythmically when she was the cause, both immediate and remote, of his torment? There had been tears again at bedtime, accusations, and a slamming of the bathroom door. He had tried to reason with her, it had been a most earnest **monologue** delivered in three parts, from outside the locked door, stationed behind her dressing table stool (how inviting was the slender nape of her neck!) and hovering anxiously over her lace pillow. His words had revealed a truly **edifying** elevation of thought, he had been aglow with the power they wielded to dispel all base suspicions from her mind – when she had astonished him by falling asleep in the middle of a sentence. How could someone who looked like a **Madonna** be so perverse?

Hitching up his silk pyjamas, Maganlal seated himself at his desk, turned the key of the top right-hand drawer, and with **fastidious** care placed a handwritten manuscript before him. Would he be able to work? He sighed. Three years ago he had been a happy, industrious man. Three years ago, a bachelor full of romantic errors, he had thought of a wife as a fragile hand serving food on a gleaming **thali**, a voice calling to his children and questions framed with **deferential** air, as music and fragrance, and a warm ecstatic yielding in the nights. He frowned. He was caught, instead, in a thunderstorm and **buffeted** without respite: for she was now all **blare and rattle**, flashes and torrential fury.

Perhaps he should have heeded the **malicious** whispers at the time of the wedding as the first faint rumblings of a gathering storm. People of ill-will had been pleased to circulate the story that he never would have won his bride but for her prodigal brother who, within a year of his father's death, had impoverished the family. But Maganlal was not a man to listen to gossip: and whether sudden penury was the reason, or Vimla had by her own, deliberate, intelligent choice decided to devote the rest of her life to a brilliant writer, it was not for him to say. The fact remained, however, that when she married him he had six film scripts to his credit which even now, from the vantage point of a new perspective, he could not think was a mean contribution to the Hindi movie industry.

Maganlal slid further into his swivel chair, settling his ample, ghee-fed middle more comfortably within its depths. Truth was his God, so he had been quite outspoken about the fact that all his six scripts were, in one way or another, imitations of Hollywood movies. But in this modern age, who could assert with any authority that the East is East and West is West? One only had to look around, and what did one find? An **amalgam** of different cultures. A synthesis of contrary trends and values. A **Yehudi Menuhin** making music with a Ravi Shanker. **Mia Farrow** at the feet of **Mahesh Maharishi**. No wonder then that his scripts had reached out to embrace a little bit of everything: Songs with their popular blend of ragas and **jazz**—even the Beatles had come to India to attempt some such thing. Dances which were a cross between Kuchipudi and the shake. Exciting **melodrama**. Tickling humour. Long shots of his noble cultural heritage like the Taj Mahal and Khajuraho, close-ups of his chaste suffering Indian womanhood and sexy westernized vamps inclined to top-heavy contours and topless costumes—but were they really so different from the ancient Ajanta beauties? Further, he had skillfully disguised the Hollywood James Bond as the Indian Jit Bharati with sideburns and forlocks; and the role of the bouncing, irresistible counterspy had been played in six successive movies by the film find of the decade, Nikhil Fernandes, who had the kind of face men are tempted to punch in the nose, but which wrings sighs and caresses from women.

For a moment Maganlal’s face, with its sleepy, Buddha-like passivity, looked **wistful**. He had long suspected that even Vimla thrilled to Nikhil’s athletic charms, though she flared up unaccountably if he so much as hinted at it—and even though he would not have reproached her for it. For who can dictate to the heart? When Vimla had married him he had hoped for—what? That he would grow tall and spare and arrogant like Nikhil, even learn that sensual way of uncovering his teeth? That he would sprout a **cowlick** on his thinning head? We are all allowed a little fantasy. But it was not boastful to say that Nikhil had been a nonentity till *his* script had made him the idol of the Indian screen. Yes, his stories had been hot box-office material, even if his **wastrel** of a brother-in-law **sneered** at them. As for being a writer, he had overheard Sunil say to Vimla, the man is condemned to impotence. Of his prowess in other areas I am not competent to—. Here Maganlal had cleared his throat. It was his way of reminding people that he was there. The pair had not looked guilty. Vimla had not blushed and Sunil had bestowed on him from afar his amused and superior grin. It was possible, of course, that they had been talking about somebody else.

With determination Maganlal removed the gold top of his fountain pen. It did not matter if his **nerves were frayed**, if for the last four nights he had not slept at all. He hunched over his manuscript....and thought of his many good friends who were forever urging him to forget his scribbling and take a greater interest in the family jewellery business. It was, after all, his bread and butter. It accounted for this ownership flat in the **nouveau riche** neighbourhood, with its highly advertised view (*that* was a fraud because a new building was going up in front of his nose), the modern décor, the Chor Bazaar antiques, the servants, the two cars and the membership in two clubs. (His father, who still had a razor-sharp business brain, was content to reside in three overflowing rooms with his two younger brothers and their families in the congested part of the city). The income from the shop also met the whims of his wife who had a lively appreciation of things beautiful, becoming and expensive. But his heart

was in his writing, even if it was a profession with little honour and recompense in his country. His first screenplay had minted money for the producer, the distributors, the star and other celluloid satellites. It had also fetched him the miserable sum of Rs. 101, the odd rupee being benevolently thrown in to wish him luck. But he had derived from this maiden venture a satisfaction so keen that one had to possess the authentic temperament of an artist to really appreciate it. And Vimla, alas, had never understood this.

One night, in the Mercedes on their way home from the Silver Jubilee celebrations for the last movie of the series, *Jai, Jai, Jit*, they had quite an argument. Vimla had a degree in English Literature from Bombay University, and after pronouncing him profoundly ignorant and lamentably uncultured (thank God the chauffeur did not understand such excellent English) she had called Jit some interesting names, among them: a great prize ox, a **phallic** symbol, a nauseating **paragon**, an **indefatigable** imbecile.

Her **vehemence** shook him, but Maganlal had been very patient. “Even if he is all you have said, whatever it means, consider this Vimla: how to do without Jit Bharati? How to kill the hen that lays the golden eggs? How to slaughter the bull that has sired so numerous a **progeny** which if not of flawless pedigree are of a lucrative strain, you are having to admit?”

“What have the scripts you’ve written over the years earned for you? Why don’t you spend more time in your father’s jewellery shop?”

This stabbed him, but he attempted a feeble laugh. “Can an artist live by bread alone?”

The remark set her off in a new direction. If he *must* write, why didn’t he avoid the pretentious and the superficial, why didn’t he move away from the **clichés**? Why did he take no interest in the aesthetics of the cinema? He ought to read *Cahiers du Cinema*, he ought to read *Sight and Sound*, she was saying as they stopped for a red signal and the blank light of a street lamp fell on her mobile little mouth. He ought to study the work of Eisenstein and Renoir, the cinematographic technique of Ingmar Bergman, she was saying as the signal changed and they moved ahead. And she had talked most knowledgeably of the out-of-focus photography, of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and the New Wave Films, of Tapas Sen’s wizardry with lights, reverse printing, jump-cutting and whatnot before the car drew to a stop in front of their slim white perpendicular building, somnolent in the moonlight. And as they climbed the six synthetic marble steps to the archway before the row of elevators, she was urging him to ponder over Samuel Beckett’s only venture in films. Which had no dialogue in it, and the only sound one heard was “Sssh!”

He stared at her, aghast. “Are you meaning to say,” he had sputtered, “that I should submit a script with only “Ssshes” written all over it? What are you talking?” His blood pressure was dangerously up as he banged shut the elevator doors. With difficulty he contained himself during their ascent up the first fifteen floors, then burst out, “It is your brother who has set you up to mock at my work!”

She had not deigned to answer him immediately. He **abhorred** violence, but he wrenched open the doors as the elevator stopped on the seventeenth floor and crashed them shut behind him. It was after the servant had ushered them

in, in response to his imperious finger on the doorbell that she had said, misty-eyed. “I haven’t seen Sunil in months, and you know it!” And she had sailed past with an injured air and made straight for the bedroom.

If his brother-in-law had been just a ne’er-do-well, Maganlal would not have found it difficult to bear on his patient brow a certain amount of reflected **odium**. After all, every family has someone who does not make good. But it seemed that Sunil had a streak of brilliance in him which had been discovered by his early teachers, who had loudly **bruted** their faith in his ultimate success in life. Unfortunately, Sunil had dropped out of college in the second year because he maintained that the serious pursuit of an academic degree was somewhat foolish in the context of contemporary realities, and not conducive to the growth of one’s originality and talents. He also recognized that he was suffering from hypersensibility, and ordered himself a year or two of rest. It was during this period of elected idleness that his father died, and after devouring his **patrimony** and plunging the family into debt, Sunil had disappeared. At the time of Vimla’s wedding, he surfaced again, virtually in rags. But his attitude to Maganlal, even when he came to borrow money, was cocksure and faintly derisive. He had about him an unpleasant aura of self-confidence, a kind of relaxed insolence. His patronage, entwined with subtle amusement, had so confused Maganlal that he had parted with a considerable amount of cash: which had only confirmed Sunil in his opinion that his sister was about to marry a **bourgeois** simpleton. But as someone had to do something about salvaging the family fortunes, he could not very well object to the match.

Maganlal could have forgiven his brother-in-law his snobbery, were it not for Vimla’s **inexplicable** attitude towards him. He was still the outcast prince, the tragic hero, the oracle in exile. From time to time she sold remnants of her girlhood jewellery and begged Sunil to accept the money as her poor contribution towards his support. And each time Sunil who loved himself with tenderness, wondered what all the fuss was about, and accepted her sacrifice with the best grace in the world. He did not believe in money. He believed in enriching his sensibilities, refining his critical faculties, in “finding himself”. Who could tell, perhaps he would end up as a revolutionary, a professional lover of mankind. As an unemployed youth he could join the Naxalites. Or end his life in an ashram at Rishikesh. In the meanwhile he lived by his wits, a profession which afforded him a very slight margin of security.

But if Sunil’s future was thus still undecided, Maganlal had no doubts at all about his own. Following Vimla with firm steps into the bedroom, and seated beside her on the bed where she had collapsed in a moist, untidy heap without so much as removing her evening’s finery, he had told her at length and in no uncertain terms that he meant to continue his literary endeavours. He was committed to Jit, he insisted in a voice tremulous with emotion as he ripped off his jacket and tie and shoes—he was never really comfortable in Western clothes—and *he wore the pants in the family*, he shouted at her, before he proceeded to remove them.

But the mischief was done. The seed of discontent was sown that very night, and a sudden and profound trouble entered Maganlal’s heart. He could not sleep. In the days that followed he found to his despair that he could not write, either, and the bluff, weary tolerance with which he had endured the bumptious Jit for so many years, now seemed to him a mask of corruption.

After a prolonged period of sleeplessness and self-doubt, Maganlal tore up all his old notes and drafts, and began to work on a new screenplay, but what he wrote about now was his secret. He had never been happier. He was gloriously involved in his work, and spurred on in his efforts by the thought of the pride that would glow in Vimla's eyes when the scenario was completed. It would be his gift to her, a love-offering. How right she had been not to accept the mediocre in him! He wrote late into the night at the desk allotted to him at the film studio, but while he had once endlessly discussed Jit's high-jinks and escapades with a bored and stony-eyed Vimla, he could not now bear to speak about his work to anyone. He hugged the secret to himself, with a warm and increasingly beautiful sense of possession. It was a kind of wall, a fortress behind which he could retreat at will. His other tasks he performed perfunctorily and detachedly, all the while nursing this wonderful secret. On his friends he bestowed a passing look, a merely tolerant eye. And when he came to bed at preposterously late hours, he did not try to woo his wife with timid whispers or tentative touches in the dark, but fell asleep in strange solitary contentment, bearing the burden of an elaborate mystery.

At first Vimla did not appear to notice the change in him. Later on when she did, he thought her immediate feeling was one of relief that she need not endure his gaucheries in bed. For really he had no gift for the job (hadn't he been an amateur at everything, up to this point?) and she had been no help at all, she gave him no cues, so that lying beside her in bed he had suffered dreadfully from attacks of stage-fright. Even after three years nothing was taken for granted between them, all was precarious and agonized. His docility offended her as much as his fumbling importunities. He knew he tried too hard to please, and when at last she responded he was rather frightened by the miracle of it all. But suddenly he was liberated, and none of it was important any more.

He was totally unprepared, therefore, when the whole situation exploded with dramatic force one night, and his shocked denials, his explanations, his pleas availed him nothing; she suspected another woman. A tramp. A witch. A bitch. An actress, no doubt. He was bemused, seduced, enslaved by her, he spent riotous hours in her arms. In desperation he confessed his secret, and even brought home his precious manuscript from the studio, as evidence of his fidelity, but she pushed it away angrily. His abstracted looks told her he was miles away in unlawful memories of the woman who had usurped her place. His inertia in bed told her he was engaged in a disreputable **liaison**, and she was beside herself at such duplicity.

Night after night she demanded the name of her rival, and because she could not get it out of him, she was haunted by the thought that she was making poor use of her youth and beauty. And she who had been indifferent to his desire, was now bent on rousing it, and her behavior was not such as he would have commonly associated with demureness.

She turned to the gods in her extremity. When it was clear to her that her husband was absolutely consumed by the flame of his passion, she abstained from food every Tuesday and Saturday, to **coerce** her chosen deities to act in her favour. She also distributed alms freely to the beggars outside the Babulnath Temple on Mondays. When all this did not have the desired result, she grew bitter and **vindictive**, and with a wealth of details told him what she would do to the other woman if she ever got her hands on her; sewing her up in

a sack and casting her into the sea (the fate of ancient queens and concubines suspected of infidelity) was one of her more humane methods of elimination....

The strain of the feud began to tell on him, he could neither sleep nor work, but still she would not desist. She was voluble with reproaches for his faithlessness, and silent only with hostility. If he held his tongue she felt the **subterfuge** in his silences. If he argued with her, she heard the guilt in his long-winded peroration before it lulled her to sleep. His wakefulness, she felt, was well-merited, and if she slept deeply sometimes it was only because she had nothing on her conscience to make her toss.

Maganlal looked up from his manuscript, bleary-eyed. Not a line had been written but, mercifully, the dawn was creeping in. No true light was yet discernible at the window, it was the barest suggestion of morning, murky as a shallow pond, with no hint of sunrise. But it was enough.

He put down his pen and with fastidious care replaced the manuscript in the top right-hand drawer and turned the key. His chair creaked as he rose and switched off the reading lamp.

He walked from room to room, turning off all the lights. Then he went into his bedroom and switched off the dim night-light shaped like a tulip growing on the wall. Vimla was not awake yet. He laid himself down cautiously on his side of the bed.

He must have dozed off a little, for when he opened his eyes again there was more light in the room, and Vimla was no longer sleeping beside him. He lay there, wondering what time it was. From the front room he heard a murmur of voices. Who was Vimla talking to, so early in the morning?

Hitching up his pyjamas, Maganlal stood at the door of his living-room. Facing him, astride one of the leggy dining suite chairs turned back-to-front, and riding it as if it were a horse, sat Sunil, his unshaven chin supported on fists resting on the delicate rosewood frame. Maganlal cleared his throat and Sunil looked up. “Ah, there he is!” His expression grew extremely sardonic, and he winked at himself in the gilt-edged mirror on the opposite wall. “Talk of the devil!”

At the exclamation Vimla, who was sitting on a pouffe at his side rose stiffly to her feet and made to leave the room.

“Where do you think you are going, didi?” ...called out Sunil.

“Back to my room,” said Vimla haughtily, though there were signs of recent tears on her face. “I have no wish to speak to him.” And she slipped past Maganlal, careful not to touch him, as if to avoid contagion.

“Well well,” said Sunil to Maganlal, “sit down,” he waved one hand, “anywhere you like,” as if he owned the place.

For a moment Maganlal hesitated, then sat down on the divan covered with new peacock-blue tapestry, and crossed his legs. “You have something to say to me,” he said. He looked very dignified, like a bronze idol on a silk pedestal.

Across the room Sunil scratched at his stubble with a dirty nail and stared at him as if were an oddity of considerable scientific interest. “I simply would not have believed it,” he said at last. “I never would have thought you had it in you.”

Maganlal folded his hands over his rounded stomach. "I do not know what you are talking about."

Sunil got up abruptly from the chair and began to pace the room. It was obvious that he was prepared to enjoy himself. "You have made my sister very unhappy," he began.

"She has no cause to be unhappy," said Maganlal.

"You have not only deceived her," Sunil went on, "but you have also deceived me."

"I'm not aware of how—"

"Don't interrupt," snapped Sunil and took a deliberate turn round the room. "I had thought of you as a dullish chap, Maganlal. A nullity. As the useful appendage of a vibrant, intelligent woman." Here he paused dramatically before Maganlal. "I had looked upon your life with my sister as the tame chronicle of an estimable marriage. And all the while you were carrying on with another woman!" A peculiar note had crept into his voice, half ironic, half enthusiastic. It told Maganlal that by the mere fact of betraying his wife he had stolen a march over her; that by engaging in sinfulness he had adequately **bested** her. "Is she the first?" Sunil was demanding. "Is she the last? Who would have thought you capable of such uproarious seduction!"

"There is no other woman!" shouted Maganlal, outraged.

Sunil folded his arms across his chest. "No doubt you already see your passion in Technicolour."

"You are quite mistaken—"

"Your conduct has always been so exemplary, irreproachable, that this is an unheard-of audacity. Can't you see that you are miscast in this role?"

"Will you please believe me—"

Sunil held up his hand for silence. "What should happen to you, Maganlal," he said in measured tones, "is that you should be tied to a stake with fire under your feet. And over fire, copper, tulsī and ganga water you should be made to take an oath. What oath?" he stared at Maganlal with patrician distaste.

"That you will never again, on the pain of death, raise your eyes above the feet of any woman other than your wife."

For a wild moment Maganlal's world turned red as something was ignited within him. He leapt up, and with a ringing back-handed slap—which took him by surprise as much as Sunil—he wiped off the insolence on the thin clever face poised above his. And before his brother-in-law could summon his breath or his wits, Maganlal found himself insisting in a crazy, **stentorian** voice (which he had difficulty in recognizing as his own) that come what may, he would never give up this woman who was dearer to him than his life.

"Do your worst!" he shouted with a **swashbuckling** valour worthy of Jit himself. "I will not be parted from her! She is my soul! The fire of my loins! Many floods cannot quench it!" he was word perfect. "And I will bring all this crashing

down on my head—” he gestured violently, and with a flourish that almost bowled him over, succeeded in sending the heavy bronze figure of Nataraja flying across the room— “before I allow anyone to take her away from me—”

With a piteous cry and a swish of her batik raw-silk housecoat Vimla came running out of the bedroom and flung herself at his feet. “No,” she cried, “no no, I cannot bear this, I cannot, you will not cast me aside for this woman, I’m your wife....your wife!” and she clung to his feet, weeping with abandon and unconsciously impersonating the heroine of his fifthscript.

Above her Maganlal , not a little flustered that his life had changed gears and was swerving at an alarming angle from its predicted course, almost bent over to help her up when he met Sunil’s gaze across the room.

‘Out!’ said Maganlal to his helpless relative, pointing to the door with **totalitarian ire**. After the **purge** he cleared his throat nervously, and fixed his eye on the woman at his feet.

Glossary

insomnia	: difficulty in sleeping
thwarted	: frustrated.
grimacing	: to make an expression of pain, strong dislike, etc. in which the face twists in an ugly way.
punctilious	: behave correctly, very precise.
monologue	: a long speech by one person.
edifying	: improving your mind or intellect.
Madonna	: Mary, the mother of Christ.
fastidious	: giving too much attention to small details and wanting everything to be correct and perfect.
thali	: large plate used for eating food.
deferential	: to show respect and regard for someone.
buffeted	: shocked, knocked about.
blare and rattle	: to make an unpleasantly loud noise, and sound similar to a series of quickly repeated knocks.
malicious	: to cause harm to others with evil intentions.
amalgam	: a mixture or a combination of parts that create a complete whole.
Yehudi Menuhin	: Yehudi Menuhin (1916-1999) was a world famous Jewish American violinist and conductor, who took interest in yoga and Indian music.
Mia Farrow	: Hollywood actress (born 1935) who travelled to India in 1968 to learn Transcendental Meditation.

Mahesh Maharishi	: Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918-2008) is the founder of the Transcendental Meditation programme, which attracted a large number of foreign disciples including the Beatles to his ashram at Rishikesh.
Jazz	: a type of modern music with a rhythm in which the strong notes are usually not on the beat and which is usually improvised i.e. invented as it is played. It is of Afro-American origin.
melodrama	: a story, play or film in which the characters show stronger emotions than real people usually do.
wistful	: sad and thinking about something that is impossible.
cowlick	: a projecting lock of hair.
wastrel	: a wasteful or good for nothing person.
his nerves were frayed	: he was feeling anxious or upset.
nouveau riche	: people from a low social class, who have recently become very rich and like to show their wealth publicly by spending a lot of money.
Jai, Jai, Jit	: Victory of Jit.
phallic	: Symbolic of, shaped like, or related to the penis.
paragon	: a person or thing that is perfect.
indefatigable	: one who is always determined and energetic in attempting to achieve something and never willing to admit defeat.
imbecile	: a person who behaves in a stupid way, mentally deficient.
vehemence	: forcefulness or passion.
progeny	: children.
cliches	: a comment that is very often made and is, therefore, not original and not interesting.
abhorred	: hated,; disliked.
odium	: hate and strong disapproval.
bruited	: spread reports about.
patrimony	: possessions inherited from one's father.
bourgeois	: rich middle class.
inexplicable	: unable to be explained or understood.
liaison	: a sexual relationship, especially between two people not married to each other.

vindictive	: to intentionally hurt someone.
subterfuge	: tricky or deceitful way to get what you want.
pouffe	: a large firm cushion used as a low seat.
bested	: defeated, outwitted.
peroration	: last part of a speech or summarization.
stentorian	: loud and powerful
swashbuckling	: behaving in a brave and exciting way, especially like a fighter in the past.
hapless	: unlucky and usually unhappy.
Totalitarian	: a political system in which those in power have complete control and do not allow people to oppose them.
ire	: anger.
purge	: removal of unwanted members from an organization.

DISCUSSION

“The Other Woman” was published in the collection of short stories named after it, *The Other Woman, and Other Stories* (1981). It is both a humorous and a highly ironical account of the domestic strife between the protagonist, Maganlal and his wife. The story is a comment on shallow sophistication and a superficial understanding of the “aesthetic” that is completely divorced from the actual and the mundane reality of our lives.

Maganlal is a married man of thirty-six, who suffers from insomnia or the inability to sleep and is afraid of the dark. It is night and he has switched on all the lights in the house except for the room where his wife, Vimla is fast asleep. He sits at his reading desk to work on his manuscript but his thoughts are on his wife who has accused him of something serious and then has fallen asleep in the middle of his explanations. This strain of humour is interspersed with the most serious moments throughout the story.

We are told that he had married three years ago and marriage to Vimla had shattered his fanciful image of a docile wife. Also, at the time of the marriage, people had suggested that he had won the hand of Vimla only due to his wealth, as Vimla’s brother had squandered away his dead father’s money leaving the family destitute. Maganlal, however, had not paid attention to these stories at that time because he was proud of his success as a scriptwriter for six super-hit Hindi movies and considered himself a brilliant writer.

Maganlal admits that his scripts are copies of Hollywood movies to which he has added the right mix of all the popular ingredients like comedy, fusion music and dance, romance, and action but this does not, to his mind, take away anything from his brilliance. He is proud of his creation, the character of Jit Bharati played by the actor Nikhil Fernandes, who has become a superstar because of his scripts. In fact, he is conscious of a secret wish to possess Nikhil’s good looks

which, he suspects, are appreciated by Vimla too, despite her strong denials. Vimla's brother, however, makes fun of him and his writing.

We are brought back to the fact that Maganlal is thinking about all this sitting at his desk with his manuscript. He tries once again to concentrate on his work but his mind drifts away into other thoughts. The story is continued by relating Maganlal's thoughts as he sits there.

Maganlal's friends often urge him to give more time to his family jewellery business than to his writing and it is here that we come to know that the source of Maganlal's riches is the jewellery business and not his successful scripts. However, Maganlal finds satisfaction and pleasure in his writing and the success of the movies even though all the profits are minted by others.

It is on this subject that he and Vimla have a heated argument. Vimla, with her degree in English literature, expresses her opinion that her husband's stories lack aesthetic depth. Notice that Vimla does not ask Maganlal to write something original or different but to follow people like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Samuel Beckett who are admired for their artistic endeavours in film-making. This points to the fact that Vimla's conditioning, part of which derives from her education and part from her brother, has led her to respect and admire a particular kind of art and disdain another. Maganlal does not understand much of Vimla's critique of his work but is very upset that his own wife should look down upon the writing he is so proud of. He gives vent to his frustration by asserting that he is the master of the house ("wore the pants in the family") and would do as he pleased. However, he is no longer able to write about Jit because Vimla's criticism brings down his own dissatisfaction with the "bumptious" or conceited character to the surface. This is how he first loses his sleep.

After many days of restlessness following this incident, Maganlal decides to write a new kind of story, one which Vimla would be proud of. He begins devoting all his time to this script and works late at night on it. Moreover, unlike his previous work which he discussed with Vimla, he keeps this script secret from everyone

The story now takes a most humorous and ironical twist when we are informed that Vimla mistakenly attributes Maganlal's changed behaviour to the assumption that he is having an affair with another woman. To add to the irony, Maganlal's confusion at this sudden charge convinces Vimla of his guilt and all his explanations fall on deaf ears. The subsequent days are spent with Vimla trying to make Maganlal 'confess' the name of this imagined other woman and her methods for doing so involve everything from seduction to prayers. It is at this point that we realize that the night when this story opens has followed just one such day of bickering between the husband and the wife.

The story now brings us back to the present with Maganlal still sitting at his desk without having written anything. But dawn is approaching and a tired Maganlal returns to his bedroom to sleep for a few hours. He is woken up by the sound of voices from the living room. It is Sunil, Vimla's arrogant, good-for-nothing brother, who claims to disdain money in favour of 'higher' things in life but often borrows it from his brother-in-law. Vimla leaves the two men alone to talk. After making a rude joke about the fact that he had not thought a dull man like Maganlal capable of having an affair with any woman, Sunil pompously demands that Maganlal take an oath of never cheating on his wife again.

Incapable of swallowing such offensive behavior, Maganlal slaps Sunil and shouts that he would never leave the other woman come what may. **Of course, the other woman does not exist**, but Maganlal wants to make it clear that he would not be dictated to by a wastrel like Sunil. Hearing this, Vimla comes running from the bedroom and pleads with Maganlal, crying at his feet. Taken aback, Maganlal is about to help up his wife when he realizes that he must not give any opportunity of retaliation to Sunil. He orders Sunil to leave the house, and then turns his attention to Vimla.

CHARACTERS

In the present story, the characters do not simply stand for individuals but also represent ‘types’. This means that the author has used her characters to represent people of a certain social background and they reflect the peculiarities of our contemporary society.

Maganlal

Maganlal is a rich man who has inherited the family jewellery business. However, his heart lies in writing scripts for Hindi movies and he derives immense satisfaction from the success of the movies made from his scripts. So against the advice of his friends, who keep asking him to stop writing and concentrate more on the jewellery business as that is the source of his income and affluence, Maganlal continues to devote most of his time to writing. It is easy to understand for the reader why this is so. The feeling of achievement that writing provides to Maganlal cannot come from making money alone. However, the scripts that he writes are copies of the plots of Hollywood movies although he does not see anything wrong in this. He believes that he is bringing the East and the West closer by doing so and that his works are worthy pieces of art.

Maganlal has been married for three years but the husband and wife have differences on several issues. Maganlal is a mild man who has a fanciful image of what a wife should be like until he gets married to Vimla. He had thought that a wife would be a docile partner who would minister to his needs and bring up his children but Vimla is an educated, intelligent woman who expresses her opinions and demands her due. Maganlal is somewhat in awe of his beautiful wife and wishes to please her. So when Vimla expresses her utter disdain for the character Jit Bharati, the stereotypical hero he has created for the screen, he decides to write something of which his wife would be proud.

Maganlal’s physical description is also quite important in sketching his character. He has given Jit Bharati all those physical charms that he lacks himself. Fat and balding, he is aware that he does not fit the standards of a good looking man set by our society. He wishes to compensate for this lack of good looks through the brilliance of his writing.

We can see that Maganlal’s ideas have been influenced more by watching commercial Hindi cinema than by reading books. This explains his image of a wife and the kind of stories that he writes. But he is essentially a simple straightforward man who is much closer to understanding his social reality than Vimla. He recognizes the significance of money as well as of art and cannot think of art as something that is completely divorced from all monetary considerations even though it is not he who mints the profits of his writing but the producers, directors and actors. His decision to write something different

after the argument with Vimla, shows that he wishes to be respected by his wife and also that he genuinely wants to improve as an artist, however limited his understanding of the subject might be.

The climax of the story is reached when, in a state of extreme anger, Maganlal falsely “confesses” that he has a relationship with another woman and then refuses to be parted from her at any cost. Why does Maganlal say such a thing? He wishes to assert that he will not be ordered about by the insolent Sunil and that he will do as he pleases. He realizes that “...by the mere fact of betraying his wife he had stolen a march over her...” in Sunil’s eyes. He uses this fact to get rid of Sunil by making a false confession.

In short, Maganlal represents those people of the rich urban business class who wish to make a contribution to art and culture in order to join the group of the educated elite. He is a mild straightforward man who loves his wife and wishes to be loved in turn by her. He is not satisfied by making money alone through the jewellery business and chooses to write in order to feel that he has achieved something in life. His idea of art is one that is successful and popular. By the end of the story he realizes that despite all her high-fangled ideas and a modern literary education, his wife is not very different from the kind of women he writes about.

Vimla

Vimla is a young, beautiful and intelligent woman who has a degree in English Literature from Bombay University. While people suggest that she has married Maganlal simply because he is a rich man, it is quite clear in the story that Vimla has a warm regard for her husband, yet also enjoys the glamour and the comfort of the life that her husband provides. However, her notions of art and aesthetics have been nurtured by a western literary education and her brother Sunil from whom she has high hopes of achieving something great. She is unable to reflect on her own ground reality and is unable to realize that all Sunil’s claims of talent are self-centered and false. While she is right in pointing out that Maganlal’s stories revolve around hackneyed clichés, her own understanding of art is completely detached from reality. We must remember however, that she does not criticize Maganlal to win a point over him but because she wishes the best for him.

When her husband starts spending his time secretly in writing a new kind of script, her insecurity comes to the surface. She cannot think of any other explanation except the most hackneyed one—that her husband must be cheating on her. This suspicion consumes her day by day and all Maganlal’s explanations only add to her conviction that there is some other woman. Her vanity suffers a blow; she feels that “...she is making poor use of her youth and beauty.” Her suspicions reach a climax when Maganlal shouts out in anger at Sunil that he will not be parted from the (imaginary) other woman. She, who has spent the preceding days demanding the name of her rival and threatening her husband with wild descriptions of what she would do to this other woman, now breaks down in tears at the feet of Maganlal, pleading with him not to desert her for someone else. In doing so, she behaves exactly like those clichéd heroines Maganlal writes about. The author expertly demonstrates that Vimla’s reality is much closer to Maganlal’s popular fictional world than to the elite literary fictional world which she so admires.

Vimla represents those people of the privileged educated middle-class who take pride in their high aesthetic tastes and modern outlook but in doing so, refuse to accept their real fears and needs in everyday life.

Sunil

“The Other Woman” by
Dina Mehta

Sunil is an irresponsible, self-centered man who is in love with himself. He squanders away all his family money within a year of his father’s death and then conveniently disappears till he hears of his sister’s impending marriage to Maganlal. However, what makes Sunil unbearable is his arrogance. He is completely convinced about his own brilliance and looks down upon others. He is neither grateful for Maganlal’s generosity nor for his sister’s little sacrifices of her jewellery to support him financially. He drops out of college on the pretext that a college degree is “...not conducive to the growth of one’s originality and talents” and declares that he does not “believe in money.” Sunil’s role in the story is that of a catalyst in making Maganlal lose his temper, which in turn paves the way for a resolution of the ongoing conflict between Maganlal and Vimla. Sunil typifies hypocritical people who proclaim their own greatness to the world but live the life of parasites, subsisting on the mercy of others.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Answer the following questions in not more than 75 words each:

i) What is the source of Maganlal’s income? Why does Maganlal write scripts for Hindi movies?

.....
.....
.....

ii) Describe the argument between Maganlal and Vimla on their way home from the Silver Jubilee celebrations of *Jai, Jai, Jit*. Why does Vimla criticize Maganlal’s stories?

.....
.....
.....

iii) What makes Maganlal say that he has a relationship with another woman and that he will not be parted from her?

.....
.....
.....

2) Match the items in column A with their closest meanings in column B.

A	B
1) punctilious	copies
2) perverse	nasty
3) industrious	scornful
4) malicious	stubbornly adopting the wrong behavior
5) derisive	imitating

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| 6) abstracted | hard-working |
| 7) impersonating | taken over |
| 8) usurped | vague or absentminded |
| 9) imitations | precise |

BACKGROUND

The present story is set in a rich flat in contemporary urban Mumbai. This physical atmosphere sets the mood appropriate for the theme of the story and we are able to smile at the physical description of Maganlal even when he is worried and unable to sleep: “Maganlal slid further into his swivel chair, settling his ample, ghee-fed middle more comfortably within its depths.” The only other physical setting in the story is of the car in which the husband and wife have their argument over Maganlal’s writing. It is a chauffeur-driven Mercedes, and this again underlines affluence.

Within the flat, the action of the story takes place in the bedroom where Vimla falls asleep in the middle of Maganlal’s explanation, in Maganlal’s study where he sits thinking about the past, and in the living room where the climax of the story is played out. Notice the few phrases interspersed in the action like:

- a) “dressing-table stool,” “lace pillow” and “night-light shaped like a tulip growing on the wall” to describe the bedroom,
- b) ‘Swivel chair’ and “gold top of his fountain-pen” in the study, and
- c) “gilt-edged mirror,” “leggy dining suite chair,” “divan covered with new peacock-blue tapestry” and “heavy bronze figure of Nataraja” in the living room

All these phrases help to build a clear picture of the flat in our minds and focus attention on the expensive furnishing and the opulence.

PROSE STYLE

Dina Mehta’s prose style in ‘The Other Woman’ is marked by its humour and irony. Irony refers to a situation which is the exact opposite of what it is supposed to be. One example to understand the notion of irony is the case of a blind man leading a person with normal eyesight during a power-cut at night. We usually expect people with normal eyesight to help the blind in finding their way but in the above case, there is no light to see by because of a power-cut and it is the blind man, accustomed to walking in the dark, who leads the way. Irony is a powerful device and may be used in many ways—it may be used to give a serious message (like the above example may be used to give the message that we should give due respect and equal rights to the blind) or it may be used for producing humour or commenting on our little follies.

The first ironical incident is the falling asleep of Vimla when Maganlal is offering his explanation, which according to him displays a “... truly edifying elevation of thought.” Next is the fact that Maganlal does not find anything wrong in imitating Hollywood movies but thinks of his stories as simply a “synthesis of contrary trends and values.” Then, Maganlal starts spending his time secretly in order to write a manuscript to please Vimla and instead this leads to Vimla’s

suspicious of liaison with another woman. Again, it is ironical that it is the imagined infidelity which makes Sunil think that Maganlal has scored a point over his sister. Finally, the most ironical of all is the effect of Maganlal’s false confession to both Sunil and Vimla. In fact, the very title of the story, ‘The Other Woman’ is quite ironical because usually a story is titled after the main character or situation but here, the other woman does not even exist.

Another important feature of the prose style is the use of parentheses or round brackets to give little pieces of facts and thoughts in between descriptions of another place or incident. For example,

\.....(how inviting was the slender nape of her neck!)

(His father, who still had a razor-sharp business brain, was content to reside in three overflowing rooms with his two younger brothers and their families in a congested part of the city.)

...(thank God the chauffeur did not understand such excellent English)....

Also notice that the story is not told in a linear fashion. We come to know of the cause of the tension between the couple through Maganlal’s reminiscences while he is sitting at his desk. There is an ample use of adjectives that allows for powerful descriptions. You can see this in phrases like “earnest monologue,” “fastidious care,” “fragile hand,” “prodigal brother,” “exciting melodrama,” “tickling humour,” “nouveau riche neighbourhood,” “highly advertised view,” “indefatigable imbecile,” “disreputable liaison,” “swashbuckling valour,” “totalitarian ire,” and so on.

There is playful use of language to produce humour. For example:

“He was committed to Jit, he insisted in a voice tremulous with emotion as he ripped off his jacket and tie and shoes—he was never really comfortable in Western clothes—and *he wore the pants in the family*, he shouted at her, before he proceeded to remove them.”

Here, we see the use of the device called “juxtaposition” which means that two contrasting things are placed together. Maganlal is here countering Vimla’s criticism of Jit, but this is described in the same sentence as his taking off the formal clothes that he had worn to the Silver Jubilee celebrations. Further, the phrase “wearing the pants in the family” means that he is the master in the house but he then takes off the literal pants that he is wearing. Thus, the juxtaposition of the literal creates the effect of humour and displays Dina Mehta’s expert use of language.

Check Your Progress II

- i) What makes Vimla suspect Maganlal of having a liaison with another woman?

.....
.....
.....
.....

- i) Write in approximately 100 words, about Dina Mehta’s prose style as

reflected in ‘The Other Woman.’

.....
.....
.....

LET US SUM UP

At the surface level, this is a funny story which revolves around the misplaced suspicions of a wife about her husband’s infidelity. However, at a deeper level it comments on the notions of art and money and the way in which the relationship between the two is perceived in our contemporary society.

ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. i) The source of Maganlal’s income is the family jewellery business. He finds pleasure and satisfaction in writing scripts for movies.
- ii) Vimla thinks his stories lack aesthetic depth.
- iii) Sunil’s offensive behavior and unjustified accusations of an affair with another woman make Maganlal so angry that he agrees to the accusations.

2.

A

B

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| 1) punctilious | precise |
| 2) perverse | stubbornly adopting the wrong behavior |
| 3) industrious | hard-working |
| 3) malicious | nasty |
| 5) derisive | scornful |
| 6) abstracted | vague or absentminded |
| 7) impersonating | imitating |
| 8) usurped | taken over |
| 9) imitations | copies |

Check Your Progress II

- i) Maganlal secretly starts writing a script in order to please his wife, but this action rebounds on him as Vimla suspects him of having an affair.
- i) Dina Mehta’s prose style is marked by humour and irony. For examples refer to 3.6.

UNIT 4 “SWIMMING LESSONS” BY ROHINTON MISTRY

Structure

Objectives

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry: Life and Works

Text of “Swimming Lessons”

Analysis

Critical Assessment

Theme

Characterization

Narrative Technique

Let Us Sum Up

Answers to Check Your Progress

OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to introduce you to the writings of an Indian immigrant in Canada. For this purpose, we have selected for detailed study the short story “Swimming Lessons” by Rohinton Mistry who has been living in Canada since 1975. Through his story, Mistry presents the problems that Indian immigrants face in Canada. After reading this unit carefully, you should be able to:

- Outline the plot of ‘Swimming Lessons’;
- explain the theme of the story;
- draw character sketches; and
- understand Mistry’s narrative technique.

INTRODUCTION

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

4.2 ROHINTON MISTRY: LIFE AND WORKS

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

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

TEXT OF “SWIMMING LESSONS”

The old man’s wheelchair is audible today as he creaks by in the hallway: on some days it’s just a smooth whirr. Maybe the way he slumps in it, or the way his weight rests has something to do with it. Down to the lobby he goes, and sits there most of the time, talking to people on their way out or in. That’s where he first spoke to me a few days ago. I was waiting for the elevator, back from Eaton’s with my new pair of swimming trunks.

“Hullo,” he said. I nodded, smiled.

“Beautiful summer day we’ve got.”

“Yes,” I said, “it’s lovely outside.”

He shifted the wheelchair to face me squarely. “How old do you think I am?”

I looked at him blankly, and he said, “Go on, take a guess.”

I understood the game; he seemed about seventy-five although the hair was still black, so I said, “Sixty-five?” He made a sound between a chuckle and a wheeze: “I’ll be seventy-seven next month.” Close enough.

I’ve heard him ask that question several times since, and everyone plays by the rules. Their faked guesses range from sixty to seventy. They pick a lower number when he’s more depressed than usual. He reminds me of Grandpa as he sits on the sofa in the lobby staring out vacantly at the parking lot. Only difference is, he sits with the stillness of stroke victims, while Grandpa’s Parkinson’s disease would bounce his thighs and legs and arms all over the place. When he could no longer hold the *Bombay Samachar* steady enough to read, Grandpa took to sitting on the veranda and staring emptily at the traffic passing outside Firozsha Baag. Or waving to anyone who went by in the compound: Rustomji, Nariman Hansotia in his 1932 Mercedes-Benz, the fat

ayah Jaakaylee with her shopping-bag, the *Kuchrawalli* with her basket and long bamboo broom.

The Portuguese woman across the hall has told me a little about the old man. She is the communicator for the apartment building. To gather and disseminate information, she takes the liberty of unabashedly throwing open her door when newsworthy events transpire. Not for Portuguese Woman the furtive peering from thin cracks or spy holes. She reminds me of a character in a movie, *Barefoot In The Park* I think it was, who left empty beer by the landing for anyone passing to stumble and give her the signal. But PW does not need beer cans. The gutang-khutang of the elevator opening and closing is enough.

The old man’s daughter looks after him. He was living alone till his stroke, which coincided with his youngest daughter’s divorce in Vancouver. She returned to him and they moved into this low-rise in Don Mills. PW says the daughter talks to no one in the building but takes good care of her father.

Mummy used to take good care of Grandpa, too, till things became complicated and he was moved to the Parsi General Hospital. Parkinsonism and osteoporosis laid him low. The doctor explained that Grandpa’s hip did not break because he fell, but he fell because the hip, gradually growing brittle, snapped on that fatal day. That’s what osteoporosis does, hollows out the bones and turns effect into cause. It has an unusually high incidence in the Parsi community, he said, but did not say why. Just one of those mysterious things. We are the chosen people where osteoporosis is concerned. And divorce. The Parsi community has the highest divorce rate in India. It also claims to be the most westernized community in India. Which is the result of the other? Confusion again, of cause and effect.

The hip was put in traction. Single-handed, Mummy struggled valiantly with bedpans and dressings for bedsores which soon appeared like grim specters on his back. *Mamaiji*, bent double with her weak back, could give no assistance. My help would be enlisted to roll him over on his side while Mummy changed the dressing. But after three months, the doctor pronounced a patch upon Grandpa’s lungs, and the male ward of Parsi Generals swallowed him up. There was no money for a private nursing home. I went to see him once, at Mummy’s insistence. She used to say that the blessings of an old person were the most valuable and potent of all, they would last my whole life long. The ward had rows and rows of beds; the din was enormous, the smells nauseating, and it was just as well that Grandpa passed most of his time in a less than conscious state.

But I should have gone to see him more often. Whenever Grandpa went out, while he still could in the days before parkinsonism, he would bring back pink and white sugar-coated almonds for Percy and me. Every time I remember Grandpa, I remember that; and then I think: I should have gone to see him more often. That’s what I also thought when our telephone-owning neighbor, esteemed by all for that reason, sent his son to tell us the hospital had phoned that Grandpa died an hour ago.

The postman rang the doorbell the way he always did, long and continuous; Mother went to open it, wanting to give him a piece of her mind but thought better of it, she did not want to risk the vengeance of postmen, it was so easy for them to destroy letters; workers nowadays thought no end of

themselves, stutting around like peacocks, ever since all this Shiv Sena agitation about Maharashtra for Maharashtrians, threatening strikes and Bombay bundh all the time, with no respect for the public; bus drivers and conductors were the worst, behaving as if they owned the buses and were doing favours to commuters, pulling the bell before you were in the bus, the driver purposely braking and moving with big jerks to make the standees lose their balance, the conductor so rude if you did not have the right change.

But when she saw the airmail envelope with a Canadian stamp her face lit up, she said wait to the postman, and went in for a fifty paise piece, a little baksheesh for you, she told him, then shut the door and kissed the envelope, went in running, saying my son has written, my son has sent a letter, and Father looked up from the newspaper and said, don't get too excited, first read it, you know what kind of letters he writes, a few lines of empty words. I'm fine, hope you are all right, our loving son – that kind of writing I don't call letter-writing

Then Mother opened the envelope and took out one small page and began to read silently and the joy brought to her face by the letter's arrival began to ebb; Father saw it happening and knew he was right, he said read aloud, let me also hear what our son is writing this time, so Mother read; My dear Mummy and Daddy, Last winter was terrible, we had record breaking low temperatures all through February and March, and the first official day of spring was colder than the first official day of winter had been, but it's getting warmer now. Looks like it will be a nice warm summer. You asked about my new apartment. It's small, but not bad at all. This is just a quick note to let you know I'm fine, so you won't worry about me. Hope everything is okay at home.

After Mother put it back in the envelope, Father said everything about his life is locked in silence and secrecy, I still don't understand why he bothered to visit us last year if he had nothing to say; every letter of his has been a quick note so we won't worry – what does he think we worry about, his health, in that country everyone eats well whether they work or not, he should be worrying about us with all the black market and rationing, has he forgotten already how he used to go to the ration-shop and wait in line every week; and what kind of apartment description is that, not bad at all; and if it is a Canadian weather report I need from him, I can go with Nariman Hansotia from A Block to the Cawasji Framji Memorial Library and read all about it, there they get newspapers from all over the world.

The sun is hot today. Two women are sunbathing on the stretch of patchy lawn at the periphery of the parking lot. I can see them clearly from my kitchen. They're wearing bikinis and I'd love to take a closer look. But I have no binoculars. Nor do I have a car to saunter out to and pretend to look under the hood. They're both luscious and gleaming. From time to time they smear lotion over their skin, on the bellies, on the inside of the thighs, on the shoulders. Then one of them gets the other to undo the string of her top and spread some there. She lies on her stomach with the straps undone. I wait. I pray that the heat and haze make her forget, when it's time to turn over, that the straps are undone.

But the sun is not hot enough to work this magic for me. When it's time to

come in, she flips over, deftly holding up the cups, and reties the top. They arise, pick up towels, lotions and magazines, and return to the building.

This is my chance to see them closer. I race down the stairs to the lobby. The old man says hullo. “Down again?”

“My mailbox,” I mumble.

“It’s Saturday,” he chortles. For some reason he finds it extremely funny. My eye is on the door leading in from the parking lot.

Through the glass panel I see them approaching. I hurry to the elevator and wait. In the dimly lit lobby I can see their eyes are having trouble adjusting after the bright sun. They don’t seem as attractive as they did from the kitchen window. The elevator arrives and I hold it open, inviting them in with what I think is a gallant flourish. Under the fluorescent glare in the elevator I see their wrinkled skin, aging hands, sagging bottoms, varicose veins. The lustrous trick of sun and lotion and distance has ended.

I step out and they continue to the third floor. I have Monday night to look forward to my first swimming lesson. The high school behind the apartment building is offering, among its usual assortment of macramé and ceramics and pottery classes, a class for non-swimming adults.

The woman at the registration desk is quite friendly. She even gives me the opening to satisfy the compulsion I have about explaining my non-swimming status.

“Are you from India?” she asks. I nod. “I hope you don’t mind my asking, but I was curious because an Indian couple, husband and wife, also registered a few minutes ago. Is swimming not encouraged in India?”

“On the contrary,” I say. “Most Indians swim like fish. I’m an exception to the rule. My house was five minutes walking distance from Chaupatty beach in Bombay. It’s one of the most beautiful beaches in Bombay, or was, before the filth took over. Anyway, even though we lived so close to it, I never learned to swim. It’s just one of those things.”

“Well,” says the woman, “that happens sometimes. Take me, for instance. I never learned to ride a bicycle. It was the mounting that used to scare me, I was afraid of falling.” People have lined up behind me. “It’s been very nice talking to you,” she says, “hope you enjoy the course.”

The art of swimming had been trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea. The devil was money, always scarce, and kept the private swimming clubs out of reach; the deep blue sea of Chaupatty beach was grey and murky with garbage, too filthy to swim in. Every so often we would muster our courage and Mummy would take me there to try and teach me. But a few minutes of paddling was all we could endure. Sooner or later something would float up against our legs or thighs or waists, depending on how deep we’d gone in, and we’d be revulsed and stride out to the sand.

Water imagery in my life is recurring. Chaupatty beach, now the high school swimming pool. The universal symbol of life and regeneration did nothing but frustrate me. Perhaps the swimming pool will overturn that failure.

When images and symbols abound in this manner, sprawling or rolling across the page without guile or artifice, one is prone to say, how obvious, how skillless; symbols, after all, should be still and gentle as dewdrops, tiny, yet shining with a world of meaning. But what happens when, on the page of life itself, one encounters the ever moving, all-engirdling sprawl of the filthy sea? Dewdrops and oceans both have their rightful places; Nariman Hansotia certainly knew that when he told his stories to the boys of Firozsha Baag.

The sea of Chaupatty was fated to endure the finales of life's everyday functions. It seemed that the dirtier it became, the more crowds it attracted: street urchins and beggars and beachcombers, looking through the junk that washed up. (Or was it the crowds that made it dirtier? – another instance of cause and effect blurring and evading identification.)

Too many religious festivals also used the sea as repository for their finales. Its use should have been rationed, like rice and kerosene. On Ganesh Chaturthi, clay idols of the god Ganesh, adorned with garlands and all manner of finery, were carried in processions to the accompaniment of drums and a variety of wind instruments. The music got more frenzied the closer the procession got to Chaupatty and to the moment of immersion.

Then there was Coconut Day, which was never as popular as Ganesh Chaturthi. From a bystander's viewpoint, coconuts chucked into the sea do not provide as much of a spectacle. We used the sea, too, to deposit the leftovers from Parsi religious ceremonies, things such as flowers or the ashes of the sacred sandalwood fire, which just could not be dumped with the regular garbage but had to be entrusted to the care of Avan Yazad, the guardian of the sea. And things which were of no use but which no one had the heart to destroy were also given to Avan Yazad. Such as old photographs.

After Grandpa died, some of his things were flung out to sea. It was high tide; we always checked the newspaper when going to perform these disposals; an ebb would mean a long walk in squelchy sand before finding water. Most of the things were probably whashed up on shore. But we tried to throw them as far out as possible, then waited a few minutes, if they did not float back right away we would pretend they were in the permanent safekeeping of Avan Yazad, which was a comforting thought. I can't remember everything we sent out to sea, but his brush and comb were in the parcel, his *kusti*, and some Kemadrin pills, which he used to take to keep the parkinsonism under control.

I drop the Eaton's bag and wrapper in the garbage can. The swimming trunks cost fifteen dollars, same as the fee for the ten weekly lessons. The garbage bag is almost full. I tie it up and take it outside. There is a medicinal smell in the hallway; the old man must have just returned to his apartment.

PW opens her door and says, "Two ladies from the third floor were lying in the sun this morning. In biknies."

"That's nice," I say, and walk to the incinerator chute, she reminds me of Najamai in Firozsha Baag, except that Najamai employed a bit more subtlety while going about her life's chosen work.

PW withdraws and shuts her door.

Mother had to reply because Father said he did not want to write to his son till his son had something sensible to write to him, his questions had

been ignored long enough, and if he wanted to keep his life a secret, fine, he would get no letters from his father.

But after Mother started the letter he went and looked over her shoulder, telling her what to ask him, because if they kept on writing the same questions, maybe he would understand how interested they were in knowing about things over there; Father said go on, ask him what his work is at the insurance company, tell him to take some courses at night school, that's how everyone moves ahead over there, tell him not to be discouraged if his job is just clerical right now, hard work will get him ahead, remind him he is a Zoroastrian: manashni, gavashni, kunashni, better write the translation also; good thoughts, good words, good deeds – he must have forgotten what it means, and tell him to say prayers and do kusti at least twice a day.

Writing it all down sadly, Mother did not believe he wore his sudra and kusti anymore, she would be very surprised if he remembered any of the prayers; when she had asked him if he needed new sudras he said not to take any trouble because the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario imported them from Bombay for their members, and this sounded like a story he was making up, but she was leaving it in the hands of God, ten thousand miles away there was nothing she could do but write a letter and hope for the best.

Then she sealed it, and Father wrote the address on it as usual because his writing was much neater than hers, handwriting was important in the address and she did not want the postman in Canada to make any mistake; she took it to the post office herself, it was impossible to trust anyone to mail it ever since the postage rates went up because people just tore off the stamps for their own use and threw away the letter, the only safe way was to hand it over the counter and make the clerk cancel the stamps before your own eyes.

Berthe, the building superintendent, is yelling at her son in the parking lot. He tinkers away with his van. This happens every fine weathered Sunday. It must be the van that Berthe dislikes because I've seen mother and son together in other quite amicable situations.

Berthe is a big Yugoslavian with high cheekbones. Her nationality was disclosed to me by PW. Berthe speaks a very rough-hewn English, I've overheard her in the lobby scolding tenants for late rents and leaving dirty lint screens in the dryers. It's exciting to listen to her, her words fall like rocks and boulders, and one can never tell where or how the next few will drop. But her Slavic yells at her son are a different matter, the words fly swift and true, well-aimed missiles that never miss. Finally, the son slams down the hood in disgust, wipes his hands on a rag, accompanies mother Berthe inside.

Berthe's husband has a job in a factory. But he loses several days of work every month when he succumbs to the booze, a word Berthe uses often in her Slavic tirades on those days, the only one I can understand, as it clunks down heavily out of the tight flying formation of Yugoslavian sentences. He lolls around in the lobby, submitting passively to his wife's tongue-lashings. The bags under his bloodshot eyes, his stringy moustache, stubbled chin, dirty hair are so vulnerable to the poison-laden barbs (poison works the same way in any language) emanating from deep within the powerful watermelon bosom. No one's presence can embarrass or dignify her into silence.

No one except the old man who arrives now, “Good morning,” he says, and Berthe turns, stops yelling, and smiles. Her husband rises, positions the wheelchair at the favourite angle. The lobby will be peaceful as long as the old man is there.

It was hopeless. My first swimming lesson. The water terrified me. When did that happen, I wonder, I used to love splashing at Chaupatty, carried about by the waves. And this was only a swimming pool. Where did all the terror come from? I’m trying to remember.

Armed with my Surf King I enter the high school and go to the pool area. A sheet with instructions for the new class is pinned to the bulletin board. All students must shower and then assemble at eight by the shallow end. As I enter the showers three young boys, probably from a previous class, emerge. One of them holds his nose. The second begins to hum, under his breath: Paki Paki, smell like curry. The third says to the first two: pretty soon all the water’s going to taste of curry. They leave.

It’s a mixed class, but the gorgeous woman of my fantasy is missing. I have to settle for another, in a pink one piece suit, with brown hair and a bit of a stomach. She must be about thirty-five. Plain looking.

The instructor is called Ron. He gives us a pep talk, sensing some nervousness in the group. We’re finally all in the water, in the shallow end. He demonstrates floating on the back, then asks for a volunteer. The pink one-piece suit wades forward. He supports her, tells her to lean back and let her head drop in the water.

Next we are shown how to grasp the rail and paddle, face down in the water. Between practicing floating and paddling, the hour is almost gone I have been trying to observe the pink one piece suit, getting glimpses of her straying pubic hair from various angles. Finally Ron wants a volunteer for the last demonstration, and I go forward. To my horror he leads the class to the deep end. Fifteen feet of water. It is so blue, and I can see the bottom. He picks up a metal hoop attached to a long wooden stick. He wants me to grasp the hoop, jump in the water, and paddle, while he guides me by the stick. Perfectly safe, he tells me. A demonstration of how paddling propels the body.

It’s too late to back out; besides, I’m so terrified I couldn’t find the words to do so even if I wanted to. Everything he says I do as if in a trance. I don’t remember the moment of jumping. The next thing I know is, I’m swallowing water and floundering, hanging on to the hoop for dear life. Ron draws me to the rails and helps me out. The class applauds.

We disperse and one thought is on my mind: what if I’d lost my grip? Fifteen feet of water under me. I shudder and take deep breaths. This is it. I’m not coming next week. This instructor is an irresponsible person. Or he does not value the lives of non-white immigrants. I remember the three teenagers. Maybe the swimming pool is the hangout of some racist group, bent on eliminating all non-white swimmers, to keep their waters pure and their white sisters unogled.

The elevator takes me upstairs. Then gutang-khutang. PW opens her door as I turn the corridor of medicinal smells. “Berthe was screaming loudly at her husband tonight,” she tells me.

“Good for her,” I say, and she frowns indignantly at me.

The old man is in the lobby. He’s wearing thick wool gloves. He wants to know how the swimming was, must have seen me leaving with my towel yesterday. Not bad, I say.

“I used to swim a lot. Very good for the circulation.” He wheezes. “My feet are cold all the time. Cold as ice. Hands too.”

Summer is winding down, so I say stupidly, “Yes it’s not so warm any more.”

The thought of the next swimming lesson sickens me. But as I comb through the memories of that Monday, I decide to go.

It’s a mistake, of course. This time I’m scared even to venture in the shallow end. When everyone has entered the water and I’m the only one outside, I feel a little foolish and slide in. Instructor Ron says we should start by reviewing the floating technique.

With trepidation. I float and paddle my way through the remainder of the hour, jerking my head out every two seconds and breathing deeply, to continually shore up a supply of precious, precious air without, at the same time, seeming too anxious and losing my dignity.

I don’t attend the remaining classes. After I’ve missed three, Ron the instructor telephones. I tell him I’ve had the flu and am still feeling poorly, but I’ll try to be there the following week.

He does not call again. My Surf King is relegated to an unused drawer. Total losses: one fantasy plus thirty dollars. And no watery rebirth. The swimming pool, like Chaupatty beach, has produced a stillbirth. But there is a difference. Water means regeneration only if it is pure and cleansing. Chaupatty was filthy, the pool was not. Failure to swim through filth must mean something other than failure of rebirth – failure of symbolic death? Does that equal success of symbolic life? death of a symbolic failure? Death of a symbol? What is the equation?

The postman did not bring a letter but a parcel, he was smiling because he knew that ever time something came from Canada his baksheesh was guaranteed, and this time because it was a parcel Mother gave him a whole rupee, she was quite excited, there were so many stickers on it besides the stamps, one for Small Parcel, another Printed Papers, a red sticker saying Insured; she showed it to Father, and opened it, then put both hands on her cheeks, not able to speak because the surprise and happiness was so great tears came to her eyes and she could not stop smiling, till Father became impatient to know and finally got up and came to the table.

When he saw it he was surprised and happy too, he began to grin, then hugged Mother saying our son is a writer, and we didn’t even know it, he never told us a thing, here we are thinking he is still clerking away at the insurance company, and he was writing a book of stories, all these years in school and college he kept his talent hidden, making us think he was just like one of the boys in the Baag, shouting and playing the fool in the compound, and now what a surprise; then Father opened the book and began reading it, heading back to the easy chair, and Mother so excited, still holding his arm walked with him, saying it was not fair him reading it first, she wanted to read it too, and they agreed that he would read the first story, then give it to her so she could also read it, and they would take turns in that manner. Mother removed the staples

from the padded envelope in which he had mailed the book, and threw them away, then straightened the folded edges of the envelope and put it away safely with the other envelopes and letters she had collected since he left.

The leaves are beginning to fall. The only ones I can identify are maple. The days are dwindling like the leaves. I've started a habit of taking long walks every evening. The old man is in the lobby when I leave, he waves as I go by. By the time I'm back, the lobby is usually empty.

Today I was woken up by a grating sound outside that made my flesh crawl. I went to the window and saw Berthe raking the leaves in the parking lot. Not in the expanse of patchy lawn on the periphery, but in the parking lot proper. She was raking the black tarred surface. I went back to bed and dragged a pillow over my head, not releasing it till noon.

When I return from my walk in the evening, PW summoned by the elevator's gutang-khutang, says, "Berthe filled six big black garbage bags with leaves today."

"Six bags!" I say. "Wow!"

Since the weather turned cold, Berthe's son does not tinker with his van on Sundays under my window. I'm able to sleep late.

Around eleven, there's a commotion outside. I reach out and switch on the clock radio. It's a sunny day, the window curtains are bright. I get up, curious, and see a black Olds Ninety-Eight in the parking lot, by the entrance to the building. The old man is in his wheelchair, bundled up, with a scarf wound several times round his neck as though to immobilize it, like a surgical collar. His daughter and another man, the car-owner, are helping him from the wheelchair into the front seat, encouraging him with words like: that's it, easy does it, attaboy. From the open door of the lobby, Berthe is shouting encouragement too, but hers is confined to one word: yah, repeated at different levels of pitch and volume, with variations on vowel length. The stranger could be the old man's son, he has the same jet black hair and piercing eyes.

Maybe the old man is not well, it's an emergency. But I quickly scrap that thought – this isn't Bombay, an ambulance would have arrived. They're probably taking him out for a ride. If he is his son, where has he been all this time, I wonder.

The old man finally settles in the front seat, the wheelchair goes in the trunk, and they're off. The one I think is the son looks up and catches me at the window before I can move away, so I wave, and he waves back.

In the afternoon I take down a load of clothes to the laundry room. Both machines have completed their cycles, the clothes inside are waiting to be transferred to dryers. Should I remove them and place them on top of a dryer, or wait? I decide to wait. After a few minutes, two women arrive, they are in bathrobes, and smoking. It takes me a while to realize that these are the two who were sunbathing in bikinis last summer.

“you didn’t have to wait, you could have removed the clothes and carried on, dear,” says one. She has a Scottish accent. It’s one of the few I’ve learned to identify. Like maple leaves.

“Well,” I say, “some people might not like strangers touching their clothes.”

“you’re not a stranger, dear,” she says, “you live in this building, we’ve seen you before.”

“besides, your hands are clean,” the other one pipes in. “you can touch my things any time you like.”

Horny old cow. I wonder what they’ve got on under their bathrobes. Not much, I find, as they bend over to place their clothes in the dryers.

“See you soon,” they say, and exit, leaving me behind in an erotic wake of smoke and perfume and deep images of cleavages. I start the washers and depart, and when I come back later the dryers are empty.

Pw tells me, “The old man’s son took him out for a drive today. He has a big beautiful black car.”

I see my chance, and shoot back: “Olds Ninety-Eight.”

“What?”

“The car,” I explain, “it’s an Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight.”

She does not like this at all, my giving her information. She is visibly nettled, and retreats with a sour face.

Mother and father read the first five stories, and she was very sad after reading some of them, she said he must be so unhappy there, all his stories are about Bombay, he remembers every little thing about his childhood, he is thinking about it all the time even though he is ten thousand miles away, my poor son, I think he misses his home and us and everything he left behind, because if he liked it over there why would he not write stories about that, there must be so many new ideas that his new life could give him.

But Father did not agree with this, he said it did not mean that he was unhappy, all writers worked in the same way, they used their memories and experiences and made stories out of them, changing some things, adding some, imagining some, all writers were very good at remembering details of their lives.

Mother said, how can you be sure that he is remembering because he is a writer, or whether he started to write because he is unhappy and thinks of his past, and wants to save it all by making stories of it; and Father said that is not a sensible question, anyway, it is now my turn to read the next story.

The first snow has fallen, and the air is crisp. It’s not very deep, about two inches, just right to go for a walk in. I’ve been told that immigrants from hot countries always enjoy the snow the first year, maybe for a couple of years more, then inevitably the dread sets in, and the approach of winter gets them fretting and moping. On the other hand, if it hadn’t been for my conversation

with the woman at the swimming registration desk, they might now be saying that India is a nation of non-swimmers.

Berthe is outside, shoveling the snow off the walkway in the parking lot. She has a heavy, wide pusher which she wields expertly.

The old radiators in the apartment alarm me incessantly. They continue to broadcast a series of variations on death throes, and go from hot to cold and cold to hot at will, there's no controlling their temperature. I speak to Berthe about it in the lobby. The old man is there too, his chin seems to have sunk deeper into his chest, and his face is a yellowish grey.

"Nothing, not to worry about anything," says Berthe, dropping roughhewn chunks of language around me. "Radiator no work, you tell me. You feel cold, you come to me, I keep you warm," and she opens her arms wide, laughing. I step back, and she advances, her breasts preceding her like the gallant prows of two ice-breakers. She looks at the old man to see if he is appreciating the act: "You no feel scared, I keep you safe and warm."

But the old man is staring outside, at the flakes of falling snow. What thoughts is he thinking as he watches them? Of childhood days, perhaps, and snowmen with hats and pipes, and snowball fights, and white Christmases, and Christmas trees? What will I think of, old in this country, when I sit and watch the snow come down? For me, it is already too late for snowmen and snowball fights, and all I will have is thoughts about childhood thoughts and dreams, built around snowcaps and winter wonderlands on the Christmas cards so popular in Bombay; my snowmen and snowball fights and Christmas trees are in the pages of Enid Blyton's books, dispersed amidst the adventures of the Famous Five, and the Five Find-Outers, and the Secret Seven. My snowflakes are even less forgettable than the old man's, for they never melt.

It finally happened. The heat went. Not the usual intermittent coming and going but out completely. Stone cold. The radiators are like ice. And so is everything else. There's no hot water. Naturally. It's the hot water that goes through the rads and heats them. Or is it the other way around? Is there no hot water because the rads have stopped circulating it? I don't care, I'm too cold to sort out the cause and effect relationship. Maybe there is no connection at all.

I dress quickly, put on my winter jacket, and go down to the lobby. The elevator is not working because the power is out, so I take the stairs. Several people are gathered, and Berthe has announced that she has telephoned the office, they are sending a man. I go back up the stairs. It's only one floor, the elevator is just a bad habit. Back in Firozsha Baag they were broken most of the time. The stairway enters the corridor outside the old man's apartment, and I think of his cold feet and hands. Poor man, it must be horrible for him without heat.

As I walk down the long hallway, I feel there's something different but can't pin it down. I look at the carpet, the ceiling, the wallpaper; it all seems the same. Maybe it's the freezing cold that imparts a feeling of difference.

PW opens her door. "The old man had another stroke yesterday. They took him to the hospital."

The medicinal smell. That's it. It's not in the hallway any more.

In the stories that he'd read so far Father said that all the Parsi families were poor or middle class, but that was okay; nor did he mind that the seeds for the stories were picked from the sufferings of their own lives, but there should also have been something positive about Parsis, there was so much to be proud of; the great Tatas and their contribution to the steel industry, or Sir Dinshaw Petit in the textile industry who made Bombay the Manchester of the East, or Dadabhai Naoroji in the freedom movement, where he was the first to use the word swaraj, and the first to be elected to the British Parliament where he carried on his campaign; he should have found some way to bring some of these wonderful facts into his stories, what would people reading these stories think, those who did not know about Parsis – that the whole community was full of cranky, bigoted people and in reality it was the richest, most advanced and philanthropic community in India, and he did not need to tell his own son that Parsis had a reputation for being generous and family oriented. And he could have written something also about the historic background how Parsis came to India from Persia because of Islamic persecution in the seventh century, and were the descendants of Cyrus the Great and the magnificent Persian Empire. He could have made a story of all this couldn't he?

Mother said what she liked best was his remembering everything so well, how beautifully he wrote about it all, even the sad things, and though he changed some of it, and used his imagination, there was truth in it.

My hope is, Father said, that there will be some story based on his Canadian experience, that way we will know something about our son's life there, if not through his letters then in his stories; so far they are all about Parsis and Bombay and the one with a little bit about Toronto, where a man perches on top of the toilet, is shameful and disgusting, although it is funny at times and did make me laugh, I have to admit, but where does he get such an imagination from, what is the point of such a fantasy; and Mother said that she would also enjoy some stories about Toronto and the people there; it puzzles me, she said, why he writes nothing about it, especially since you say that writers use their own experience to make stories out of.

Then Father said this is true, but he is probably not using his Toronto experience because it is too early; what do you mean, too early, asked Mother and Father explained it takes a writer about ten years time after an experience before he is able to use it in his writing, it takes that long to be absorbed internally and understood, thought out and thought about, over and over again, he haunts it and it haunts him if it is valuable enough, till the writer is comfortable with it to be able to use it as he wants; but this is only one theory I read somewhere, it may or may not be true.

That means, said Mother, that his childhood in Bombay and our home here is the most valuable thing in his life just now, because he is able to remember it all to write about it, and you were so bitterly saying he is forgetting where he came from; and that may be true, said Father, but that is not what the theory means, according to the theory he is writing of these things because they are far enough in the past for him to deal with objectively, he is able to achieve what critics call artistic distance, without emotions interfering; and what do you mean emotions said Mother,

you are saying he does not feel anything for his characters, how can he write so beautifully about so many sad things without any feeling in his heart?

But before father could explain more, about beauty and emotion and inspiration and imagination. Mother took the book and said it was her turn now and too much theory she did not want to listen to, it was confusing and did not make as much sense as reading the stories, she would read them her way and Father could read them his.

My books on the windowsill have been damaged. Ice has been forming on the inside ledge, which I did not notice, and melting when the sun shines in. I spread them in a corner of the living room to dry out.

The winter drags on. Berthe wields her snow pusher as expertly as ever, but there are signs of weariness in her performance. Neither husband nor son is ever seen outside with a shovel. Or anywhere else, for that matter. I occurs to me that the son's van is missing too.

The medicinal smell is in the hall again. I sniff happily and look forward to seeing the old man in the lobby. I go downstairs and peer into the mailbox, see the blue and magenta of an Indian aerogramme with Don Mills, Ontario, Canada in Father's flawless hand through the slot.

I pocket the letter and enter the main lobby. The old man is there, but not in his usual place. He is not looking out through the glass door. His wheelchair is facing a bare wall where the wallpaper is torn in places. As though he is not interested in the outside world any more having finished with all that, and now it's time to see inside. What does he see inside, I wonder? I go up to him and say hullo. He says hullo without raising his sunken chin. After a few seconds his grey countenance faces me. "How old do you think I am?" his eyes are dull and glazed: he is looking even further inside than I first presumed.

"Well, let's see, you're probably close to sixty-four."

"I'll be seventy-eight next August." But he does not chuckle or wheeze. Instead, he continues softly, "I wish my feet did not feel so cold all the time. And my hands." He lets his chin fall again.

In the elevator I start opening the aerogramme, a tricky business because a crooked tear means lost words. Absorbed in this while emerging, I don't notice PW occupying the centre of the hallway, arms folded across her chest: "They had a big fight. Both of them have left."

I don't immediately understand her agitation. "What...who?"

"Berthe. Husband and son both left her. Now she is all alone."

Her tone and stance suggest that we should both not be standing here talking but do something to bring Berthe's family back. "That's very sad," I say, and go in. I picture father and son in the van, driving away, driving across the snow-covered country, in the dead of winter, away from wife and mother; away to where? How far will they go? Not son's van nor father's boozecan take them far enough. And the further they go, the more they'll remember, they can take it from me.

All the stories were read by Father and Mother, and they were sorry when the book was finished, they felt they had come to know their son better now, yet there was much more to know, they wished there were many more stories; and this is what they mean, said Father, when they say that the whole story can never be told, the whole truth can never be known; what do you mean, they say, asked Mother, who they, and Father said writers, poets, philosophers. I don't care what they say, said Mother, my son will write as much or as little as he wants to, and if I can read it I will be happy.

The last story they liked the best of all because it had the most in it about Canada, and now they felt they knew at least a little bit, even if it was a very little bit, about his day-to-day life in his apartment; and Father said if he continues to write about such things he will become popular because I am sure they are interested there in reading about life through the eyes of an immigrant, it provides a different viewpoint; the only danger is if he changes and becomes so much like them that he will write like one of them and lose the important difference.

The bathroom needs cleaning, I open a new can of Ajax and scour the tub. Sloshing with mug from bucket was standard bathing procedure in the bathrooms of Firozsha Baag, so my preference now is always for a shower. I've never used the tub as yet; besides, it would be too much like Chaupatty or the swimming pool, wallowing in my own dirt. Still, it must be cleaned.

When I've finished, I prepare for a shower. But the clean gleaming tub and the nearness of the vernal equinox give me the urge to do something different today. I find the drain plug in the bathroom cabinet, and run the bath.

I've spoken so often to the old man, but I don't know his name. I should have asked him the last time I saw him, when his wheelchair was facing the bare wall because he had seen all there was to see outside and it was time to see what was inside. Well, tomorrow. Or better yet, I can look it up in the directory in the lobby. Why didn't I think of that before? It will only have an initial and a last name, but then I can surprise him with: hullo Mr. Wilson, or whatever it is.

The bath is full. Water imagery is recurring in my life: Chaupatty beach, swimming pool, bathtub. I step in and immerse myself up to the neck. It feels good. The hot water loses its opacity when the chlorine, or whatever it is, has cleared. My hair is still dry. I close my eyes, hold my breath, and dunk my head. Fighting the panic, I stay under and count to thirty. I come out, clear my lungs and breathe deeply.

I do it again. This time I open my eyes under water, and stare blindly without seeing, it takes all my will to keep the lids from closing. Then I am slowly able to discern the underwater objects. The drain plug looks different, slightly distorted; there is a hair trapped between the hole and the plug, it waves and dances with the movement of the water. I come up, refresh my lungs, examine quickly the overwater world of the washroom, and go in again. I do it several times, over and over. The world outside the water after I have seen a lot of, it is now time to see what is inside.

The spring session for adult non-swimmers will begin in a few days at the high school. I must not forget the registration date.

The dwindled days of winter are not all but forgotten; they have grown and attained a respectable span. I resume my evening walks, it's spring, and a vigorous thaw is on. The snow banks are melting the sound of water on its gushing, gurgling journey to the drains is beautiful. I plan to buy a book of trees, so I can identify more than the maple as they begin to bloom.

When I return to the building, I wipe my feet energetically on the mat because some people are entering behind me, and I want to set a good example. Then go to the board with its little plastic letters and numbers. The old man's apartment is the one on the corner by the stairway, that makes it number 201. I run down the list, come to 201, but there are no little white plastic letters beside it. Just the empty black rectangle with holes where the letters would be squeezed in. That's strange. Well, I can introduce myself to him, then ask his name.

However, the lobby is empty. I take the elevator, exit at the second floor, wait for the gutang-khutan. It does not come; the door closes noiselessly, smoothly. Berthe has been at work, or has made sure someone else has. PW's cue has been lubricated out of existence.

But she must have the ears of a cockroach. She is waiting for me. I whistle my way down the corridor. She fixes me with an accusing look. She waits till I stop whistling, then says: "You know the old man died last night."

I cease groping for my key. She turns to go and I take a step towards her, my hand still in my trouser pocket. "Did you know his name?" I ask, but she leaves without answering.

Then Mother said, the part I like best in the last story is about Grandpa, where he wonders if Grandpa's spirit is really watching him and blessing him, because you know I really told him that, I told him helping an old suffering person who is near death is the most blessed thing to do, because that person will ever after watch over you from heaven, I told him this when he was disgusted with Grandpa's urine-bottle and would not touch it, would not hand it to him even when I was not at home.

Are you sure, said Father, that you really told him this, or you believe you told him because you like the sound of it, you said yourself the other day that he changes and adds and alters things in the stories but he writes it all so beautifully that it seems true, so how can you be sure; this sounds like another theory, said Mother, but I don't care, he says I told him and I believe now I told him, so even if I did not tell him then it does not matter now.

Don't you see, said Father, that you are confusing fiction with facts, fiction does not create facts, fiction can come from facts, it can grow out of facts by compounding, transposing, augmenting, diminishing, or alerting them in any way; but you must not confuse cause and effect, you must not confuse what really happened with what the story says happened, you must not loose your grasp on reality, that way madness lies.

Then Mother stopped listening because, as she told Father so often, she was not very fond of theories, and she took out her writing pad and started a letter to her son; Father looked over her shoulder, telling her to say how proud they were of him and were waiting for his next book, he also said, leave a little space for me at the end, I want to write a few lines when I put the address on the envelope.

“SWIMMING LESSONS”: A DETAILED ANALYSIS

Critical Assessment

The story focuses on many elements that are often seen in the life of a new immigrant through a use of parallel stories, imagery and effective diction.

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

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

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

Firstly, the story is interesting in the way it flashes back and forth in the protagonist’s mind. Mistry effectively shows the difficulty an immigrant faces when making a transition into another urban environment. When Kersi’s daily encounters trigger memories or thoughts that relate to back home, they truly show elements of both culture shock and a fear of rejection from a new community. One such instance is before he takes his first swimming lesson, and is beginning to question his decision to take up the class:

‘It was hopeless. My first swimming lesson. The water terrified me. When did that happen, I wonder, I used to love splashing at Chaupatty, carried about by the waves. And this was only a swimming pool. Where did all that terror come from? I’m trying to remember.’

The above quote explains the leap Kersi is trying to take in shifting from a familiar environment to a new one where everything is more feared. It is interesting to note that throughout the story, he often refers to the Chaupatty Sea as dirty and not enjoyable to swim in. However, at this point in time, his fear is so great as to prefer swimming in filth in comparison to swimming in a safer and cleaner environment.

Theme

The story deals with the problems of adjustment and acceptability for migrants. Immigrants living in their adopted country face a typical dilemma about their sense of belonging. The chasm between the two cultures leads to a sense of alienation. In 'Swimming Lessons', as you must have already noticed, Mistry portrays the superficial existence of the immigrants, who live in Canada without actually knowing the Canadians. The tension between wanting to belong and wanting to retain one's identity is very well delineated in this story. The narrator's present is continuously affected by the narrator's past, between his memory of his parents and the present life of loneliness. This life in Canada becomes more meaningful when compared or contrasted with his life in Bombay. The old and invalid man living in his building reminds the narrator of his own grandfather. He also remembers how his mother used to take very good care of his grandpa, comparing it with the care being meted out to the invalid. The narrator knows the old man quite well, has talked to him many times, but one day suddenly realizes that he doesn't even know his name. The old man dies before the narrator gets an opportunity to ask him his name. Swimming in this story becomes a metaphor for acceptability. If he wants to assimilate with the Canadians, he must know swimming, otherwise he would remain on the fringe. This becomes very clear when he goes for his first swimming lesson, finding the chlorinated water of the local pool as foreign an element as the suburban life around him. In almost an autobiographical mood, Mistry points out the difficulties he faced in Canada; he was unable to swim with the tide and learning swimming reflects the difficulties he faces as an immigrant. Once he learns to swim, it would symbolize his overcoming the problems of being an immigrant, he would become one with the Canadians, though, not necessarily their equal. There are sexual overtones to many of the narrator's dreams, which are handled very realistically as well as ironically – it is but natural for a young man living alone to have voyeuristic dreams.

His fears of rejection are not without reason. It brings us to another element that is prominent in the story- racism and stereotyping. When Kersi is changing in the bathroom before his swimming lesson, three young boys treat him as an inferior simply by looking at his skin color. As Mistry writes:

'One of them holds his nose. The second begins to hum, under his breath: Paki Paki, smell like curry. The third says to the first two: pretty soon all the water's going to taste of curry.'

The quote is indicative of both racism and stereotyping but is also suggestive of another factor: ignorance. Often immigrants are judged by unfair generalization and here, Kersi is yet just another victim. The fear of swimming lessons is cumulated with how others will receive him, and this gets him off to a bad start by the boys' crass association of his color with 'curry'. By saying 'all the water's going to taste like curry', the boy suggests a dislike for immigrants and the fact that they occupy a large part of the county. In response, Kersi

does not say anything nor does he stand up for himself, and this indicates that he still has a while before he can crawl out of his shell. He remembers their behavior after his lesson and starts to worry about whether he can actually belong with the people who come swimming.

Check Your Progress I

- i) What is the typical dilemma faced by immigrants living in their adopted country and why?

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- i) Why is learning swimming important for the protagonist. Give your answer in 70 words.

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Characterization

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

Narrative Technique

The story is written in the first person narrative form, yet is unique and quite interesting. The narrator describes his life in Toronto as well as connects with

Short Story

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

The narration of the story in Toronto is intersected by his parents reactions to his letters in Bombay. These reactions are given throughout in italics, making it a subtext tagged along with the main narrative. Kersi has sent his book home to be read by his parents; their discussion about its contents, focus and certain omissions provides an interleaved sub-text to the story as well as the whole collection. These intersections are very cleverly handled and the most interesting aspect of the discussion between mother and father is the minimal use of punctuation, the sentences run along very fluidly, presenting a kind of unbroken continuity. The Direct is mixed with the Indirect. The sentences are inordinately long, providing a feeling of breathless excitement. One sentence covers a full paragraph, such is the flow of the language and emotion. Thus, Mistry cleverly includes within this story a commentary on and a critique of his own writing. He unites two traditions in the short story: the conservative, semi-autobiographical mode that specializes in connected stories of childhood; and the newer self-reflexive mode in which the function of the story is to comment on itself. The story thus gains in stature and becomes an excellent example of a complex yet effective narrative technique which achieves a double purpose.

Check Your Progress II

i) Where is the narrator in the story living?

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i) Give two instances from the narrator’s present which remind him of his past life in Bombay.

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LET US SUM UP

You must have become aware from your reading of the unit, of the fears, hopes, desires as well as the tensions that immigrants face in the country they have adopted. Their nostalgia for the past and their dilemma of acceptance and assimilation in their new existence has very vividly been brought out by Mistry in his story. However, unlike other immigrant writers who focus on the theme of lament in their writings, Mistry strikes a positive note in his story. By the

end of “Swimming Lessons”, the protagonist has got over his fear of swimming, symbolizing his victory over fear not only of water, but also of living in an alien society. In a way, the protagonist comes to terms with his new existence.

ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- i) The typical dilemma faced by immigrants is about their sense of belonging. Caught between two different cultures—the culture of their own country they have left behind, and the culture of the new country they have chosen to live in—they constantly suffer a sense of dislocation and alienation. On the one hand, they want to retain their own identity and, on the other, they want to belong to the country they have immigrated to.
- i) The narrator feels that he must know swimming to be one with the Canadians otherwise he would just be an outsider who was living with them but was not one of them. His initial inability to swim is symbolic of the difficulties he faces as an immigrant. But his resolve to take lessons in swimming and consequently to swim would make him like the other Canadians whose culture he would assimilate. Thus, swimming becomes a metaphor for his acceptability by the new culture.

Check Your Progress II

- i) He is living in Toronto, Canada.
- i) The first instance is when he looks at the sick man living in his building in Toronto, and is reminded of his sick grandpa in Bombay. The second instance is when his failed attempts at swimming in Toronto remind him of his failure to learn swimming in Bombay.

