2015–2016
LITERATURE RESOURCE GUIDE

Selected Literature of India and the Indian Diaspora

The vision of the United States Academic Decathlon® is to provide students the opportunity to excel academically through team competition.
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Critical reading is a familiar exercise to students, an exercise that many of them have been engaged in since the first grade. Critical reading forms a major part (more than fifty percent) of the PSAT, the SAT, the ACT, and both Advanced Placement Tests in English. It is the portion of any test for which students can do the least direct preparation, and it is also the portion that will reward students who have been lifelong readers. Unlike other parts of the United States Academic Decathlon® Test in Literature, where the questions will be based on specific works of literature that the students have been studying diligently, the critical reading passage in the test, as a previously unseen passage, will have an element of surprise. In fact, the test writers usually go out of their way to choose passages from works not previously encountered in high school so as to avoid making the critical reading items a mere test of recall. From one point of view, not having to rely on memory actually makes questions on critical reading easier than the other questions because the answer must always be somewhere in the passage, stated either directly or indirectly, and careful reading will deliver the answer.

Since students can feel much more confident with some background information and some knowledge of the types of questions likely to be asked, the first order of business is for the student to contextualize the passage by asking some key questions. Who wrote it? When was it written? In what social, historical, or literary environment was it written?

In each passage used on a test, the writer’s name is provided, followed by the work from which the passage was excerpted or the date it was published or the dates of the author’s life. If the author is well known to high school students (e.g., Charles Dickens, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jane Austen), no dates will be provided, but the work or the occasion will be cited. For writers less familiar to high school students, dates will be provided. Using this information, students can begin to place the passage into context. As they start to read, students will want to focus on what they know about that writer, his or her typical style and concerns, or that time period, its values and its limitations. A selection from Thomas Paine in the eighteenth century is written against a different background and has different concerns from a selection written by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Toni Morrison writes against a different background from that of Charles Dickens.

Passages are chosen from many different kinds of texts—fiction, biography, letters, speeches, essays, newspaper columns, and magazine articles—and may come from a diverse group of writers, varying in gender, race, location, and time period. A likely question is one that asks readers to speculate on what literary form the passage is excerpted from. The passage itself will offer plenty of clues as to its genre, and the name of the writer often offers clues as well. Excerpts from fiction contain the elements one might expect to find in fiction—descriptions of setting, character, or action. Essays and magazine articles are usually focused on one topic of contemporary, local, or universal interest.

Other critical reading questions can be divided into two major types: reading for meaning and reading for analysis. The questions on reading for meaning are based solely on understanding what the passage is saying, and the questions on analysis are based on how the writer says what he or she says.

In reading for meaning, the most frequently asked question is one that inquires about the passage’s main idea since distinguishing a main idea from a supporting idea is an important reading skill. A question on main ideas is sometimes disguised as a question asking for an appropriate title for the passage. Most students will not select as the main idea a choice that is neither directly
stated nor indirectly implied in the passage, but harder questions will present choices that do appear in the passage but are not main ideas. Remember that an answer choice may be a true statement but not the right answer to the question.

Closely related to a question on the main idea of a passage is a question about the writer’s purpose. If the passage is fiction, the purpose, unless it is a digression—and even digressions are purposeful in the hands of good writers—will in some way serve the elements of fiction. The passage will develop a character, describe a setting, or advance the plot. If the passage is non-fiction, the writer’s purpose might be purely to inform; it might be to persuade; it might be to entertain; or it might be any combination of all three of these. Students may also be questioned about the writer’s audience. Is the passage intended for a specific group, or is it aimed at a larger audience?

The easy part of the Critical Reading section is that the answer to the question is always in the passage, and for most of the questions, students do not need to bring previous knowledge of the subject to the task. However, for some questions, students are expected to have some previous knowledge of the vocabulary, terms, allusions, and stylistic techniques usually acquired in an English class. Such knowledge could include, but is not limited to, knowing vocabulary, recognizing an allusion, and identifying literary and rhetorical devices.

In addition to recognizing the main idea of a passage, students will be required to demonstrate a more specific understanding. Questions measuring this might restate information from the passage and ask students to recognize the most exact restatement. For such questions, students will have to demonstrate their clear understanding of a specific passage or sentence. A deeper level of understanding may be examined by asking students to make inferences on the basis of the passage or to draw conclusions from evidence in the passage. In some cases, students may be asked to extend these conclusions by applying information in the passage to other situations not mentioned in the passage.

In reading for analysis, students are asked to recognize some aspects of the writer’s craft. One of these aspects may be organization. How has the writer chosen to organize his or her material? Is it a chronological narrative? Does it describe a place using spatial organization? Is it an argument with points clearly organized in order of importance? Is it set up as a comparison and contrast? Does it offer an analogy or a series of examples? If there is more than one paragraph in the excerpt, what is the relationship between the paragraphs? What transition does the writer make from one paragraph to the next?

Other questions could be based on the writer’s attitude toward the subject, the appropriate tone he or she assumes, and the way language is used to achieve that tone. Of course, the tone will vary according to the passage. In informational nonfiction, the tone will be detached and matter-of-fact, except when the writer is particularly enthusiastic about the subject or has some other kind of emotional involvement such as anger, disappointment, sorrow, or nostalgia. He or she may even assume an ironic tone that takes the form of exaggerating or understating a situation or describing it as the opposite of what it is. With each of these methods of irony, two levels of meaning are present—what is said and what is implied. An ironic tone is usually used to criticize or to mock.

A writer of fiction uses tone differently, depending on what point of view he or she assumes. If the author chooses a first-person point of view and becomes one of the characters, he or she has to assume a persona and develop a character through that character’s thoughts, actions, and speeches. This character is not necessarily sympathetic and is sometimes even a villain, as in some of the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Readers have to pick up this tone from the first few sentences. If the author is writing a third-person narrative, the tone will vary in accordance with how intrusive the narrator appears to be. Some narrators are almost invisible while others are more intrusive, pausing to editorialize, digress, or, in some cases, address the reader directly.

Language is the tool the author uses to reveal attitude and point of view. A discussion of language includes the writer’s syntax and diction. Are the sentences long or short? Is the length varied—is there an occasional short sentence among longer ones? Does the writer use parallelism and balanced sentence structure? Are the sentences predominantly simple, complex, compound, or compound-complex? How does the writer use tense? Does he or she vary the mood of the verb from indicative to interrogative to imperative? Does the writer shift between active and passive voice? If so, why? How do these choices influence the tone?

Occasionally, a set of questions may include a grammar question. For example, an item might require students to identify what part of speech a particular word is being used as, what the antecedent of a pronoun is, or what a modifier modifies. Being able to answer demonstrates that the student understands the sentence structure and the writer’s meaning in a difficult or sometimes purposefully ambiguous sentence.

With diction, or word choice, one must also consider whether the words are learned and ornate or simple and colloquial. Does the writer use slang or jargon? Does he or she use sensual language? Does the writer use figurative language or classical allusions? Is the writer’s meaning clearer because an abstract idea is associated with a concrete image? Does the reader have instant recognition of a universal symbol? If the writer does any of the above, what tone is achieved through the various possibilities of language? Is the writing formal or informal? Does the writer approve of or disapprove of or ridicule

(continued on page 9)
In order to prepare for the critical reading portion of the test, it may be helpful for students to take a look at a sample passage. Here is a passage used in an earlier test. The passage is an excerpt from Mary Shelley’s 1831 Introduction to Frankenstein.

“We will each write a ghost story,” said Lord Byron, and his proposition was acceded to. There were four of us. The noble author began a tale, a fragment of which he printed at the end of his poem of Mazeppa. Shelley, more apt to embody ideas and sentiments in the radiance of brilliant imagery and in the music of the most melodious verse that adorns our language than to invent the machinery of a story, commenced one founded on the experiences of his early life. Poor Polidori had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady who was so punished for peeping through a key-hole—what to see I forget: something very shocking and wrong of course; but when she was reduced to a worse condition than the renowned Tom of Coventry, he did not know what to do with her and was obliged to dispatch her to the tomb of the Capulets, the only place for which she was fitted. The illustrious poets also, annoyed by the platitude of prose, speedily relinquished their ungenial task.

I busied myself to think of a story—a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror—one to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart. If I did not accomplish these things, my ghost story would be unworthy of its name. I thought and pondered—vainly. I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations. "Have you thought of a story?" I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative.

Mary Shelley
Introduction to Frankenstein (1831)

1. Tom of Coventry—Peeping Tom who was struck blind for looking as Lady Godiva passed by.

INSTRUCTIONS: On your answer sheet, mark the lettered space (a, b, c, d, or e) corresponding to the answer that BEST completes or answers each of the following test items.

1. The author’s purpose in this passage is to
   a. analyze the creative process
   b. demonstrate her intellectual superiority
   c. name-drop her famous acquaintances
   d. denigrate the efforts of her companions
   e. narrate the origins of her novel

2. According to the author, Shelley’s talents were in
   a. sentiment and invention
   b. diction and sound patterns
   c. thought and feeling
   d. brightness and ornamentation
   e. insight and analysis
3. The author’s descriptions of Shelley’s talents might be considered all of the following EXCEPT
   a. accurate
   b. prejudiced
   c. appreciative
   d. detached
   e. exaggerated

4. The author’s attitude toward Polidori is
   a. amused
   b. sincere
   c. derisive
   d. ironic
   e. matter-of-fact

5. The author’s approach to the task differs from that of the others in that she begins by thinking of
   a. her own early experiences
   b. poetic terms and expressions
   c. the desired effect on her readers
   d. outperforming her male companions
   e. praying for inspiration

6. At the end of the excerpt the author feels
   a. determined
   b. despondent
   c. confident
   d. relieved
   e. resigned

7. “Noble” (line 2) can be BEST understood to mean
   a. principled
   b. aristocratic
   c. audacious
   d. arrogant
   e. eminent

8. All of the following constructions, likely to be questioned by a strict grammarian or a computer grammar check, are included in the passage EXCEPT
   a. a shift in voice
   b. unconventional punctuation
   c. sentence fragments
   d. run-on sentences
   e. a sentence ending with a preposition

9. In context “platitude” (line 11) can be BEST understood to mean
   a. intellectual value
   b. philosophical aspect
   c. commonplace quality
   d. heightened emotion
   e. demanding point of view

10. “The tomb of the Capulets” (line 10) is an allusion to
    a. Shakespeare
    b. Edgar Allan Poe
    c. English history
    d. Greek mythology
    e. the legends of King Arthur

**ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS OF ANSWERS**

1. (e) This type of question appears in most sets of critical reading questions. (a) might appear to be a possible answer, but the passage does not come across as very analytical, nor does it seem like a discussion of the creative process but rather is more a description of a game played by four writers to while away the time. (b) and (c) seem unlikely answers. Mary Shelley’s account here sounds as if she is conscious of inferiority in such illustrious company rather than superiority. She has no need to name-drop, as she married one of the illustrious poets and at that time was the guest of the other. She narrates the problems she had in coming up with a story, but since the passage tells us that she is the author of Frankenstein, we know that she did come up with a story. The answer is (e).

2. (b) This type of question asks readers to recognize a restatement of ideas found in the passage. The sentence under examination is found in lines 3–6, and students are asked to recognize that “diction and sound patterns” refers to “radiance of brilliant imagery” and “music of the most melodious verse.” (a) would not be possible because even his adoring wife finds him not inventive. “Thought and feeling,” (c), appear as “ideas and sentiments” (line 3), which according to the passage are merely the vehicles to exhibit Shelley’s talents. Answer (d), incorporating “brightness,” might refer to “brilliant” in line 4, but “ornamentation” is too artificial a word for the author to use in reference to her talented husband. (e) is incorrect, as insight and analysis are not alluded to in the passage.
3. (d) This question is related to Question 2 in that it discusses Shelley’s talents and the author’s opinion of them. The writer is obviously not “detached” in her description of her very talented husband. She is obviously “prejudiced” and “appreciative.” She may even exaggerate, but history has shown her to be accurate in her opinion.

4. (a) This is another question about the writer’s attitude. Some of the adjectives can be immediately dismissed. She is not ironic—she means what she says. She is not an unkind writer, and she does not use a derisive tone. However, there is too much humor in her tone for it to be sincere or matter-of-fact. The correct answer is that she is amused.

5. (c) This question deals with the second paragraph and how the author set about writing a story. Choices (a), (b), (d), and (e) may seem appropriate beginnings for a writer, but they are not mentioned in the passage. What she does focus on is the desired effect on her readers, (c), as outlined in detail in lines 13–16.

6. (b) This question asks for an adjective to describe the author’s feeling at the end of the excerpt. The expressions “blank incapability” (line 17) and “mortifying negative” (line 20) suggest that “despondent” is the most appropriate answer.

7. (b) This question deals with vocabulary in context. The noble author is Lord Byron, a hereditary peer of the realm, and the word in this context of describing him means “aristocratic.” “Principled,” (a), and “eminent,” (e), are also possible synonyms for “noble” but not in this context. Byron in his private life was eminently unprincipled (nicknamed “the bad Lord Byron”) and lived overseas to avoid public enmity. (c) and (d) are not synonyms for “noble.”

8. (d) This is a type of question that appears occasionally in a set of questions on critical reading. Such questions require the student to examine the sentence structure of professional writers and to be aware that these writers sometimes take liberties in order to make a more effective statement. They know the rules, and, therefore, they may break them! An additional difficulty is that the question is framed as a negative, so students may find it a time-consuming question as they mentally check off which constructions Shelley does employ so that by a process of elimination they may arrive at which construction is not included. The first sentence contains both choices (a) and (e), a shift in voice and a sentence ending in a preposition. Neither of these constructions is a grammatical error, but computer programs point them out. The conventional advice is that both should be used sparingly, and they should be used when avoiding them becomes more cumbersome than using them. The sentence beginning in line 14 is a sentence fragment (c), but an effective one. Choice (b) corresponds to the sentence beginning in line 6 and finishing in line 11, which contains a colon, semicolon, and a dash (somewhat unconventional) without the author’s ever losing control. This sentence is not a run-on even though many students may think it is! The answer to the question then is (d).

9. (c) Here is another vocabulary in context question. Knowing the poets involved and their tastes, students will probably recognize that it is (c), the commonplace quality of prose, that turns the poets away and not one of the loftier explanations provided in the other distractors.

10. (a) The allusion to “the tomb of the Capulets” in line 10 is an example of a situation where a student is expected to have some outside knowledge, and this will be a very easy question for students. Romeo and Juliet is fair game for American high school students. Notice that the other allusion is footnoted, as this is a more obscure allusion for American high school students, although well known to every English schoolboy and schoolgirl.
his or her subject? Does he or she use connotative rather than denotative words to convey these emotions? Do you recognize a pattern of images or words throughout the passage?

Some questions on vocabulary in context deal with a single word. The word is not usually an unfamiliar word, but it is often a word with multiple meanings, depending on the context or the date of the passage, as some words have altered in meaning over the years.

The set of ten questions on pages 6–7 is very typical—one on purpose, a couple on restatement of supporting ideas, some on tone and style, two on vocabulary in context, and one on an allusion. Students should learn how to use the process of elimination when the answer is not immediately obvious. The organization of the questions is also typical of the usual arrangement of Critical Reading questions. Questions on the content of the passage, the main idea, and supporting ideas generally appear first and are in the order they are found in the passage. They are followed by questions applying to the whole passage, including general questions about the writer’s tone and style. Students should be able to work their way through the passage, finding the answers as they go.

Additional questions on an autobiographical selection like this passage might ask what is revealed about the biographer herself or which statements in the passage associate the author with Romanticism.

Since passages for critical reading come in a wide variety of genres, students should keep in mind that other types of questions could be asked on other types of passages. For instance, passages from fiction can generate questions about point of view, about characters and how these characters are presented, or about setting, either outdoor or indoor, and the role it is likely to play in a novel or short story.

Speeches generate some different kinds of questions because of the oratorical devices a speaker might use—repetition, anaphora, or appeals to various emotions. Questions could be asked about the use of metaphors, the use of connotative words, and the use of patterns of words or images.

The suggestions made in this section of the resource guide should provide a useful background for critical reading. Questions are likely to follow similar patterns, and knowing what to expect boosts confidence when dealing with unfamiliar material.
SECTION II

Nectar in a Sieve (1954) by Kamala Markandaya

Photograph of Kamala Markandaya, author of Nectar in a Sieve and nine other novels.

Kamala Markandaya’s most famous novel, Nectar in a Sieve, is a novel that functions equally on the universal and particular planes: it is a moving and occasionally joyful account of human perseverance in the face of suffering and injustice, but it is also a realistic portrayal of rural poverty in India and the destructive forces of colonialism and industrialization.

KAMALA MARKANDAYA (1924–2004)

Biography

In 1924, Kamala Purnaiya was born into a Tamil Brahmin family in Chimakurti, a small village in the south of India outside of the city of Mysore (now known as Mysuru). Her father was a railway transport officer, and she spent much of her childhood traveling through India. When she was sixteen, she enrolled as a student at the University of Madras, where she studied history while also working as a journalist. It was at this time that she decided to take a pseudonym—her pen name, Kamala Markandaya—as she began to publish short stories in Indian newspapers. While she did not finish her degree because of World War II, she was a very educated woman. During the war she remained in India to work for the army, but in 1948, she moved to London, England. There, she met her husband, Bertrand Taylor, an English journalist, and they eventually had a daughter together. Markandaya and her family remained in England for the rest of their lives, although Markandaya always considered herself part of the Indian diaspora. Her husband died in 1986, but Markandaya lived until May 2004, when she passed away in London, survived by her daughter, Kim Oliver.

Over the span of her career, Kamala Markandaya published ten novels. Without a doubt, she is most famous for her first published novel, Nectar in a Sieve (1954). The novel was tremendously popular in the United States and was situated alongside works such as Pearl S. Buck’s The Good Earth. The success of this novel cemented Markandaya’s position as one of the first generation of Indian writers writing in the tradition of early and mid-twentieth century Indian English writers—writers such as Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and R.K. Narayan, who were publishing twenty to thirty years before Markandaya and had paved the way for her success. From 1954 to 1982, Markandaya was quite prolific, and her last novel was published in 1982. After her last novel was published, she rarely appeared on the literary scene, living the rest of her life in the privacy of her family’s home in London.

Transnational Feminist Writer

While Markandaya did leave India for England at the age of twenty-four, she did not give up her identity as an Indian woman, or an Indian writer. In fact, she joined a growing number of former British subjects who migrated to London during or after British colonialism. The reasons for this migration “to the metropole” are quite complex and varied, but Markandaya’s experience of migration echoed that of other famous world writers: Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Derek Walcott,
Nadine Gordimer, and Salman Rushdie, to name only a few. From the 1970s through the early 1990s, these writers were often grouped together into a category called “Commonwealth Writers” because of their political history as writers coming from former British colonies and their decision to write in English. While Markandaya’s later work is included among the works of these Commonwealth Writers, thematically and stylistically Nectar in a Sieve has more in common with mid-century Indian English writing, particularly in her use of stark social realism as opposed to the “magical realism” of Salman Rushdie.

Markandaya’s novel Nectar in a Sieve can be understood as part of the literary conversation about the impact of British colonialism on the rhythms and beliefs of indigenous village life, which were also dramatized by the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka in his play Death and the King’s Horseman (1975). Many of Markandaya’s novels portray women who must negotiate the constrictions of their culture’s beliefs about the roles of women. Jamaica Kincaid, originally from the Caribbean island of Antigua, is an author who writes about the complicated relationships between mothers and daughters, who are caught within a cycle of poverty, sexism, and racism under colonial rule (Annie John, 1985 Autobiography of My Mother, 1995). Kincaid’s writing resonates with Markandaya’s depiction of the emotional distance that develops between Ruku, the protagonist, and her daughter, Ira, in Nectar in a Sieve.

The term “Commonwealth Writers” was eventually replaced by variations of the terms “postcolonial” or “global anglophone.” The label “Commonwealth Writers” fell out of favor with writers and literary critics for three major reasons. First, while many of these writers do explore similar themes of migration, diaspora, colonialism, hybridity, identity, and nationalism, they are actually much more dissimilar from each other than the term suggests. Not only are their writing styles and content very different, but these “Commonwealth Writers” had very different experiences under British colonialism. While all were under British administration at some point, the colonial experiences of Canada and Australia cannot be very easily compared to those of the Caribbean islands or India.

The issue of English being a global language, rather than being a language that is the sole property of the English themselves, posed an additional dilemma for these writers. In many places, English arrived as the language of the colonizer. The British system of colonial education prioritized the English language, culture, literature, and history, whereas the local and indigenous languages and cultures were regarded as inferior and only fit for the domestic sphere. Some writers, like Salman Rushdie from India, claimed English as an authentic Indian language while others, like Ngugi Wa Thiong’o from Kenya, rejected English as the colonizer’s language and began writing in his own native language (Gikuyu). While Markandaya’s literary career began several decades before the height of this debate about language, it
is clear that Markandaya felt comfortable with English as her literary language.

The term “Commonwealth Writers” suggests that the most important commonality among these writers from different parts of the world is their nation’s relation to Great Britain. Indeed, these writers often explore their shared experiences under colonial regimes and the struggles for independence. However, there are many other similarities and differences to be found among these writers—style, genre, as well as themes that do not directly address colonialism—and some writers felt their writing was constrained by these expectations. As new postcolonial nation states emerged in the bloody aftermath of independence revolutions or from more peaceful transitions of power, the writers of these nations often began to explore themes of national identity. They wanted to find authentic voices of their new nation and reject the colonial culture of the English. As we will discuss later, it is unclear whether the events in Nectar in a Sieve occur prior to or after Indian independence, but regardless of this ambiguity, most readers understand the protagonist’s voice as being an authentic representation of a rural Indian woman’s experience.

Because of her privileged upbringing and her subsequent migration to London, Markandaya had very little in common with her main character Ruku, who did not travel outside her own village except when forced to do so out of necessity of survival. Yet Markandaya’s writing demonstrates solidarity with Ruku, one born from the experience of being a woman in a patriarchal society, where a woman’s worth is directly related to her fertility and her relationships with men. By creating a strong female protagonist, Markandaya was directly challenging the worldview that positions men as the actors of history and pushes women into the margins. Even though Ruku’s sons are the overt political actors in the novel, it is the strength of Ruku’s narrative voice that truly challenges the hierarchy of literary and political representation.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

British Colonialism in India

Centuries before Queen Victoria claimed India as the “jewel in the crown” of her British empire, European powers conducted robust trade with the Mughal and Maratha empires as well as various southern principalities. The arrival of the Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama in the late fifteenth century heralded the beginning of a long sequence of political and economic maneuvering, motivated by a desire to monopolize European access to Indian products. A joint-stock company chartered by Queen Elizabeth in 1600—the British East India Company—governed India from 1757 until 1857 and served as the proxy for British national interests. After the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the British government stripped the East India Company of its charter and began its formal colonial administration of the subcontinent.

The East India Company and Queen Victoria administered India through both direct and indirect means. While the British system of law was put into place, the colonial administrators, rather than push against the caste system, solidified it. Prior to colonial rule, the caste system actually exhibited more fluidity. Local rule was a zamindarship, a legalized system of “tax farming.” Zamindars were aristocratic large landowners who collected revenue from their peasant tenants. The relationship of landowners to revenue extraction changed drastically during British rule. Zamindars were pressured by British tax demands, and this led to mass landlessness and famine. The British thus drastically affected the lives of peasants, even if indirectly, through the zamindarships.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the British began to develop a colonial system of education throughout India. Ostensibly, the goal was to educate the populace in order to improve living conditions—but as a notorious historical document shows, the true motivation behind the educational system was one that served the British Empire’s interests:

*We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we*
govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.

—Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Minute on Indian Education” (1835)

While Macaulay’s reasoning may have been vindicated for a time, a generation of highly educated Indians began to question the hypocrisy of English ideals about political liberty and self-determination in the context of colonial conquest. This was epitomized in Mahatma Gandhi’s life: trained as a barrister in London, he began to question the racist and unjust British colonial system in South Africa, and when he returned to India, he was determined to fight against British rule and advocate for Indian independence.

Even though the colonial education system in India was rife with racist ideology that supported European imperialism, it did facilitate widespread English literacy. For many, literacy in English was the key to a relatively lucrative career in colonial administration. For others, English became a lingua franca—a common language. While it was still unusual, Ruku’s literacy would not have been too surprising, particularly since it was her father who taught her how to read and write.

**Religious Traditions in India**

The dominant religion of India is Hinduism, but Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Christianity are also practiced in different communities. Major religious conflicts have occurred between Hindus and Muslims. During Indian independence in 1947, India was divided into two nations, India and Pakistan. This is known as the Partition of India, and it was in part fueled by religious differences. During the early twentieth century, religious conflict increased significantly and reached an unprecedented pinnacle with the Partition. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, religious nationalism has flared up in India, resulting in political movements and riots.

Hinduism is a pantheistic religion, with many gods and goddesses. The rhythm of daily and seasonal life is celebrated with ceremonies, rituals, and gift-giving. One of the most significant Hindu holidays is Diwali (also known as Divali or Deepavali), or the Festival of Lights. It commemorates the return of Lord Rama from his period of exile. When Lord Rama returned, it was a very dark night, so the people welcomed him with lights. There are, however, regional iterations of Deepavali.
the south—the setting of *Nectar in a Sieve*—Deepavali is associated with the god Krishna and the defeat of the demon Narakaśura. The autumnal celebration of Diwali is marked by a season of gift-giving, cleaning, decorating, and, on the evening of Diwali, explosions of fireworks and lights. Symbolically, the holiday represents the triumph of light over darkness—it reminds believers that even on the darkest night, one can find lights to guide the way home.

One of the most complicated aspects of Hinduism is the caste system. While the caste system is also present in a variety of Indian religious and social arrangements, most people associate it with the Hindu belief system. As mentioned earlier, British colonialism solidified the terms of the caste system and exploited it. *Nectar in a Sieve* underscores the impact of this rigid caste system and its effects on the peasant community.

**Rural Poverty, Colonialism, and Capitalism**

Even though Markandaya was born into a privileged and educated Brahmin family, she witnessed a great deal of poverty and starvation as she traveled with her family throughout India. The 1943 famine of Bengal resulted in the deaths of over three million people due to starvation. Families and communities were destroyed, and the people who survived only did so through sheer tenacity and their willingness to fight for every possibility of food.

Within the colonial agricultural economy, villagers rented land from a wealthy absentee landowner, often for generations at a time. The family would cultivate the land and then pay a yearly rent to the landowner, which came out of the harvest. Under British colonialism, the landowners depended upon this income from their tenants in order to pay their own taxes/fees to the British. This was the zamindarism—the indirect rule of the British. It was a precarious life for the villagers—floods and drought could destroy any harvest, leaving the family without food or resources. Communities flourished and withered at the mercy of the weather, and starvation was a constant threat.

While it is true that the rural poor did not fare very well under the zamindar system of tenant farming, the economic and societal changes wrought by industrialization were even more devastating. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the arrival of the tannery epitomizes these issues. Migrant workers arriving to work in the tannery earn a higher wage than the vast majority of the villagers who make their living through tenant farming. In response to these higher wages, the village merchants raise the prices of goods until only the tannery workers can afford to purchase things. The value of the cultivated crop, rice, does not keep pace, so the farming families fall further and further behind.

Not only did industrialization change the economic structure of the region, it also altered the extended family and kinship structures of rural Indian society. Under the previous system, a family could weather a bad harvest and survive, but in this situation, a single season of drought could destroy the possibility of survival. Even though a family’s sons were willing to stay on the land and work, their presence would only add more mouths to feed. Therefore, the sons looked for work and survival elsewhere—as in the novel, they found employment in the new industry, moved to the city to do menial labor, or became indentured laborers in another country, leaving their village forever.

What happens to the village and the families in the novel is a snapshot of how industrialization and capitalism transformed the foundations of rural Indian society. The rice cultivated by Nathan and Ruku is a commodity, one which is connected to a vast global circulation of capital, investment, goods, and labor. People on opposite sides of the world are connected through the commodities they produce and the goods they consume. In the world of *Nectar in a Sieve*, the rice cultivated by Nathan and Ruku could end up in a market in London, while factory workers in England could have produced the medicines consumed in rural India. However, the structure of capitalism tends to obscure these human relations. Rice as a commodity, an object with an exchange value, appears to move through the global market as if it is unconnected to any human labor.

Markandaya’s novel is a searing reminder that the origin of that commodity is a relationship between humans. The landowner and, more so, the British profit from Nathan’s physical labor that cultivates the land and the rice. In turn, the landowner converts that rice into capital, which begins to circulate in the local and global
In capitalism, the production of a commodity produces great wealth; however, the people who cultivate and create that commodity do not benefit from that wealth. The wealth flows to the people who own the land or the factory, not the laborers themselves. Ruku’s life story of impoverishment is one that has been repeated many times in many parts of the world, as the forces of capitalism and modernization sweep through agricultural societies.

**Women’s Roles in India**

Historically and regardless of caste, religious, or economic background, extended family and kinship structures characterized family life in India. Multiple generations often lived in the same home, and relationships among women dominated the domestic sphere. As is the case in many parts of the world, contemporary family structures are very different now when compared to what they once were, but in India the extended family structure is still very influential. A child may have many “aunties” who are distantly related through marriage and other family networks.

Although this has rapidly changed in the past forty years, Indian women were historically confined to the domestic sphere and unable to participate in political or public life, with a few notable exceptions. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, sons were viewed as being the most valuable, and daughters were often regarded as inconsequential at best and a burden at worst. It was expected that women would join their husbands’ families and leave their birth families. In addition, the bride’s family was expected to provide a dowry—a payment made to the husband’s family—upon being married to her husband. This means that female children drained their birth family’s assets, whereas male children were valued because they were expected to work the land and would eventually marry a woman who would bring a dowry to the family. Most often, these marriages were arranged between families without any input from the young woman herself.

Once married and living with her husband's family, a woman's fertility was the most important aspect of her life. While we now know that infertility can affect both men and women, infertility was historically blamed solely on the woman. If a woman could not conceive, her social standing was negatively affected. A woman’s ability to bear children was directly connected to her worth as a virtuous, religious, and upstanding woman. As Ira’s experience demonstrates in *Nectar in a Sieve*, it was not uncommon for a husband to reject a wife if she was unable to conceive.

**PLOT SYNOPSIS**

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the narrator, Rukmani, tells the story of her life in a rural Indian village. Through an arranged marriage, Ruku marries Nathan when she is only twelve years old and moves away from her own family. In the beginning of their marriage, Ruku struggles with infertility. She first gives birth to a daughter but then is “infertile” for six years. However, after beginning a tentative friendship with a white British doctor, Kennington, Ruku’s inability to conceive is treated, and she gives birth to six sons. Nathan is a tenant farmer, and when numerous harvest and crop cycles are destroyed by drought or floods, the family teeters on the edge of starvation.

During Ruku’s lifetime, the entire fabric of their village is changed by the construction of a tannery, which alters the economic foundation of the region, leaving ten-
ant farmers like Nathan particularly vulnerable. Disaster upon disaster strikes the family, including a situation where Ruku’s daughter Ira is rejected by her husband for being unable to bear a child. Two of Ruku’s sons end up migrating to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to find work; a third is killed by tannery officials when he attempts to find food for his family; a fourth moves to the city to find work; a fifth is apprenticed to the white doctor, Kenny; and the sixth dies as an infant due to starvation. Eventually, the family is so destitute that even Ira’s prostitution cannot keep the family from starvation. Ruku and Nathan leave their village to seek their fourth son in the city, but more tragedy and hunger await them there. Finally, Ruku and Nathan return back to their village, along with an adopted son, Puli, and the novel concludes with this homecoming.

**SETTING**

Because the novel provides so many realistic details about daily village life and rice farming, it may take some time for the reader to realize that Markandaya never provides a specific location for the rural village in Part One or for the city in Part Two. This was a strategic decision on Markandaya’s part. While cultural customs serve as clues to the southern and Tamil-speaking setting of the novel, the village is meant to be universal in its representation of rural Indian life and the historical transformations that affected the Indian peasant.

Although Markandaya does not explicitly tell the reader exactly when the novel’s events take place, the novel does give us clues that directly point to the fact that it might be set during the colonial period: the mention of white people as distinctly powerful, white capitalists (the investors in the Tannery), the presences of zamindars who were abolished with the creation of an independent India and Pakistan as two separate nation states, and indentured labor in the form of Tamil migration to tea plantations in Ceylon. This changes our interpretation of the novel and the historical messages it relays.

**PLOT SUMMARY**

**Part One – Chapters 1–5**

The novel begins with Ruku’s first-person narration, as she tells the reader that sometimes she thinks that her husband is with her again. From these first sentences, we understand that her husband is deceased. In the next paragraph, Ruku watches her son, daughter, and Puli, the child she “clung to” who was not hers, step into the yard. Then, Ruku shifts her gaze to the building where her son and Kenny work. At this point, Ruku’s thoughts move far away into her own past, and she recalls her own childhood with her three sisters. The reader is left with a bit of uncertainty—we do not know who Kenny is, nor do we know if Ruku has only had two children.

Ruku’s family was only able to find a poor tenant farmer, Nathan, for her to marry due to the lack of a dowry. At twelve, Ruku married Nathan, and narrator Ruku remembers that many people called it “a poor match.” However, narrator Ruku remarks on “how little they knew, any of them,” which implies that her marriage defied these expectations and instead was a wonderful match. Ruku describes the early days of her marriage and her own fear and hesitancy, and Nathan’s calm patience and understanding.

Ruku makes friends with three village women—Janaki, Kali, and Kunthi. Soon, Ruku becomes pregnant and while she is resting, she begins to take up writing again. It is clear that her literacy is very uncommon for her social standing and gender, but Ruku draws comfort and hope from her writing. When Ruku gives birth to her daughter, Irawaddy (also called Ira), she first feels disappointment because her firstborn is not a boy. But soon she bonds to her daughter, who turns out to be an extraordinarily lovely child. Six years after Ira is born, Ruku still has not conceived another child. She meets the white doctor, Kennington, when her mother is ill, and he perceives that Ruku is upset over her infertility. Kenny treats Ruku, and she quickly conceives and give birth to five sons in succession. Years later, Kenny visits Ruku and becomes acquainted with her entire family, helping them out when he can.

Change comes to the village in the form of a new tannery and an influx of new workers. The villagers have...
different reactions to the events—some welcome the opportunities for work and change, while others are able to foresee the destruction of their way of life. Ruku is frightened and angry by the economic changes, which will leave her family vulnerable and powerless, but Nathan understands that “there is no going back” and that they must “bend like the grass, that you do not break.”

**PART ONE – CHAPTERS 6–10**

When Ira turns fourteen years of age, Ruku realizes that it is time for her to be married. Ruku approaches Old Granny and asks her to be the matchmaker. Ruku and Nathan spend much of their savings for Ira’s dowry and wedding festivities. Soon after Ira is married, the monsoon season arrives early, and the entire village is decimated by an enormous storm. Many people lose their homes and begin to starve. At one point, Ruku encounters Kenny who is very angry with Ruku and the villagers because they suffer in silence and do not demand help. However, Ruku does not understand what Kenny means, because all she can do is simply endure the hardships until they end.

Kunthi’s sons are the first villagers to work in the tannery, and Ruku has an unpleasant confrontation with Kunthi about the tannery. Kunthi looks down on Ruku as an ignorant peasant who does not appreciate the benefits of the tannery’s wages and modernization, but Ruku thinks that Kunthi does not understand the destruction of their village by the tannery. Janaki’s husband is forced to close his shop, and soon Janaki and her family leave the village, never to be heard from again. Ruku is sad at first, but then quickly dismisses those thoughts and goes on with her life.

The villagers are Hindu, but there is a community of Muslims who arrive with the tannery. They are strangers in the village and are wealthier, living apart from the villagers. Ruku and Kali discuss how different their lives are from the Muslim women, and one day Ruku finds herself selling vegetables to a Muslim woman. It is a nice moment of connection, but Ruku reaffirms to herself that she much prefers her open skies and fields to the closed living quarters of the Muslim women.

Five years after her wedding, Ira’s husband returns Ira to her mother’s house because Ira has not conceived any children. Ruku empathizes with her daughter, remembering her own struggles with infertility. During this time, Ruku’s sons Arjun and Thambi begin working at the tannery because the family is struggling. Thambi rebels against the concept of tenant farming—of laboring
so hard for another man’s profit. Ruku tries to dissuade Arjun from going to the tannery by suggesting that he work with Kenny the doctor. She is confident that Kenny can help Arjun because “white men have power.” Arjun agrees with her and cryptically adds that they have power “over men, and events, and especially over women.” This exchange shows that Ruku’s sons understand their lives from a different, and more political, perspective.

The village celebrates Deepavali (Diwali, the Festival of Lights), and Ruku and her family have a joyful and beautiful evening. The entire village is caught up in the ritual and celebration, and the fires and lights symbolize the triumph—even if fleeting—of light over darkness.

**Part One – Chapters 11–15**

When Nathan travels away from home to attend a funeral, Ruku goes to see Kenny and asks him to treat Ira’s infertility. Later that evening, on her way home from visiting Kenny, Ruku encounters Kunthi, who is dressed very provocatively. Kunthi’s attire suggests that she is working as a prostitute. Kunthi assumes that Ruku is being unfaithful to Nathan with Kenny and threatens to tell Nathan. This enrages Ruku, and she loses her temper and physically attacks Kunthi.

Kenny helps Ira as he did Ruku, but it is too late—Ira’s husband has already taken a new wife. With this news, Ira slides into depression. At the same time, Ruku herself is pregnant (having conceived on Diwali) and gives birth to her last son, Kuti. With the birth of Kuti, Ira begins to recover, and she becomes the primary caregiver for Kuti.

Meanwhile, Arjun and Thambi attempt to lead a workers strike in the tannery, but it fails after a week, and they both lose their jobs. This jeopardizes the family’s precarious survival, and eventually Arjun and Thambi decide to travel to Ceylon to work on tea plantations. Murugan also leaves the village to find work in the city. Ruku grieves her for sons, knowing that she will probably never see them again.

Kenny visits Ruku, and they end up having one of their most frank discussions. Kenny admits to Ruku that he lost his wife and children because of his work, and he openly expresses his frustration with her people. Ruku comes to have a partial understanding of his motivations, but he still remains a mystery to her.

Drought returns to the village, and Sivaji comes to collect the yearly rent from Nathan, who is unable to pay. Sivaji relents and says that if Nathan can pay half, then he can give him an extension until the next year’s harvest. Ruku sells her saris to Biswas the moneylender, but they are still unable to pay even half of the rent. Rain finally comes, but far too late for the ruined crops. The entire village is suffering, and starvation is rampant.

The family is on the brink of starvation, and Ruku has managed to keep back enough rice to feed the family for twenty-four days. A sick and paranoid Kunthi appears to Ruku, and blackmails Ruku into giving her some rice by threatening to accuse Ruku of having an affair with Kenny. After Kunthi leaves, Ruku goes to check on the remaining rice and discovers that it has gone missing.
Nathan confesses that he gave the rice to Kunthi because she blackmailed him—Nathan is the father of Kunthi’s sons, and he has been unfaithful to Ruku with Kunthi. Although Ruku feels betrayed and angry, she also feels relief, as she recounts to her husband what Kunthi was holding over her own head. With this honesty, Ruku and Nathan feel even stronger in their relationship.

Once the rice is gone, the family is starving, forced to eat grass. The baby Kuti is very sickly from malnutrition. The family is so desperate that Ruku’s son, Raja, trespasses on tannery property in order to steal a skin so he can get money to find food. The guards kill him and bring his body back to Ruku. They manipulate her into accepting that the tannery had no responsibility for his death and that Raja’s death was his own fault for trespassing.

Part One – Chapters 16–20

It is a race against time—can the family survive long enough to reap the benefits of the successful harvest? Even if they do survive, will they be physically capable of performing the necessary labor? Kuti is dying before their eyes, and Ruku lies awake at night consumed by worry. Suddenly, Kuti’s health takes a turn for the better, and a few nights later, Ruku hears someone walking outside their hut. Haunted by memories of Kunthi’s treachery, Ruku runs outside and physically attacks the intruder. However, the intruder turns out to be Ira, who is seriously injured after her mother’s attack. Ira eventually reveals that she has turned to prostitution in order to earn money for food to give to Kuti. Ruku and Nathan are very angry and judgmental, but Ira is determined to do anything in her power to put food in Kuti’s belly. However, it is too late and Kuti dies, within weeks of the best harvest the family reaps in many years.

After the harvest, Kenny returns to the village and seeks out Ruku again. They have a spirited conversation, and Kenny admires Ruku’s newly displayed confidence. Kenny decides to train Ruku’s son, Selvam, as his apprentice because he has raised the funds to construct a hospital. Kenny is driven to help the villagers and make their lives better and does not understand why Ruku is so complacent with her lot. However, Ruku does not understand the use in crying out for help when there is no help to be found and suffering is simply part of life.

Ira becomes pregnant and does not know who the father is because of her work as a prostitute. However, her child, Sacrabani, is born albino. It is a genetic condition in which a child is born without pigmentation. Sacrabani
is regarded as an oddity, a freak, but Ira is fiercely protective of him and refuses to acknowledge his difference. Kali stops by to visit the family and begins to criticize the baby, but Selvam steps up and asserts that Sacrabani is more similar to other babies than he is different.

**PART ONE – CHAPTERS 21–23**

The hospital construction begins and is plagued by a variety of construction delays. In the meantime, Old Granny dies of starvation, and Ruku feels sadness and guilt about not noticing or caring for her. Ruku begins to despair, as she sees the death and suffering all around her, and she recalls Kenny’s admonition to cry out for help—but she wonders again what is the use in crying out when people refuse to hear your cry?

Selvam, Ira, and Sacrabani become very close, and Nathan and Ruku are left to work the land by themselves. Nathan’s health begins to decline, but suddenly Sivaji returns to tell Nathan that the landowner is selling the land to the tannery and that they have two weeks to vacate the property. At first, Ruku blames the tannery, as it was the first sign of change and destruction in their lives. But then she acknowledges that their lives as tenant farmers have always been precarious, and the land could have been taken from them at any time. Selvam offers to take care of Ira and her son, while Ruku and Nathan make plans to go live with their son in the city.

**PART TWO – CHAPTERS 24–30**

Nathan and Ruku travel on a bullock cart to the city, which is a chaotic and disorienting place for two rural villagers. They have not written to tell their son of their arrival, so they try to make their way through the city alone. Night is about to fall, and they have no place to stay or anything to eat, but a stranger directs them to a temple where they can sleep and find food for the night. Since Nathan is too sick to stand and push his way through the line, Ruku tries to claim his portion, but she is shocked that people berate her and accuse her of being selfish and trying to lie. After they eat, Nathan and Ruku return for the bundles they had left near a pillar in the temple, but their belongings have been stolen. They finally go to sleep, but in the morning, Ruku discovers that her money has been stolen from her sari, leaving them truly destitute.

They decide to make their way to Murugan’s home, confident they will find shelter and food. They ask a disabled orphan boy, Puli, for directions. However, when they arrive at the doctor’s house, who happens to be a woman, they discover that Murugan no longer works for her. The doctor instructs her servants to feed Nathan and Ruku and give them a rest as they continue in their search for their son.

Eventually, they arrive at their destination but are disappointed yet again when Murugan’s wife, Ammu, shares the news that he has left her alone and penniless with her children. It is clear that Ammu does not have the resources to care for her in-laws, as she can barely feed her own children. Ruku feels ashamed of her son, and she feels pity for Ammu, who, like Ira, has turned to prostitution in order to feed her family.

Nathan and Ruku return to the temple, and Ruku tries to make money by offering her services as a reader of letters. Unless they can make money, they cannot afford the trip home to their village. Ruku is not very successful, but they come upon Puli again. Puli tells them that a rock quarry pays daily wages, and Nathan and Ruku decide to try their luck in the quarry. It is very difficult work, but the three of them work well together as a team.

One day, growing confident in their income, Ruku decides to buy some sweet treats for Nathan and Puli. She also buys a toy for Puli, as he has softened her heart. However, that evening Nathan falls ill. The next morning in the rain, the three go to work in the quarry. When Ruku leaves to collect their wages, Nathan collapses in a delirious fever. Nathan dies, but not before spending his
last moments with his beloved, Ruku.

After Nathan’s death, Ruku convinces Puli to join her on her trip home. Selvam, Ira, and her son welcome Ruku and Puli, and the novel ends with Ruku’s joy in returning home to her village and family.

CHARACTERS

Rukmani or Ruku – Ruku is the narrator of the novel, who is telling the reader her life story. As a child, her father taught her to read and write, and so Ruku has a literary and reflective sensibility. The narrative voice is that of Ruku as an old woman, after she has returned to Selvam’s home after Nathan’s death in the city. Ruku is a devoted wife and mother, and she has endured many tragedies in her life. As illustrated in her conversations with Kenny, Ruku accepts that life is full of suffering, and does not understand why she should fight or rage against injustice, which is as impersonal and out of her control as is the monsoon or drought. However, her own determination to write her story and to make her voice heard belies her fatalistic philosophy—at some level, she must believe that crying out does make a difference.

Nathan – Nathan, Ruku’s husband, is a patient, gentle, and hardworking tenant farmer. He treats his twelve-year-old child bride with kindness and affection, and eventually their marriage blossoms into a love partnership. However, Nathan is not without his faults—he fathers Kunthi’s sons, one before his marriage to Ruku and one after, a betrayal that Kunthi uses against him. He is also very judgmental about Ira’s decision to be a prostitute, even though it puts food in his family’s mouths. He eventually dies in the city, away from his family and that he feels more kinship with her country than his own. He does much to help Ruku and her family over the years, and eventually Kenny hires Selvam as his apprentice. Kenny can be seen as representing the Western philanthropist who comes from the perspective of charity. Many of his comments and frustrations echo contemporary Western frustrations with native poverty and a tendency to assign blame on native culture or “passivity” rather than international economic systems. The emptiness of Kenny’s criticisms to Rukumini (and her bewilderment with his lack of understanding of her lived reality) can be seen as speaking directly to the Western reader of the period.

Irawaddy or Ira – Ira is Ruku and Nathan’s only daughter and firstborn child. She is given away in marriage at the age of fourteen. However, because of her infertility, Ira’s husband rejects her and sends her back to her family. When her family is on the edge of starvation, Ira turns to prostitution in a futile attempt to save her baby brother. Later, Ira becomes pregnant with a child (but does not know who the father is) and gives birth to a son, Sacrabani, who is albino. Ira is devoted to her son and becomes very close with her brother Selvam, who protects them both.

Arjun and Thambi – Arjun and Thambi are sons of Ruku and Nathan who take jobs in the tannery. Arjun is keenly aware of the injustices of the colonial system and of who truly holds the power in their society (the white man). Arjun and Thambi lead a tannery workers strike, but it is ultimately unsuccessful, and they lose their jobs. They then decide to migrate to work as tea plantation laborers in Ceylon because there are no opportunities for them in their own village.

Murugan – Murugan is the son of Ruku and Nathan who leaves the village to become a servant in the city, on the recommendation of Kenny. He marries Ammu and has a son, but he abandons them and never communicates with his parents again.

Raja – Raja is the son of Ruku and Nathan who is killed by tannery guards when he tries to steal a skin from the tannery.

Selvam – Selvam is the son of Ruku and Nathan who is apprenticed to Kenny and works at the new hospital. Selvam has a strong bond with his sister, Ira, and is fiercely protective of his nephew, Sacrabani. When Ruku and Puli return to the village, he welcomes them both home.

Kuti – Kuti is the son of Ruku and Nathan who dies of starvation as a young child during the famine. He is a surrogate son for Ira, and her love for him was the motivation for her to work as a prostitute.

Sacrabani – Sacrabani is Ira’s illegitimate son, who is born albino, without pigmentation. He is regarded as an oddity in the village, but both Ira and Selvam love him unconditionally.

Puli – Puli is a clever orphaned city boy who has learned to survive on the streets despite his disfigurement by leprosy. He helps Ruku and Nathan find their way in the city, and he eventually encounters them again when they stay at the temple. His intelligence and spirit endear him to the old couple, and they informally adopt him. When Nathan dies, Puli returns with Ruku to her village and lives as her son.

Kunthi – Kunthi is a very attractive village woman who welcomes the tannery and the change that it brings. She profits from the tannery by working as a prostitute. She is resentful of Ruku and blackmauls her about her relationship with Kenny. Eventually, it is revealed that Nathan has fathered Kunthi’s sons, in a betrayal of his...
marriage. However, starvation causes Kunthi to lose her physical beauty, and she begins to lose her grip on reality when she blackmails both Ruku and Nathan into giving her their rice.

Kali – Kali is a friend of Ruku’s who is kindhearted, though also judgmental and a gossip.

Janaki – Janaki is a friend of Ruku’s who is forced to leave the village when her husband’s shop fails due to the increased competition from the tannery.

Biswas – Biswas is the cruel, avaricious money-lender who profits from the misfortune of the villagers.

Old Granny – Old Granny is an old woman who sells fruits and vegetables. Even though Ruku begins to sell her produce to Biswas in order to earn more money, Ruku still asks Old Granny to make Ira’s marriage match. When Ira’s marriage fails, Old Granny blames herself. She eventually dies in the street from starvation, with no family or friends to mourn her.

THEMES

Title and Epigraph

The novel’s title, Nectar in a Sieve, and its epigraph, “Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve, And hope without an object cannot live,” are taken from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem, “Work Without Hope” (1825). A sieve is designed to separate liquids and solids; therefore, if you try to capture nectar with a sieve, it is almost a futile task. The nectar will eventually drain away through the sieve’s many openings. Nectar, because of its role in the nutrient and reproductive cycle of plants, is associated with life, beauty, and joy. The novel’s title conjures an image of this precious life-affirming liquid slowly draining away, even as the sieve represents a futile attempt to preserve and conserve this substance. This image is a haunting one—it pairs life with emptiness, struggle with futility, and hope with despair. The title is equally weighted between these forces, and as the reader moves through the story, the reader may wonder which forces are more powerful in the end: hope or despair, life or destruction?

The epigraph places the title into a poetic context. The title image—nectar in a sieve—is actually a metaphorical description of “work without hope.” If one works without hope, one is pursuing a fruitless task. This insight has a parallel—if hope is without an object, it cannot survive. These lines are from Coleridge’s sonnet:

All Nature seems at work. Slugs leave their lair—
The bees are stirring—birds are on the wing—
And Winter, slumbering in the open air,
Wears on his smiling face a dream of Spring!
And I, the while, the sole unbusy thing,
Nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing.

Yet well I ken the banks where amaranths blow,
Have traced the fount whence streams of nectar flow.
Bloom, O ye amaranths! bloom for whom ye may,
For me ye bloom not! Glide, rich streams, away!
With lips unbrighten’d, wreathless brow, I stroll:
And would you learn the spells that drowse my soul?
Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve,
And Hope without an object cannot live.

In the sonnet, the speaker is surrounded by the beauty and industriousness of Nature—every plant and creature has a purpose, and all of nature is working in concert. Nature is anticipating the turn of the season from winter into spring, from the season of slumber to the season of birth and new beginnings. Every single thing, from the birds to the flowers to the streams, is doing its part to bring forth the new spring—everything except for the speaker, who is the “sole unbusy thing.” He feels detached from the work around him even though he is intimately familiar with the landscape. He can observe, but not participate. Because he is not working toward the same purpose, he feels like he is unworthy of viewing the beauty that is unfolding all around him. In contrast
to the blooming amaranths and the gliding streams, his own lips are “unbrighten’d” and his brow is “wretchless.” While even Winter (as personified in the poem) smiles as he dreams of spring, the narrator is under "spells" that "drowse" his soul.

In the final couplet, the speaker explains why he feels so lethargic and detached. Working without hope is as futile as trying to use a sieve to collect nectar; he is without hope because he does not have anything to have hope for. Or, put another way, unless he has hope, it is no use working. Everything around him is working because of the collective hope and promise of spring, but he does not share this hope.

Epigraphs can be an author's way of giving the reader a hint about what themes or ideas will be central to the novel. This epigraph actually raises questions rather than answering them. How does hope or despair affect survival? How can one hope when the nectar of life is draining through one's fingers? What use is work when there is nothing left to hope for? However, Markandaya only designates the final two lines as the epigraph, not the entire poem. It is clear that Coleridge's speaker feels listless, hopeless, and despairing. However, is this true of Ruku, the narrator in the novel? If she has something to hope for, then perhaps her work will not be in vain.

MEMORY, REFLECTION, AND TEMPORALITY

Ruku (Rukmani) is the first-person narrator of her life story. The events in the novel are recounted as a flashback—the narrator Ruku has already returned home to her son Selvam and daughter Ira after Nathan's death. This means that the narrative perspective is that of an older, wiser Ruku, who is both telling and interpreting her own experiences. Ruku is reflecting on her life, and in hindsight she sees moments of foreshadowing and can interpret the meaning of events or feelings. These moments of clarity surface in the novel when we can hear "present Ruku" reflecting on "past Ruku’s" thoughts, actions, and feelings.

For instance, in Chapter 1, Ruku tells the reader about the early days of her marriage, and she expresses gratitude for this brief interlude of peace and quiet before the major tragedies occur:

"How well I recall it, how grateful I am that not all the clamour which invaded our lives later could subdue the memory or still the longing for it. Rather, it has strengthened: had there not been what has been, I might never have known how blessed we were.

She later comes to appreciate the meaning of this peace and quiet—although she was content at the time, it is only after a lifetime of sorrow and loss that she could truly appreciate the blessing of this peaceful joy with her husband.

However, this narrative structure also means that the reader should be aware that the first-person narrator, Ruku, is deliberately including and excluding things. We are not simply reading an objective account of all the events that happened in Ruku's life; Ruku is crafting and shaping the contours, style, and meaning of her life. In some ways, Ruku is incredibly honest about her actions or feelings—her disappointment at her daughter’s birth and her rage at Kunthi, which leads her to assault her own daughter—but in other ways, she is deliberately guarded and ambiguous—for instance concerning how Kenny actually treats her infertility. As readers, we should pay attention to both levels of the novel: the actual events in Ruku's life and the way that Ruku deliberately crafts her life story.

The novel begins with a lyrical moment in Ruku's voice:

"Sometimes at night I think that my husband is with me again, coming gently through the mists, and we are tranquil together. Then morning comes, the wavering grey turns to gold, there is a stirring within as the sleepers awake, and he softly departs."

From these first two sentences, the reader is introduced to the first-person narrator and comes to understand that the narrator's husband has passed away. Even though the husband has disappeared from the narrator's present, he still returns to her at night, in her dreams, moving through the currents of the night mists. This suggests that the divide between the past and the present is not as solid as we might think; the past haunts the present, bringing both loss and comfort. It also represents the structure of the novel—every present moment is touched by the past, and the narrator turns to the past for comfort, even as she must wake each morning to the reality of her present.

A few pages later, we discover that Ruku is losing her vision:

"Sometimes I can see quite clearly: the veil is rent and for a few seconds I see blue skies and tender trees, then it closes on me again and once more I am back in a world of my own, which darkens a little with each passing day. Yet not alone; for the faces of those I have loved, things that have been—shapes, forms, images—are always before me: and sometimes they are so vivid that truly I cannot say whether I see them or not, whether the veil is lifted to allow me the sight, or whether it is only my mind that sees.

She is still blessed with moments of visual clarity, but those moments are growing further apart. While her vision is failing, her memory, her mind's eye, is strengthening. She may not be able to see the "blue skies and tender trees" of her present, but "the faces of those [she has] loved, things that have been" are becoming ever more vivid and clear. In fact, she begins to question what feels more real—her loss of physical vision or the presence of her lost loved ones and memories.

This trope of a veil that lifts and closes also resonates
with the first-person narrative structure and the temporal shift between the Ruku as the present narrator and the story she is telling about her life. In writing her own story, Ruku the present narrator controls the veil of sight for the reader. Also, what is obscured in the present is made more visible with distance in time.

Ruku has always cherished the past more than her present, in part because her present has been full of painful and destructive changes. In Chapter 4, Ruku reflects on the willingness of Janaki and Kali to accept the tannery and the changes it will bring, in contrast to her own fears about the present:

“So they were reconciled and threw the past away with both hands that they might be the readier to grasp the present, while I stood by in pain, envoicing such easy reconciliation and clutching in my own two hands the memory of the past, and accounting it a treasure.”

Here, Ruku is caught between two worlds, and in this moment of loss, she begins to see the past more clearly. Ruku does not let the past paralyze her, but she knows that holding onto the past is painful.

After Raja and Kuti die, Kenny returns to the village, and Ruku tells him about what has happened. She stops mid-sentence because the memory floods her senses:

“The memory of those days was ever with me, yet the passing of time had made it quiescent; now my own words brought it savagely alive with a shrill, stabbing pain that swept the words away.”

Speaking about her loss conjures it anew; it was never forgotten, but it was lying dormant, below the surface of her daily life. In this moment, her words have the power to breathe new life into the pain. Yet later, the narrator Ruku finds immense comfort in putting her pain and loss into words. The very act of speaking and writing brings the past to life.

At the end of the novel when Ruku reflects upon the night of Nathan’s death, she describes her memories of that night as “hard and bright within me like a diamond.” A diamond cannot be destroyed by fire—and Ruku’s memories are just as indestructible. When she recalls these memories, she realizes that they have different qualities and intensities. Extending the diamond metaphor, she notes that “the fires that flash from it have strange powers. Some are blue and wrap me gently in their glow; or green and soothing like oxen eyes in the night; but there are others, yellow and red, that sear me with their intensity.”

Nathan’s final moments brought a mixture of comfort, love, pain, fear, and grief, and when these memories and emotions become overwhelming, Ruku tells us that she “call[s] to the mists and they come, like clouds that cover the sun. But the fires themselves are always there, they will never be extinguished until my life itself is done.” This is an allusion to the very first sentence in the novel—“Sometimes at night I think that my husband is with me again, coming gently through the mists, and we are tranquil together.” Here, when the pain becomes too much, Ruku calls to these mists, the substance that separates wakefulness from dreaming, the material world from the spiritual one. While she acknowledges that the “fires” of her memories will only be extinguished when her life is over, we wonder if her fire will ever truly die out. Do Ruku’s words carry the embers of those fires, even past her own death? Can the fires of Ruku’s story resonate with the reader’s own experience?

The novel’s ending takes us back to the beginning and completes the narrative circle of Ruku’s life story as recounted in a flashback. Ruku and Puli return to Selvam and Ira who greet them with open arms. Ruku tries to tell them that their father has passed, but she is unable to speak: “There was a silence, I struggled to say what had to be said.” But Selvam sees his mother’s pain and assures her that she does not need to talk about it at that moment, unless she feels that she must. In the last two lines of the novel Ruku responds to her son: “It was a gentle passing,’ I said. ‘I will tell you later.’” It is too difficult for Ruku to tell the whole story in that moment of homecoming, but as we know from the novel’s beginning, she does indeed follow through on her promise to tell the story, once she has settled into her children’s home.

It is important that the novel starts in the present—that it is not entirely chronological. If the novel concluded in the narrator’s present, showing us the moment of Ruku’s death, the reader might interpret it differently. Ruku’s death at the end of the novel would convey a sense of futility—the last bit of nectar draining from the sieve. However, by ending the novel with the promise of telling her story, we are left with a sense that Ruku will survive through her own words, even though we know she will eventually die. The last words of the novel invite the reader to imagine the future, even if we know that the future does include Ruku’s death. It is possible that all the nectar has not drained away—that Ruku’s words themselves represent the nectar of life, and we the readers have become the container for their preservation.

**Critiques of Colonialism**

Although clues lead us to conclude that the novel is set in southern India, the lack of naming a geographical or historical specificity allows Markandaya’s novel to widely critique the legal, economic, and caste structures of colonialism across the nation. It is easy to interpret the novel with a universal lens—Ruku’s story stands in for the human experience of loss, change, suffering, pain, hardship, endurance, and joy.

In the very first paragraphs, Markandaya shows us how Ruku’s life is affected by colonial power structures. As a young child, Ruku dreams of having a grand wedding, one that will be remembered for the ages. Her fa-
ther is the head of the village, and Ruku grows up believing that her father is the leader of the community and holds a great deal of power. When she tells her brother about her wedding dreams, he scolds her for “speak[ing] like a fool, the headman is no longer of consequence. There is the Collector, who comes to these villages once a year, and to him is the power, and to those he appoints; not to the headman.” Unbeknownst to Ruku, her father’s power has been usurped by the system of colonial administration. While he retains the title of headman, he is a figurehead only—his title does not translate into real economic or social power.

Ruku begins Chapter 4 by reflecting on the type of changes she had known in her life. She notes that she had watched her father’s power diminish, “but the alteration was so slow that we hardly knew when it came.” She had also watched her parents age and die, but while this change was painful, it too was gradual and nonviolent. However, in a moment of foreshadowing, she tells the reader that “the change that now came into my life, into all our lives, blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye.” These devastating, wrenching, violent changes are brought to the village by the construction of the tannery, and this insight comes from an older Ruku, one who is able to see the full course of destruction.

While many readers will interpret the tannery as a general symbol of modernity—and indeed it is—it is important to recognize that modernity and colonialism cannot be separated in this novel. The tannery transforms the village economically, environmentally, and socially. It devastates the local subsistence economy, it pollutes the water and land, and it alters the family and kinship structures. These are outcomes of modernity, but they are also outcomes of colonialism. As Ruku observes a few chapters later, the tannery’s growth swallows everything in its path:

Photograph from the time of the British Raj. *Nectar in a Sieve* widely critiques the legal, economic, and caste structures of colonial India.

A photograph of rural India from colonial times. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, Ruku witnesses the devastating changes brought by modernity and industrialization in the form of the tannery, which wholly transforms her village and its way of life.

*It was a great sprawling growth, this tannery. It grew and flourished and spread. Not a month went by but somebody’s land was swallowed up, another building appeared. Night and day the tanning went on.*

At the height of the British Empire, the British controlled three-quarters of the globe; on a smaller scale, the tannery has taken on a life of its own and now controls almost the entire village.

There are several moments of foresight or foreshadowing in Chapter 4. During the construction of the tannery, the villagers gather around to watch and seem to be disrupting the progress. A white man enters into the crowd, speaks with the overseer, and afterward, the overseer tries to disperse the crowd. The white man is the owner of the tannery, and the overseer, who a moment ago was in control of the workers, suddenly begins to “bow and scrape” in front of the owner. As the villagers reluctantly leave, Kannan, the owner of the village’s current tanning business, remarks that the white man and overseer are telling them what to do “as if he owned us.” Kannan stands his ground because he “resent[s] the haughty orders,” but most of the villagers, including Ruku, obey the command. However, Ruku thinks: “already he foresaw his livelihood being wrested from him.” While Kannan is speaking figuratively—the white man and the overseer do not actually own the villagers as slaves—it does ring true. In colonialism, the people who own the means of production (the factories, the land) are the ones who control the capital and goods that are produced. The tannery represents a shift in the extractive nature of British colonialism.

The young Ruku has a difficult conversation with her husband after the tannery is built, and there is a lull in the work. When Nathan tells her that he is sure the
workers will return to the tannery, she cries out:

_They may live in our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter, and hoard our silver since we cannot spend it, and see our children go without the food that their children gorge, and it is only in the hope that one day things will be as they were that we have done these things. Now that they have gone let us forget them and return to our ways._

She understands that her village will be torn apart by the tannery and its subsequent effects, but she is hoping that it is merely temporary—that they can return to their lives as if the tannery was merely an interlude. However, Nathan knows differently, and he responds by telling Ruku that “there is no going back. Bend like the grass, that you do not break.” Here, even though he has no more experience with the tannery than Ruku, Nathan has the foresight to understand that their survival depends solely on their ability to adapt and endure.

Eventually, it becomes clear to Ruku that at least one of her sons must try to find employment at the tannery. She tells Arjun that she will ask Kenny to use his connections to help him because “white men have power.” Arjun bitterly agrees with this statement, and adds that they have power “over men, and events, and especially over women.” Arjun’s comment about “especially over women” comes back to haunt Ruku because it makes her vulnerable to Kunthi’s blackmail. She is afraid that Arjun might give credence to Kunthi’s lies about her relationship with Kenny. However, in addition to this personal reference, Arjun’s response has a political valence. In this colonial power structure, white men do have all the power, and it is a type of power that reinforces itself. If white men control men—the labor force as well as the elite—then they will control political, economic, and legal events. If they control men and events, then they also control women through these means. It also means that women are controlled by all three—white men, other men, and events. Women are at the intersection of these oppressive forces.

As Ruku shows us, Kenny’s anger is directed toward the people who have the very least amount of power in this system:

_Times will not be better for many months. Meanwhile you will suffer and die, you meek suffering fools. Why do you keep this ghastly silence? Why do you not demand—cry out for help—do something? There is nothing in this country, oh God, there is nothing!_
Kenny cannot understand why people do not resist and instead accept their fate meekly, willing to live and die without any struggle. This is a place where the indefinite historical location creates ambiguity in the text.

Ruku’s sons, on the other hand, display a great deal of anger, resistance, and political consciousness. Arjun echoes Kenny’s frustration, after the failed tannery strike: “the people will never learn.” Ruku does not understand why he is saying this:

Kenny had said it, and I had not understood, now here were my own sons saying the same thing, and still I did not understand. What was it we had to learn? To fight against tremendous odds? What was the use? One only lost the little one bad. Of what use to fight when the conclusion is known?

Ruku’s attitude represents why the tannery strike failed—the workers were unable to see the power of solidarity, and instead thought narrowly about their own daily survival.

Arjun and Thambi’s failed leadership of the strike sets in motion their eventual migration to work on the tea plantations of Ceylon. They become part of the Indian diaspora and a vast network of global migration of labor, moving according to the labor needs of British colonialism. This is the moment when Ruku has clarity.

Somehow I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing…Since then it had spread like weeds in an untended garden, strangling whatever life grew in its way. It had changed the face of our village beyond recognition and altered the lives of its inhabitants in a myriad ways. Some—a few—had been raised up; many others cast down, lost in its clutches. And because it grew and flourished, it got the power that money brings, so that to attempt to withstand it was like trying stop the onward rush of the great juggernaut.

The Friendship between Kenny and Ruku

The relationship between Kenny and Ruku also cannot be understood outside of the social, legal, economic, and political structures of colonialism. This is not to say that Ruku and Kenny’s friendship is solely about power dynamics; but it does mean that the moments of genuine connection always occur within these larger structures. Both of them struggle to understand one another—while they live in proximity for much of their lives, they live in different worlds. In a profound way, they remain strangers to one another, even through the long years of their
friendship. In fact, foreignness is a trope throughout the novel. Ruku does not understand or feels estranged from her family members and friends at various different points as well, even though she shares their world. This is the surprising aspect of Ruku's friendship with Kenny—in some key ways, Ruku and Kenny understand each other better than their own families do.

They first meet when Ruku goes to take care of her dying mother. Even though her mother is dying, Kenny is doing everything he can to make her comfortable. He does not promise her cures or miracles; rather, he gives her honesty. Ruku observes that between her mother and Kenny "lay mutual understanding and respect, one for the other." From the beginning, Ruku notices Kenny's ability to connect in a profoundly compassionate and respectful way, despite the gulf between their lives. Most likely, it is this first impression that Ruku holds onto when Kenny becomes surly and cruel later in the novel. This moment of affinity is strengthened when Kenny speaks to Ruku in her own language. Kenny notices that Ruku is grieving for something, and she tells him about her infertility. He offers to help her, and while she is initially afraid of seeking his help, she eventually goes to him. Soon, she is pregnant with her second child, but Ruku does not tell us exactly how he cures her infertility.

When Kenny is able to cure Ruku's infertility—and later, her daughter's—we can see that Ruku accepts Kenny's medical and worldly authority. Often during their exchanges, Kenny becomes frustrated with Ruku's unwillingness to cry out and fight against her fate. He tries to teach her about things in the world beyond her village, about the ways in which her life could be different. However, a closer reading of these conversations reveals the ways in which Ruku herself is teaching Kenny about her world. While she does not get frustrated with him, she does challenge the limits of his own assumptions. For instance, in the early days of their friendship, Kenny finds Ruku collecting dung from the fields. He questions her about why she does not leave the dung to fertilize the land. She tells him that "dung is too useful in our homes to be given to the land, for it is fuel to us and protection against damp and heat and even ants and mice. Did you not know?" He answers that he does know, but he "thought [she] would know better, [because] she live[s] by the land yet think[s] of taking from it without giving." Kenny knows that without fertilization and replenishment, the soil will be drained of nutrients, leading to eventual crop failure. However, Ruku responds by asking another question of him—"what substitute then?" Kenny has no answer.

This moment also illustrates the ways in which Kenny's knowledge—knowledge gained through a thoroughly modern, cosmopolitan, and global education—is wholly inadequate in the domain of Ruku's life. It is true that agricultural soil needs to be replenished with nu-
Markandaya uses this exchange to make a subtle but powerful point about the failures of the “civilizing mission” of colonialism. Like Kenny, many British doctors, administrators, engineers, educators, and missionaries traveled to India, believing that they had a duty to bring the wonders of civilization and modernity to the masses in India. They even viewed it in terms of reciprocity—while controlling India’s natural and agricultural resources enriched the British nation, in exchange, the British would bring the light of civilization—medicine, railroads, education, science—to the Indians. While the intentions of particular individuals may have been fairly altruistic, the very concept of the “civilizing mission” is rooted in deeply racist ideologies about the superiority of Western cultures. Here, through Ruku’s response to Kenny, Markandaya shows the reader that even while Kenny may be scientifically correct, his solution is deeply flawed. The history of colonialism is full of examples of “solutions” that are implemented to fix particular problems. However, these solutions are imported into a social world in which the “fixers” are not fluent. The solution comes from the outside, rather than from the people themselves. Ruku is the one with the most valuable knowledge in this moment, and it is Kenny who must learn from her.

Even so, Kenny often rails against what he sees as ignorance and foolishness. While Ruku is trying to ask him to help Ira’s infertility, he grows frustrated and tells Ruku that “you people will never learn. It is pitiful to see your foolishness.” In these kinds of statements, it is clear that even though Kenny speaks the local language and lives among the villagers, caring deeply for their welfare, he only thinks of Ruku’s world as that of “you people.” This phrase creates a distance, an “othering.” It divides the world into “us” and “you people.” Ruku’s narration does not make it clear just what “foolishness” Kenny is seeing, but it is possible that Kenny is lashing out at “you people” because he cannot admit that he might be the one who is foolish and pitiful. How can one doctor combat the cycle of conquest, colonialism, and exploitation that feeds the extreme poverty and suffering that he is helpless to alleviate?

In a later conversation, Kenny grows impatient with Ruku and remarks: “you simplify everything, being without understanding. Your views are so limited it is impossible to explain to you.” But here, Ruku answers back and says “Limited, yes…Yet not wholly without understanding. Our ways are not your ways.” Ruku notes that she sees a spark of admiration in his eyes when he tells her “you have sound instincts.” This is an echo of Kenny’s previous use of us/them, but Ruku does not use it as an “othering” strategy; rather, it is an expression of self-respect and dignity. In this moment, she is asserting her authority and knowledge of the world.

There is an asymmetry of knowledge about each other’s personal lives as well. Not only is Kenny their doctor, but he spends a great deal of time with Ruku and her family. He visits their home, and he often brings gifts to help the family. But Ruku has little knowledge of him because “of himself he did not speak, of wife or children or parents or home.” Kenny also disappears at will, leaving for years at a time. Ruku is quite aware that she knows next to nothing about Kenny’s life or his motivations. She reflects that:

...he came and went mysteriously. I knew little beyond the fact that he worked among the people of the tannery, treating and healing their bodies during long hours and then going to his lone dwelling; but when he left the village, for days or years at a time, nobody knew where he went or what he did, and when he returned he was more taciturn than ever and none dared ask.

Kenny’s world has a much wider scope than that of Ruku. His comings and goings reflect his involvement in a global medical and philanthropic field, which itself is an outgrowth of colonialism. He can enter into her world, by virtue of being a white British male doctor, but she would be unable to function in his world.

Even though Ruku knows very little about Kenny, she is very observant and insightful about his moods and demeanor. When Ruku approaches Kenny for help for Ira’s infertility, she comes upon him at the end of a long day:

He looked grim and tired, his eyes were burning, there was an air of such impersonal cruelty about him that despite myself I shivered. “I said no more tonight. Did you not hear me? Do you think I am made of iron?”

In order to survive each day as a healer and a witness to such extreme poverty, pain, suffering, and illness, Kenny must don a mask of “impersonal cruelty.” However, in his cry to Ruku, he shows how much of an emotional and physical toll his work is taking—it is a rare moment of vulnerability between the two.

In Chapter 12, Ruku and Kenny finally have a conversation in which Kenny reveals more of himself to Ruku. He knows all about her life, troubles, and heartaches, but she knows nothing about him. She has a moment of compassion for him, seeing him “sitting there in our hut with long, haggard face and eyes like a kingfisher’s wing, living among us who were not his people, in a country
not his own.” She suddenly asks him if he is all alone—he deliberately misunderstands her at first and reminds her of the “crowds always at [his] door” but instead of feeling shut down, she persists by gently telling him that was not what she was asking. He wonders why she hasn’t asked before, but Ruku answers him by saying that “it is not my place to ask questions. You come and go, and it is your own concern.” He then responds with this speech:

I have the usual encumbrances that men have—wife, children, home—that would have put chains about me, but I resisted and so I am alone. As for coming and going, I do as I please, for am I not my own master? I work among you when my spirit wills it… I go when I am tired of your follies and stupidities, your eternal, shameful poverty. I can only take you people… in small doses.

Ruku does not take offense to Kenny’s anger, as she believes she understands his truer nature: “Barbed words, but what matter from one so gentle.”

There are several images involving slavery in this passage: Kenny believes that domestic and family ties “would have put chains about” him, but he defiantly asserts that he is his own master because he can come and go as he pleases. He insists on his own freedom, both from home obligations and from the demands of the “eternal, shameful poverty.” Yet something holds power over him—why does he keep returning to the village? Why does he persist in constructing the hospital, even when it takes more than seven years? What claim does Ruku have on him that he feels compelled to help her and her family throughout the years? Ruku senses this contradiction, but remains silent. The chapter closes as Ruku watches Kenny leave her home. “A strange nature, understanding only partly within my understanding. A man half in shadow, half in light, defying knowledge.” They are foreign to each other; but with each interaction, they build their own partial understanding across the vast divide of colonizer/colonized.

**Suffering, Hope, Love, and Endurance**

When you read a synopsis of *Nectar in a Sieve*, it would be easy to label it as “depressing” or “dark” or “brutal.” Tragedy upon tragedy unfolds; starvation, death, and poverty are ever present. However, a plot summary does not capture the equally important, but small, lyrical, and poetic power structures of colonialism in this novel, it is also important to acknowledge that the twin forces of hope and fear shape the lives of people who make a subsistence living from the land. The unpredictability of nature and agricultural cycles brings a very high degree of vulnerability, particularly if there are no social safety nets or if the entire local economy is vulnerable to the same cycles. Chapter 7 begins with Ruku’s meditations on this relationship between humans and nature:

Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat.

It is impossible to fully tame a wild animal—domestication only happens after generations of breeding and evolution, and even then, only in very specific types of animals. As we know from the natural disasters in our contemporary world, it is impossible to tame Nature; all we can do is devise technology and strategies that allow us to cope with what comes our way. For Ruku and her community, this unpredictability is even more dangerous; storms, droughts, and monsoons can be lethal in an instant.
While Ruku does indeed experience hopeful and joyful moments, she also experiences long stretches of unrelenting despair and hopelessness. After a particularly devastating storm, the entire village was destroyed. As the family ventures out to find food, they discover that many villagers are homeless and worse off than they are. The sight of so much destruction fills everyone with despair. That night at home, Ruku lies awake, listening to the funeral drums:

At dusk the drums of calamity began; their grave, throbbing rhythm came clearly through the night, throughout the night, each beat, each tattoo, echoing the mighty importance of our human endeavor...In the sound of the drums I understood a vast pervading doom; but in the expectant silences between, my own disaster loomed larger, more consequent and more hurtful.

In the aftermath of such random destruction, the drums beat the collective rhythm of the village’s heart. The struggle to survive is what connects the village to the larger “human endeavor.” Ruku understands this larger connection, but she also feels very isolated—in the silences between the drum beats, she feels the pain of her own losses and struggles.

This relationship between collective and individual experiences is something that Markandaya’s novel urges us to consider—how do people connect their own experiences of injustice and suffering to the larger collective experience, and then collectively act to make things better? In the novel, Ruku and Nathan tend to accept their lot in life because they see it as inevitable as Nature’s monsoons or droughts. Ruku often does not understand the point of fighting or rebelling against injustice—“what point is there to bewail that which has always been and cannot change?” When her son Selvam goes to work for Kenny at the hospital, he tells his mother that there can never be enough money for the hospital because the needs are so great. Hearing this, Ruku questions Kenny’s perspective even further:

It is not as simple as Kenny said...It is not enough to cry out, not sufficient to lay bare your woes and catalogue your needs; people have only to close their eyes and their ears, you cannot force them to see and to hear—or to answer your cries if they cannot and will not.

Although Kenny is continually frustrated by what he thinks is mute acceptance of injustice and suffering, Ruku understands that crying out is not use without reciprocity. It is not enough for a single person to “lay bare [her] woes and catalogue [her] needs” if no one is willing to answer the cries. This is why collective action is so necessary—single individuals will be ignored, but collective cries and action against injustice will command attention and change.

In the absence of collective action—or failed collective action like the tannery strike—an individual must find a way to survive every day. After Ira’s husband has rejected her and Ira has returned home, Ruku has a conversation with Old Granny, fearing that Ira’s fate will be the same as Granny’s—to grow old alone, in a state of destitution. But Granny tells Ruku that her life is not unbearable; in fact, “one gets used to it.” Old Granny’s comment leads Ruku to reflect on the ways in which one can get used to anything:

I had got used to the noise and the smell of the tannery;
they no longer affected me. I had seen the slow, calm beauty of our village wilt in the blast from the town, and I grieved no more; so now I accepted the future and Ira's lot in it, and thrust it from me.

However, in the next breath, Ruku acknowledges the part of her that still protests and rages against the pain: “only sometimes when I was weak, or in sleep while my will lay dormant, I found myself rebellious, protesting, rejecting, and no longer calm.” Ruku fights this internal battle throughout the novel, even though Kenny believes she calmly accepts her suffering.

In Chapter 10, the family celebrates Deepavali, the Festival of Lights. It is a moment out of time—out of their lives of hardship and struggle. Even though they have very little money, Ruku finds herself spending money on fireworks for the children because “their rapturous faces overcame [her] misgivings. It is only once, I thought, a memory.” The family becomes caught up in the ritual of the bonfire, and the entire village is celebrating the triumph of light over the darkness of night. That evening Nathan transforms from a somber, cautious patriarch into a cavorting, carefree father. He dances and laughs with the children, telling Ruku that “I am happy because life is good and the children are good and you are the best of all.” That evening, Ruku and Nathan conceive their last child, Kuti. It is a moment of connection, passion, and hope, a moment that temporarily lights the darkness of their struggle.

Ruku and her family struggle on the most fundamental level of survival—several times during her life, Ruku is close to dying of starvation. In fact, she loses her last son, Kuti, the son conceived in the passion of Deepavali, to starvation. Death arrives indiscriminately, without any justice or meaning. When Raja is killed by the tannery officials, Ruku falls into despair:

“For this I have given you birth, my son, that you should lie in the end at my feet with ashes in your face and coldness in your limbs and yourself departed without trace, leaving this buddle of bones and flesh without meaning.”

Death is an immutable fact of life, but when parents bury children, it can feel as if the natural order is violated. Despite the tragedy of one’s own suffering, we hold onto the hope that our children will be spared, or at least suffer a bit less than ourselves. The tannery officials pay Ruku a visit in order to forestall any possibility that Ruku will draw attention to the unjust and possibly criminal circumstances of her son’s death. They warn her...
It is in this scene that the line “the truth is unpalatable” is first spoken. One of the tannery officials is obviously sympathetic to Ruku and feels quite badly about Raja’s death. The sympathetic worker tries to stop his colleague from saying that Raja’s death was for the best because Ruku would have one less mouth to feed. Surprised at being cut short, the other worker stops and then turns to Ruku and says: “I did not intend to wound you. But sometimes the truth must be stated, unpalatable as it is.” What does this worker mean? To what truth is he referring? As he says this, Ruku nods, but she does not disagree or agree with the statement, because “the gulf between [them] was too wide.” From the worker’s perspective, a son’s death could be a relief to this destitute family—the truth is that each mouth to feed lessens the survival rate of everyone. The unpalatable truth is that the son was a burden on the family, and by getting himself killed, he does more good for the family dead than alive. The unpalatable truth is that Ruku and her family are simply faceless numbers in a poverty-stricken population, and it does not matter whether they live or die.

But what does it really mean that a truth is unpalatable? It is a truth that is distasteful—for it is difficult to hear that your son is better off dead—but something else is also happening in this phrase. If the truth is palatable, it means that one can swallow it, that it is fit to consume. But if a truth is unpalatable, it is indigestible, not fit for consumption. The worker’s intention was to tell what he believed was the difficult, unpalatable truth, a truth that Ruku is hiding from—but as the reader, how else can we interpret this phrase?

This phrase is repeated when Ruku confronts Ira about the details of her prostitution work. Ruku is worried about her daughter, afraid of what violence could happen to her as she works the “dim lanes and alleys.” Ruku implores Ira to tell her where she goes, and Ira tells her mother that her “imagination would not travel that far.” Ruku and Ira feel like they are living in separate worlds, and Ira confirms this by telling her mother that “the truth is unpalatable.” What does Ira mean by using this phrase here, and is it similar to or different from the tannery official’s use of it? Ira believes that her mother’s capacity for understanding is very limited, as is her willingness to survive. From Ira’s perspective, her mother and father were willing to let their children starve to death—Kuti only had a few days of reprieve from suffering because of Ira’s willingness to do whatever it took, including prostitution, to feed her brother. In this scene, Ira is holding up a mirror to her mother, making her face the unpalatable truth that survival is a desperate, violent, and amoral venture. It is Ira’s sex work that will feed the family—and regardless of its provenance, the money she earns buys nourishing and necessary food.

But sometimes the truth must be stated, unpalatable as it is. The unpalatable truth is that Ruku and her family are simply faceless numbers in a poverty-stricken population, and it does not matter whether they live or die.

Markandaya deliberately placed this phrase in the mouths of two very different characters, and the reader is left to interpret its significance. The same phrase is uttered in very different contexts, but is both times directed toward the narrator, Ruku. Does this mean that Ruku is being deliberately blind to the brutal truth of her life? Or is this a way for the tannery official and Ira to justify their own actions? What if this phrase is directed to the reader—what truths are unpalatable to us? While we are living relatively comfortable lives, what truths are we hiding from—the acknowledgement that other people in the world are dying from starvation and poverty, in conditions that are unfathomable to us? Is the entire novel a sequence of unpalatable truths about colonialism, globalization, poverty, and exploitation? Markandaya leaves these questions unanswered, and the reader must come to his or her own conclusions about this ambiguous phrase.

After Ruku and Nathan are evicted from their land by the landowner, they make preparations to go to the city to stay with their son, Murugan. Ruku is in shock, and her thoughts tumble and spin without any meaning:

“A dozen lines of thought began and continued in my brain without ending: crossing, angling, like threads on some meaningless warp….The present chaos is madness.”

Through the chaos, Ruku focuses on small details about their journey and takes notice of the bullocks that are pulling the cart in which they are riding. One bullock has a raw patch on the shoulder where the yoke had rubbed off the skin, and Ruku watches the bullock’s sore get infected and more serious as the trip progresses. The carter does not stop his journey to tend to the animal, only allowing it some relief by taking off the yoke as they stop to drink.

As soon as the animals had drunk he put the yoke back. The bullock cringed, but accepted the torment and as soon as the whip fell it began to pull again.

Ruku the narrator does not draw a direct comparison,
but the reader may see yet another unpalatable truth—Ruku is like the bullock, suffering enormous pain in silence and succumbing to those more powerful than she. Whether this is an accurate comparison is something we will discuss further in a moment, but here it is clear that Ruku feels some connection with the wretched animal.

While many truths are unpalatable and there is no compensation for death, moments of lightness still appear for Ruku. Soon after Kuti dies, it is time for the harvest. The entire family is in such a physical state of starvation that it seems impossible for them to sustain any physical labor at all. However, they manage, and in the middle of the field, Nathan looks up at his family and remarks that “strength has been given to us. Else how could so much have been achieved by such as we are?” The entire family looks at one another, and the absurdity of their physical deterioration sends ripples of laughter through the family until “the four of us, [felt] hysterical, released, rocking with laughter and gasping for breath which ran out as fast as we sucked it in. The hollow cheeks and bulging stomachs, the grotesque, jutting bones, became matter for laughter.” Pushed to the very edge of survival, after watching two of their family members succumb to the tides of death, Ruku’s family is able to find a reser-

oir of laughter, macabre as it is to laugh at the physical manifestations of starvation. It is a moment of release, one in which they feel a slight moment of relief, knowing that they will be able to eat that evening. Despite all the suffering, grief, and loss, this laughter is a promise for the future—that the future does exist, and that they are moving toward it. Ruku reflects that while they are in the middle of starvation, “in our minds [it] belonged to the past—to the painful past that we thrust from us with all our force; and the laughter was in some measure born of relief that we could do so.” Laughter resists death—it is a promise of a life that continues into the future.

In fact, laughter and brutality exist side by side. This becomes even more clear to Ruku when she observes the homeless, disabled, and orphaned children playing in the city streets:

*They themselves were forgetful of their pains—or patient with them as the bullock had been—and played naked and merry in the sun. Merry, that is, until a crust of bread fell on the road or a sweetmeat toppled from an overambitious pyramid, when, all childhood lost, all play forgotten, they fought ferociously in the dust for food.*

At first, Ruku feels as if these city children remind her of her own children fighting over the precious amounts of food, but she does not want to acknowledge the similarity:

*...time had mellowed the memory or dimmed it, for it did not seem to me that they had struggled like these: teeth bared, nails clawing, ready, predatory like animals.*

Ruku is aware that time and her own constructions of memory have altered her perception, but even so, this is a truth that feels unpalatable to her—that her own children were in such a state of bare survival that they would turn on each other like stray animals.

While it may be tempting for the reader to embrace the moments of hope, light, joy, and pleasure in the nov-
el, and interpret it as a text that celebrates a universal human capacity for endurance, it is critical that the reader refrain from divorcing hope from despair, joy from suffering, and survival from senseless death. Over and over again, Markandaya pairs these moments together, and as readers, we should not turn from the unpalatable truths offered by the novel. Death is often senseless, and there is no compensation for it. Hunger is a force that drives humans to brutality. Sex work is sometimes the only viable economic activity available to women. The actions of people in power have life and death consequences for people who have no political, social, or economic power. Markandaya’s novel gives us unpalatable truths in lyrical and moving language, but they are truths, nonetheless.

**Relationships between Women**

One of the major themes in the novel centers on how women relate to one another in a societal structure of traditional patriarchy—a society where men are in power, and women are excluded from it. Although Ruku is a child bride, Ruku and Nathan grow to love one another and form a strong marriage partnership—despite the fact that Nathan has been unfaithful and has fathered children with Ruku’s neighbor, Kunthi. Ruku adores her sons, and in fact, her initial inability to conceive a son is the catalyst for her friendship with Kenny. While Ruku’s friendship with Kenny is rather opaque and her marriage to Nathan includes betrayal, Ruku’s relationships with women are more complex and volatile than those she has with men.

While it is indisputable that Ruku loves her daughter, the relationship between Ruku and Irawaddy covers a great deal of emotional ground. In fact, when Ira is first born, Ruku admits that “I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born?” In this society, boy children are valued much more highly than girls because boys will stay to work the land and support the family, whereas it is expected that girls will not bring any value to the family because they will be married off with a dowry. As such, Ruku’s disappointment in her firstborn’s sex is to be expected. Ruku takes pride in Ira’s beauty and grows to love her—but does not think of her as valuable in the same way that her sons are valuable. Rather, Ruku sees herself in her daughter, particularly when Ira struggles with infertility. When Ira returns to her parents’ home, she is tortured by the judgment of other women—if she cannot conceive, she is failure as a woman. Her sole purpose in life is to have children, and if she cannot, she has no value as a wife.
Ruku dreads this repetition and fears for her daughter: “All this I had gone through—the torment, the anxiety. Now the whole dreadful story was repeating itself, and it was my daughter this time.”

Ruku knows that this is a dangerous repetition. After Ruku gives birth to her last son, Kuti, Ira comes out of her depression in order to nurture and care for her little brother. Nathan sees this change and is simply happy that his daughter has regained some of her vitality. However, Ruku still worries about her daughter, for reasons that her husband, who “was a man, did not understand.” Ruku understands just how precarious life is for an unmarried woman—without the protection of a husband, Ira will be left to fend for herself, once her parents die and her brothers marry. Her value as a wife has been destroyed—without a substantial dowry, no man would want to marry a woman who is not a virgin and who is unable to conceive. Ruku knows all too well how vulnerable Ira is within this social structure—if a woman has no husband or children, she has no value to the society. In fact, Ruku fears that Ira’s fate will follow that of Old Granny’s—alone, homeless, destitute, left to die in the streets.

Ironically, it is precisely these women who supposedly have no value who actually work to feed their families and provide incomes for their dependents. Ruku’s sons, upon whom their parents built their future hopes, fail to provide for the family. Arjun and Thambi become involved with the strike politics at the tannery and eventually choose to migrate as laborers to Ceylon; Murugan moves to the city for work but deserts his wife and children; Raja is killed while trying to steal from the tannery in order to buy food; Selvam works for Kenny at the hospital, not on his father’s land; Kuti dies as a child. It is Ira, the first-born girl child, who rises to the occasion and finds a way to keep food on the table. She has no trade or economic skills, so she turns to the only thing she has of value—her own body.

While her father is deeply shamed by Ira’s prostitution, Ruku comes to take a different view. She knows that nothing could keep Ira from helping her brother, Kuti, and she also knows that Ira is anything but a weak, submissive daughter. Ruku understands that Ira “was no longer a child, to be cowed or forced into submission, but a grown woman with a definite purpose and invincible determination.” As with death and starvation, Ruku notes that she quickly got used to Ira’s “comings and goings, as they got used to so much else.” While Ruku understands the source of Nathan’s shame in his daughter’s prostitution, Ruku is able to take a more compassionate and pragmatic view, in part because she identifies with her daughter’s purpose and determination. Perhaps if Ruku had been younger herself, she may have turned to prostitution as well—Ruku reserves judgment from her daughter, reminding herself that her life is an entire sequence of “getting used” to previously unthinkable things.

The novel presents prostitution as an economic choice that women make in order to support themselves and their children. Markandaya uses Nathan’s reaction to represent the response of traditional morality to such a choice, but Ruku’s perspective carries more weight for the reader because she is the narrator. Ruku understands the economic necessity of such a choice in a society where women are dependent on men. It is important to recognize that it is not just Ira who becomes a prostitute—Murugan’s wife, Ammu, is also driven to sex work after her husband deserts her. Ammu is fiercely proud and refuses to apologize for the way she feeds her children, telling her in-laws:

…‘one must live’ she repeated defiantly, challenging, sensing reproach where none could be; for it is very true, one must live.

Ruku knows just to what lengths starvation can drive a person, and how the survival instinct compels a person to act in ways previously unthinkable. However, Ruku is unable to communicate her empathy to Ammu, who remains hard and inhospitable. But that, too, Ruku sees
and understands:

There is no touching this girl...misfortune has hardened her, which is just as well, she will take many a knock yet.

Another character also turns to prostitution—Kunthi. However, Ruku does not feel empathy for Kunthi. Kunthi is Ruku's nemesis; their tentative friendship quickly turns to suspicion, jealousy, and betrayal. Initially, when Ruku meets Kunthi, they are part of a circle of friends that also includes Janaki and Kali. Sometimes these women are helpful and supportive of one another, but at other times their friendships are antagonistic and contentious. When Janaki and her family are forced to move away from the village because their shop has gone out of business, her friends, including Ruku, rarely think of her once she is gone. Kali is quite helpful and neighborly, but her gossip is often hurtful, particularly when she is judgmental about Ira's son, Sacrabani. From the very beginning of their acquaintance, the relationship between Kunthi and Ruku is marked by suspicion and antipathy. For instance, Ruku strongly identifies with the rhythms and beauty of an agricultural life. When the tannery appears, she rightly fears that her way of life will be destroyed. When she tells Kunthi of her fears, Kunthi responds harshly: “Stupid words. No wonder they call us senseless peasant women; but I am not and never will be. There is no earth in my breeding.”

Kunthi is Ruku's foil—she represents the opposite of Ruku's values and character traits. Ruku values the natural world and the dignity of a life that is tied to the fortunes of the land; Kunthi values modernization and the changes wrought by the influx of industry and labor. Ruku is a faithful, devoted wife; Kunthi betrays her own husband with Ruku's husband. Ruku physically labors for her family's survival; Kunthi uses her physical attractiveness to her financial advantage. Unlike Ruku, Kunthi grew up in an urban environment, bringing further contrast to their lives. While these characters may at first seem completely polarized—Ruku is the virtuous protagonist and Kunthi is the scheming villain—their relation to one another is actually more complicated than it initially appears.

In her interactions with Kunthi, we see that Ruku becomes both vicious and violent. In Chapter 11 when Ruku encounters Kunthi after asking Kenny to help with Ira's infertility, Ruku feels herself overtaken by rage and violence:

I saw her mouth forming these words, her eyes half hooded and mocking, then I saw her face suddenly close to mine and did not realize I had thrown myself at her until I felt her body in my grip. An overwhelming rage possessed me, I kept shaking her furiously, I could not stop.
Ruku does not feel like herself; she is not aware of making the decision to grab Kunthi. In fact, she does not feel rage—she is possessed by rage, which implies that it is an external force that suddenly descends over Ruku.

Ruku experiences this same rage again during the famine when Kunthi approaches Ruku with the intent to blackmail her. Ruku looks at Kunthi’s ravaged physical beauty with something like satisfaction:

"Of her former beauty not a vestige remained. Well, I thought. All women come to it sooner or later: she has come off perhaps worse than most."

As their interaction goes on, it is clear that Kunthi is on the brink of starvation and is no longer quite lucid. However, when Kunthi blackmails Ruku by threatening to expose her relationship with Kenny, Ruku finds herself battling a murderous rage—she flies at Kunthi and physically assaults her. While the reader may not have much sympathy for Kunthi and may empathize with Ruku’s anger in this scene, it becomes harder to absolve Ruku when her rage leads her to mistake her own daughter, Ira, for Kunthi. Ruku does serious injury to her own daughter because she is so consumed by rage and paranoia about Kunthi.

What is the significance of Ruku’s rage and physical aggression toward Kunthi? Over and over again, Ruku portrays herself as resigned to injustice and unable to see the value in becoming angry and fighting against the suffering in her life. Why does Ruku allow herself to act on her rage toward another woman when she doesn’t see the need to rage at fate? Is this displaced anger? Again, when Ruku reflects on her state of mind when she mistakenly attacks Ira, she emphasizes the experience of feeling as if she is not herself:

"The being that was me was no longer in possession: it had been consumed in the flames of anger and hatred that raged through me in those few minutes; what took its place I do not know."

These questions become even more salient when Nathan confesses to fathering Kunthi’s children—why does Ruku direct her anger toward a woman, a former friend, rather than her husband, whose betrayal cuts even more deeply? Indeed, Ruku is upset by Nathan’s confession, but she eventually feels relieved once honesty is restored between them. However, her rage toward Kunthi does not abate, as is clearly evidenced by her attack on Ira.

Although Markandaya herself may have been motivated by a feeling of solidarity with women like Ruku, the portrayal of the women in the novel points to a more complex reality. In the novel, sisterhood is not universal—for all of Ruku’s empathy and understanding for Ira and Ammu, she is also very quick to sever her own ties with other women. Fundamentally, Ruku and Kunthi share the same fate—dependency on men for survival. And, in fact, Ruku’s own daughter follows Kunthi’s, not Ruku’s, life path. However, Ruku directs her rage and hatred toward Kunthi. Instead of flying at the tannery officials who coerce her into silence, Ruku flies at her former friend, a powerless woman who is using her own resources to survive. Instead of raging against the exploitive economic system of tenant farming and colonialism, Ruku rages against Kunthi. Even Ruku the narrator does not question her own motivations although she is quite honest about the degree to which her rage overwhelms her.

Although Kenny believes that Ruku meekly accepts her fate without rage or question, Ruku’s relationship to Kunthi shows the reader that Ruku is not as meek as the men in her life may believe. Rather, Kunthi is an accessible target for Ruku’s displaced anger at the world. If Ruku assaulted a tannery official, the consequences of her action could cost her life. When Ruku assault Kunthi, a woman who is even less powerful than Ruku herself, the only consequence is that Ira becomes the collateral damage.

RECEPTION AND LITERARY CRITICISM

Very quickly after its publication in 1954, Nectar in a Sieve became an international bestseller. In the United States, it was chosen as a Book of the Month Club selection, and the American Library Association named it a “Notable Book” in 1955, an award that came with a $100,000 prize. While Markandaya published nine other novels, several of which received much critical acclaim, none of them approached the commercial success of Nectar in a Sieve.

More than sixty years after its publication, Markandaya’s novel remains a mainstay in high school literature curriculums. Its genre, social realism, is accessible to high school readers. While many violent and brutal
In terms of critical literary reception, the novel has earned a place in the canon of English language Indian literature. It is regarded as a strong example of the genre of social realism, even though many critics dispute the ways in which readers assume that it is an “authentic” representation of a rural Indian woman’s life. Also, Markandaya was one of the first globally successful Indian woman writers of the twentieth century, and in all of her work, gender relations and power structures are at the forefront. However, literary critics have critiqued the ways in which the novel frames Ruku’s narrative as an authentic representation of actual rural Indian experience. The fact remains that while Markandaya did indeed spend her childhood in India and witnessed a great deal of rural poverty, she was quite removed from the actual lived experience of rural poverty. Motivated by an activist sense of solidarity, Markandaya constructed the novel in order to give voice to this social reality; however, the social reality in the novel is an imagined construction, which places Markandaya’s narrator, Ruku, in the role of speaking for those who have no political voice.

As admirable as Markandaya’s motives may have been, they nevertheless pose several dilemmas for critics and readers. To what extent does Markandaya’s novel repeat the effect of silencing by standing in and speaking for rural Indian women? How do the social realism and the historical ambiguity of the novel absolve Western readers of their own complicity in the historical violence of colonialism? Why is the basis of the novel’s popularity the “universal” themes of human endurance and courage and not its searing indictment of colonialism? How does Markandaya manipulate the genre of realism in order to give her fictional character, Ruku, the authority of authenticity? These are questions that do not have simple answers—and it is perhaps a testament to Markandaya’s craft that they are questions that animate new generations of readers and critics.
SECTION III

Shorter Selections

INTRODUCTION

In this section of the resource guide, we will closely examine seven shorter works of literature, including two historic speeches given by notable Indian leaders; three essays by the controversial but highly acclaimed writer Salman Rushdie; a poem by Nissim Ezekiel, a writer hailed as the “founding father of modern Indian poetry”; and, finally, a short story by Jhumpa Lahiri, an American writer of Indian descent. While all of these works have clear differences, they nonetheless address some similar themes and questions, including but not limited to: What is India, and what form should the nation of India take? In what ways does India’s diversity of religion, culture, and language challenge our modern notion of the nation and national identity? And, how can India, and the modern world as a whole, reconcile political and religious divisions and national boundaries with the reality of our interconnected lives and histories?

Many of these works also address the issue of language head on, in specific the English language. It should not escape the reader’s notice that the selected works, as well as the novel discussed in Section II of this Resource Guide, are all works written in English (though Gandhi first gave his “Quit India” speech in Hindi, he followed this with an English version). Students should remain aware that India is an incredibly diverse nation. Its literary history is many centuries old, and its literature includes countless notable works in a multitude of languages and genres, addressing topics and themes as diverse and varied as the human experience. While literature in English is now a significant part of the Indian literary tradition, the reader should be cognizant that it is just that: a part, not a whole.

Our readings here have been limited by time and space and have been selected in an effort to present students with a collection of works on topics relevant to the study of India that contain valuable insights and overlap with the material presented in other subject areas. Students are, however, highly encouraged not to limit their exploration of Indian literature and the literature of the Indian diaspora solely to these selections. Rather, you are urged to seek out works by other authors, works in translation and works from other time periods in order to further enhance your understanding of and familiarity with the literature of India and the Indian diaspora.

“QUIT INDIA” SPEECH
BY MAHATMA GANDHI, 1942

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) was born and raised in a Hindu family in Porbandar, in the state of Gujarat in India. He studied law at the Inns of Court School of Law, London and worked in South
Africa for twenty-one years. Initially, Gandhi was not disapproving of British imperialism and did not speak up against apartheid in South Africa. However, in June 1893, he was thrown out of a train compartment reserved only for White people in South Africa. This experience sensitized Gandhi to the deep racial violence of apartheid and other colonial practices. He developed his approach of nonviolence and led the resident Indian community in South Africa in their struggle for civil rights through nonviolent civil disobedience. It was in South Africa that Gandhi began practicing a life of simplicity that shunned Western modernity—in fact, he published a critique of it in his short book *Hind Swaraj* (1909). Gandhi was given the honorific title of “Mahatma,” meaning “great soul,” in 1914 in South Africa.

Gandhi returned to India in 1915 and organized peasants and farmers to protest against British exploitation. By 1921, Gandhi had become an important member of the Indian National Congress, and he led colonized India in its demand for *Swaraj*, or self-rule. Gandhi also aimed to make the untouchable caste in India acceptable by calling them “Harijans” (Children of God). Gandhi was fondly referred to as *bapu* (“father” in Gujarati) and was also given the title of the “Father of the Nation” by another freedom fighter, Subhas Chandra Bose.

**Satyagraha and Ahimsa**

*Satyagraha*, the key principle of Gandhi’s approach, was based on truth (sat or satya in Sanskrit), nonviolence (ahimsa in Sanskrit), and self-suffering (tapasya or sadhana in Sanskrit). “Satyagraha” literally means “insistence on truth” and implies a resolute quest for truth through non-violent means. Gandhi refers to all three of these tenets in his “Quit India” speech. According to him, the “satyagrahi,” or the non-violent activist, practiced self-restraint, by which he not only resisted violence, but—equally important—he also did not harbor hostility toward others or criticize them. Gandhi suggested that one should follow these tenets only if one’s conscience permitted him or her to do so. In so doing, Gandhi advocated leading by example. Gandhi’s vision of *satyagraha* rested on a very spiritual and moral understanding of the world.

Gandhi took leadership of the Indian National Congress in the 1920s. He used nonviolent means to weaken colonial economic and power structures and to resist
British rule. At different moments, he launched protests against and boycotted British-made goods as in the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Swadeshi movement. Gandhi considered it a sin to cooperate with a tyrannical government and encouraged people to withdraw from the British government-sponsored schools, police services, the courts, and the military and the civil service. On March 12, 1930, he began his Salt March, a protest in which he led a march to the coastal village of Dandi in the state of Gujarat where he produced salt without paying taxes. This was a direct action campaign of tax resistance and a nonviolent protest against the British salt monopoly in colonial India. It came to be known as the Salt Satyagraha. It is to these instances of non-violent civil disobedience that Gandhi refers in his “Quit India” speech when he assures the people of India that his views on the means to attain freedom have not changed. His refusal to abide by England’s imperial aspirations is a sign that his resolve for nonviolence has, in fact, strengthened.

**World War II (1939–45)**

In 1939, when war broke out between Britain and Germany, India was also declared to be at war with Germany, as it was a part of the British Empire. The leadership of the Indian National Congress condemned the British decision to drag India into the war without consulting Indian leaders. The Congress maintained an official policy of neutrality during this time because it did not want to support either the fascist tendencies of Germany or the colonialism of England.

However, England needed India’s support, as India was its largest colony in the world. It was also a strategic commercial outpost and military bastion, and the British needed to secure India in the face of Japanese militarism in Asia. In order to appease the Indians, then British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874–1965) sent one of the ministers of his War Cabinet, Sir Richard Stafford Cripps (1889–1952), to initiate negotiations with Gandhi, the Congress leaders, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League and the founder of Pakistan. This was known as the Cripps Mission. Cripps encouraged Indian leaders to give public support to the
British government and its war efforts. In return, Cripps pledged, on behalf of the British government, to increase Indian representation in the central government, establish a Constituent Assembly, and grant India Dominion status, which would be nearly tantamount to full independence.

Indian leaders found this proposal very disappointing, as it did not carry an unconditional offer of British withdrawal from India but depended on the then seemingly unlikely chance of England’s victory in the war. As a result, shortly after Cripps returned to Britain, Gandhi made a public call for the British to leave India peacefully or be chased out by means of nonviolent resistance. According to him, the presence of the British was an invitation to the Japanese to come and invade India. The absence of the British would remove this possibility. The Indian National Congress met from April 29, 1942 to May 1, 1942 in the city of Allahabad and once again on July 14, 1942 in Wardha to pass the “Quit India” resolution, which demanded complete independence from the British.

The Quit India Movement

Gandhi delivered his Quit India speech on August 8, 1942, on the eve of the Quit India Movement (Bharat Chhodo Andolan) at the Gowalia Tank Maidan in Bombay (Mumbai), which has since been renamed August Kranti Maidan (August Revolution Ground). It is in this speech and in this movement that Gandhi seemingly gives a call to “do or die,” urging Indians to either fight for the freedom of India or die in the struggle. Gandhi’s speech mobilized an entire nation in its relentless demand for freedom, and it put pressure upon the British government for immediate independence. Prior to this, the Indian nationalist movement had only asked for “Home Rule” or self-government within the British Empire, but never for complete independence from the British.

Gandhi’s speech spurred mass uprisings and protests and acts of civil disobedience across the country. However, what was imagined as nonviolent civil disobedience took a violent turn when on August 9, 1942, the British government cracked down hard on the Congress leaders and other supporters of the movement. Gandhi, along with his wife Kasturba Gandhi, was imprisoned in the Aga Khan Palace in Pune, and other Congress leaders, such as Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958), and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (1875–1950), were imprisoned in the Ahmednagar Fort in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra. The high committees of the Congress leadership were immediately outlawed, and the assembly of public meetings was prohibited. Many people were arrested, and mass fines were imposed on countless individuals. The British opened fire on protestors and used tear gas to diffuse crowds. This violent turn of events led many to think that the Quit India movement had not been successful since it was supposed to be a nonviolent endeavor. However, in more recent historical studies, the Quit India movement is recognized as the moment that catalyzed India’s achievement of complete independence from the British.

Communal (Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Sikh) Conflict in India

India is a religiously and an ethnically diverse country, wherein different religious communities have lived in long, though sometimes violent, coexistence. Communal tension between Hindus and Muslims escalated as the possibility of India’s freedom became more imminent. After failed bids to form coalitions with the Muslim League led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, reluctantly supported the partition of India according to a plan released by the British on June 3, 1947. Thus, the departure of the British from India was marked by the split of India into Pakistan and India. Often referred to as simply the Partition, this was a violent event that resulted in mass murders by both the Hindu and Muslim communities. Since then, India has fought three wars with Pakistan and engaged in conflicts over the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir.

Despite its secular foundation, India has unfortunately witnessed routine violence and strife resulting from communal and religious differences within the country, especially between the Hindu and the Muslim communities. The Ayodhya riots of 1992 were an especially important episode of communal violence in independent India. The geographical area in the city of Ayodhya called Ram Janmabhoomi (which literally translates to “Birthplace of Rama” referring to the Hindi god, Rama) is the center of a long-standing dispute between Hindus and Muslims in India. The dispute arises from the pres-
ence of a Muslim mosque, the Babri Masjid, on what is believed to be sacred ground by the Hindus. The destruction of this mosque by Hindu extremists during a political rally quickly turned into a riot on December 6, 1992. Islamic extremists responded to the demolition with more rioting and bombing across the country. In 2002, Hindu pilgrims returning from the disputed Ram Janmabhoomi and Babri Masjid site were burned alive in a train at the Godhra railway station. This was met with even more violence from Hindu extremists who killed thousands of Muslims in what came to be known as the Gujarat Riots.

In his essay, “Imaginary Homelands,” which we will discuss shortly, the writer Salman Rushdie discusses another case of communal violence in India, one between the Hindus and the Sikhs. These two communities had, by and large, been at peace with each other. However, the political climate shifted drastically when Indira Gandhi, daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru and India’s fourth Prime Minister, was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for the storming of the Sikhs’ Golden Temple by Mrs. Gandhi’s troops.

More recently, India has seen increasing anti-Christian violence, as Hindu nationalists have specifically targeted Christian communities and destroyed churches in an attempt to purge India of any “foreign” influences and to restore its mythic “pure” Hindu past. Hindu nationalists are ideologues who believe that India as a nation belongs—and historically, belonged—only to the Hindus, and that in order to be deemed Indian, a thing or a person must adhere to Hindu religious and cultural beliefs.

**Selected Work**

“QUIT INDIA” SPEECH BY MAHATMA GANDHI, 1942

Before you discuss the resolution, let me place before you one or two things, I want you to understand two things very clearly and to consider them from the same point of view from which I am placing them before you. I ask you to consider it from my point of view, because if you approve of it, you will be enjoined to carry out all I say. It will be a great responsibility. There are people who ask me whether I am the same man that I was in 1920, or whether there has been any change in me. You are right in asking that question.

Let me, however, hasten to assure that I am the same Gandhi as I was in 1920. I have not changed in any fundamental respect. I attach the same importance to non-violence that I did then. If at all, my emphasis on it has grown stronger. There is no real contradiction between the present resolution and my previous writings and utterances.

Occasions like the present do not occur in everybody’s and but rarely in anybody’s life. I want you to know and feel that there is nothing but purest Ahimsa in all that I am saying and doing today. The draft resolution of the Working Committee is based on Ahimsa, the contemplated struggle similarly has its roots in Ahimsa. If, therefore, there is any among you who has lost faith in Ahimsa or is wearied of it, let him not vote for this resolution. Let me explain my position clearly. God has vouchsafed to me a priceless gift in the weapon of Himsa. I and my Ahimsa are on our trail today. If in the present crisis, when the earth is being scorched by the flames of Himsa and crying for deliverance, I failed to make use of the God given talent, God will not forgive me and I shall be judged unworthy of the great gift. I must act now. I may not hesitate and merely look on, when Russia and China are threatened.

Ours is not a drive for power, but purely a non-violent fight for India’s independence. In a violent struggle, a successful general has been often known to effect a military coup and to set up a dictatorship. But under the Congress scheme of things, essentially non-violent as it is, there can be no room for dictatorship. A non-violent soldier of freedom will covet nothing for himself, he fights only for the freedom of his country. The Congress is unconcerned as to who will rule, when freedom is attained. The power, when it comes, will belong to the people of India, and it will be for them to decide to whom it will be entrusted. It may be that the reins will be placed in the hands of the Paris, for instance—as I would love to see happen—or they may be handed to some others whose names are not heard in the Congress today. It will not be for you then to object saying, “This community is microscopic. That party did not play its due part in the freedom’s struggle; why should it have all the power?” Ever since its inception the Congress has kept itself meticulously free of the communal taint. It has thought always in terms of the whole nation and has acted accordingly. . . I know how imperfect our Ahimsa is and how far away we are still from the ideal, but in Ahimsa there is no final failure or defeat. I have faith, therefore, that if, in spite of our shortcomings, the big thing does happen, it will be because God wanted to help us by crowning with success our silent, unremitting Sadhana for the last twenty-two years.

I believe that in the history of the world, there has not been a more genuinely democratic struggle for freedom.
than ours. I read Carlyle’s *French Revolution* while I was in prison, and Pandit Jawaharlal has told me something about the Russian revolution. But it is my conviction that inasmuch as these struggles were fought with the weapon of violence they failed to realize the democratic ideal. In the democracy which I have envisaged, a democracy established by non-violence, there will be equal freedom for all. Everybody will be his own master. It is to join a struggle for such democracy that I invite you today. Once you realize this, you will forget the differences between the Hindus and Muslims, and think of yourselves as Indians only, engaged in the common struggle for independence.

Then, there is the question of your attitude towards the British. I have noticed that there is hatred towards the British among the people. The people say they are disgusted with their behaviour. The people make no distinction between British imperialism and the British people. To them, the two are one. This hatred would even make them welcome the Japanese. It is most dangerous. It means that they will exchange one slavery for another.

We must get rid of this feeling. Our quarrel is not with the British people, we fight their imperialism. The proposal for the withdrawal of British power did not come out of anger. It came to enable India to play its due part at the present critical juncture. It is not a happy position for a big country like India to be merely helping with money and material obtained willy-nilly from her while the United Nations are conducting the war. We cannot evoke the true spirit of sacrifice and valour, so long as we are not free. I know the British Government will not be able to withhold freedom from us, when we have made enough self-sacrifice. We must, therefore, purge ourselves of hatred. Speaking for myself, I can say that I have never felt any hatred. As a matter of fact, I feel myself to be a greater friend of the British now than ever before. One reason is that they are today in distress. My very friendship, therefore, demands that I should try to save them from their mistakes. As I view the situation, they are on the brink of an abyss. It, therefore, becomes my duty to warn them of their danger even though it may, for the time being, anger them to the point of cutting off the friendly hand that is stretched out to help them. People may laugh, nevertheless that is my claim. At a time when I may have to launch the biggest struggle of my life, I may not harbor hatred against anybody.

**Analysis of Gandhi’s “Quit India” Speech**

Gandhi begins his “Quit India” speech by assuring his audience that he is the same believer in ahimsa or non-violence as he was during the Non-Cooperation movement. It is, in fact, precisely his belief in ahimsa that makes it impossible for him to embrace violent means in the struggle for freedom and to lend support to what he views as Britain’s imperialist war. Gandhi, and the Congress leadership he represented in this speech, condemned British imperialism during World War II as much as they condemned German Nazism. In this speech, Gandhi expresses his fear that the Indian people will welcome Japanese militarism and imperial rule in place of that of the British, without realizing that it is not the British who are bad per se but their imperial rule.

Throughout his political and intellectual life, Gandhi made a conscious effort to delink British imperialism from British culture, people, and literature. For instance, in 1948, Gandhi justified publishing his weekly journal, *Harijan*, in English by claiming that “the British Empire will go because it has been and still is bad; but the empire of the English language cannot go.” According to him, English was a “world language” to be learned whether one wished to do so or not. However, given its foreign provenance, Gandhi felt it could never be accorded the status of a national language and thought it was not a language in which Indians should be educated. Since India is a land of immense linguistic diversity, English is often used as a language that connects the speakers of different languages. Gandhi felt that this reliance on the English language as the link between the diverse population of India had impaired the growth and development of India’s native languages.

As a result of this distinction between the British people and British rule, Gandhi claims in his “Quit India” speech that he wants to “save [the British] from their mistakes.” According to him, the British at this time were “on the brink of an abyss,” and it was his “duty to warn them of their danger even though it may, for the time being, anger them to the point of cutting off the friendly hand that is stretched out to help them.” Guided by his nonviolent approach, Gandhi wished to reach out to the people of England even as he was ready to fight British imperialism tooth and nail. His vision of nonviolence prevented him from harboring “hatred against anybody” as he “launch[ed] the biggest struggle of [his] life.”

Gandhi also comments on the role he envisages for the Indian National Congress in a soon-to-be independent India that was gearing to fight the colonizers. He claims that the Congress was above communal politics and was only in the service of India’s freedom—it did not seek power for itself. Toward the end of the speech, Gandhi emphasizes the exceptionalism of India’s democratic struggle and presents a clear and ambitious sense of an independent India, where it belonged in the world, and what shape it must take. Gandhi held democracy as the highest ideal to which independent India must aspire. However, unlike the French and the Russian revolutions, Gandhi believed that India would dispense with violence and arrive at this democracy through the path
of truth and nonviolence. In Gandhi’s estimation, only a nonviolent approach could renounce the clamors for power and accord equality to everyone. Gandhi did not foresee any communal strife in India in the future, either at the level of the leadership or among the people. In his own words in the speech:

In the democracy which I have envisaged, a democracy established by non-violence, there will be equal freedom for all. Everybody will be his own master. It is to join a struggle for such democracy that I invite you today. Once you realize this you will forget the differences between the Hindus and Muslims, and think of yourselves as Indians only, engaged in the common struggle for independence.

This idea is echoed also in Nehru’s “Tryst with Destiny” speech, but is severely belied in Salman Rushdie’s retrospective assessment of the Indian nation forty years after independence.

“TRYST WITH DESTINY” SPEECH
BY JAWAHARLAL NEHRU, 1947

Jawaharlal Nehru

Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) was born into a high-caste and wealthy Kashmiri Pandit family. His father was a barrister, and Nehru himself also trained to be a lawyer at Trinity College, Dublin, and at the Inns of Court School of Law in London. Nehru returned from England to India in August 1912. He found he had little interest in a legal career and became increasingly involved with the Indian National Congress. Along with Gandhi, Nehru was one of the key figures in India’s independence struggle, and he served twice as the president of the Indian National Congress. Nehru played an important role in envisioning a modern Indian nation state that was sovereign, socialist, secular, and a democratic republic. Quite opposed to Gandhi, Nehru was a man who held modern science in high regard.

Nehru had a very internationalist perspective on the Indian independence struggle and also, as his speech reveals, a very astute sense of India’s role in the world. During India’s struggle for freedom, Nehru sought foreign allies for India and forged links with movements for independence and democracy all over the world. Nehru took office as the first Prime Minister of India on August 15, 1947, and he delivered his inaugural address, titled “Tryst with Destiny,” to the Indian Constituent Assembly at the midnight session of the parliament on the eve of India’s independence.

SELECTED WORK

“How TRYST WITH DESTINY” SPEECH
BY JAWAHARLAL NEHRU, 1947

This speech was delivered by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, in the Constituent Assembly, New Delhi, August 14, 1947, on the eve of the attainment of Independence.

I

Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance. It is fitting that at this solemn moment we take the pledge of dedication to the service of India and her people and to the still larger cause of humanity.

At the dawn of history India started on her unending quest, and trackless centuries are filled with her striv-
ing and the grandeur of her successes, and her failures. Through good and ill fortune alike she has never lost sight of that quest or forgotten the ideals which gave her strength. We end today a period of ill fortune and India discovers herself again. The achievement we celebrate today is but a step, an opening of opportunity, to the greater triumphs and achievements that await us. Are we brave enough and wise enough to grasp this opportunity and accept the challenge of the future?

Freedom and power bring responsibility. The responsibility rests upon this Assembly, a sovereign body representing the sovereign people of India. Before the birth of freedom, we have endured all the pains of labour and our hearts are heavy with the memory of this sorrow. Some of those pains continue even now. Nevertheless, the past is over and it is the future that beckons to us now.

That future is not one of ease or resting but of incessant striving so that we might fulfil the pledges we have so often taken and the one we shall take today. The service of India means the service of the millions who suffer. It means the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity. The ambition of the greatest man of our generation has been to wipe every tear from every eye. That may be beyond us but as long as there are tears and suffering, so long our work will not be over.

And so we have to labour and to work and work hard to give reality to our dreams. Those dreams are for India, but they are also for the world, for all the nations and peoples are too closely knit together today for anyone of them to imagine that it can live apart. Peace has been said to be indivisible; so is freedom, so is prosperity now, and so also is disaster in this one world that can no longer be split into isolated fragments. To the people of India, whose representatives we are, we appeal to join us with faith and confidence in this great adventure. This is no time for petty and destructive criticism, no time for ill will or blaming others. We have to build the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell.

II

The appointed day has come—the day appointed by destiny—and India stands forth again, after long slumber and struggle, awake, vital, free and independent. The past clings on to us still in some measure and we have to do much before we redeem the pledges we have so often taken. Yet the turning-point is past, and history begins anew for us, the history which we shall live and act and others will write about.

It is a fateful moment for us in India, for all Asia and for the world. A new star rises, the star of freedom in the East, a new hope comes into being, a vision long cherished materializes. May the star never set and that hope never be betrayed!

We rejoice in that freedom, even though clouds surround us, and many of our people are sorrow-stricken and difficult problems encompass us. But freedom brings responsibilities and burdens and we have to face them in the spirit of a free and disciplined people.

On this day our first thoughts go to the architect of this freedom, the Father of our Nation [Gandhi], who, embodying the old spirit of India, held aloft the torch of freedom and lighted up the darkness that surrounded us. We have often been unworthy followers of his and have strayed from his message, but not only we but succeeding generations will remember this message and bear the imprint in their hearts of this great son of India, magnificent in his faith and strength and courage and humility. We shall never allow that torch of freedom to be blown out, however high the wind or stormy the tempest.

Our next thoughts must be of the unknown volunteers and soldiers of freedom who, without praise or reward, have served India even unto death.

We think also of our brothers and sisters who have been cut off from us by political boundaries and who unhappily cannot share at present in the freedom that has come. They are of us and will remain of us whatever may happen, and we shall be sharers in their good [or] ill fortune alike.

The future beckons to us. Whither do we go and what shall be our endeavour? To bring freedom and opportunity to the common man, to the peasants and workers of India; to fight and end poverty and ignorance and disease; to build up a prosperous, democratic and progressive nation, and to create social, economic and political institutions which will ensure justice and fullness of life to every man and woman.

We have hard work ahead. There is no resting for any one of us till we redeem our pledge in full, till we make all the people of India what destiny intended them to be. We are citizens of a great country on the verge of bold advance, and we have to live up to that high standard. All of us, to whatever religion we may belong, are equally the children of India with equal rights, privileges and obligations. We cannot encourage communalism or narrow-mindedness, for no nation can be great whose people are narrow in thought or in action.

To the nations and peoples of the world we send greetings and pledge ourselves to cooperate with them in furthering peace, freedom and democracy.

And to India, our much-loved motherland, the ancient, the eternal and the ever-new, we pay our reverent homage and we bind ourselves afresh to her service.

*Jai Hind.*

*Jai Hind is a salutation and expression of patriotism often used in Indian speeches and communications; it translates roughly as “victory to India.”*
While Nehru highlights the idea that India is facing the dawn of a new day—he nevertheless clearly connects the present day with India’s long history, in particular its pre-colonial history. He notes that “trackless centuries are filled with her [India’s] striving and the grandeur of her successes and her failures.” Nehru paints India’s achievement of independence as a moment of reconnection with its pre-colonial past, declaring that the time of independence is a time when “India discovers herself again,” and he emphasizes that India “has never lost sight of that quest or forgotten the ideals which gave her strength.” Nehru even concludes his speech with a pairing of past and present/future, describing India as “ancient” and “eternal” while simultaneously “ever-new.” India’s time as a British colony is described as “a period of ill fortune.” As is often the case with patriotic speeches, India is repeatedly personified. India has a “soul” that has been long suppressed and with independence is finding utterance; under the yoke of colonialism, India endured a “long slumber and struggle” but with independence will “awake to life and freedom.”

Nehru also finds opportunities in his speech to pay homage to the work of Mahatma Gandhi in his leadership of India’s independence movement. Nehru refers to Gandhi as “the greatest man of our generation” and “the Father of our Nation.” Interestingly, in his references to Gandhi, Nehru once again pairs the old with the new, the past with the present and future; Nehru describes “Gandhi as “embodying the old spirit of India” but at the same time states that Gandhi’s example will guide India into the future, declaring that “succeeding generations will remember this [Gandhi’s] message and bear the imprint in their hearts of this great son of India, magnificent in his faith and strength and courage and humility.”

Nehru reminds the people of India that freedom and power bring responsibility. Before 1947, India depended on England for leadership and guidance. After 1947, India will be its own master, and the country will have to make its own decisions, learn from its mistakes, and move forward. India, according to Nehru, has to grow into a mature and wise nation and ought to be a model to other nations. Nehru feels that all Indians should work hard for the development of their country. The rhetoric of unity and commonality is impossible to miss in Nehru’s speech, as it defines what it means to be a nation. By using phrases such as “long suppressed soul of the nation,” Nehru creates a sense of something intrinsically affirming about the idea of the nation. And, when he exhorts his audience “to build the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell,” the nation emerges as an organic and a unified entity—something that will be contested in the writings of Salman Rushdie.

Though Nehru emphasizes national unity and his tone is certainly one of optimism, he nonetheless makes reference not only to the difficulties of India’s struggle for

Analysis of “Tryst with Destiny” Speech by Nehru

Widely considered one of the greatest speeches of all times, Jawaharlal Nehru’s “Tryst with Destiny” speech marked India’s independence from British rule. Its broadcast over radio on the eve of independence brought together the entire nation as one entity to be addressed together for the first time in history. Recordings of and excerpts from “Tryst with Destiny” have often been used in popular films and novels, such as Deepa Mehta’s Earth (1998) and Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (1981) to capture and convey the intoxicating and hopeful mood in India at this time. Nehru opens his speech by affirming the inevitability of India’s freedom, which has now liberated the long-suppressed soul of the nation. Nehru asks the people of India to dedicate themselves not only to the service of India, but also to the service of all of mankind. In Nehru’s estimation, serving a country means serving its people:

\[\text{The service of India means the service of the millions who suffer. It means the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity. The ambition of the greatest man [Gandhi] of our generation has been to wipe every tear from every eye. That may be beyond us but as long as there are tears and suffering, so long our work will not be over.}\]

From the very outset of his speech, Nehru alternates between references to India’s past and a focus on its present and future potential as an independent nation. India’s tryst with destiny was made “long years ago,” but it is now, the present moment, says Nehru, when “we shall redeem our pledge.” Nehru describes India as stepping out “from the old to the new,” underscoring the notion that the moment of his speech is a moment when India will move forward out of its colonial past—“when an age ends”—into its future as a sovereign nation.
independence, but also to the challenges of the indepen-
dence agreement itself and the consequent Partition:

*Before the birth of freedom we have endured all the
pains of labour and our hearts are heavy with the
memory of this sorrow. Some of these pains continue
even now...clouds surround us, and many of our peo-
ple are sorrowstricken and difficult problems encom-
pass us.*

Later in the speech, he makes direct reference to the
trauma of Partition:

*We think also of our brothers and sisters who have been
cut off from us by political boundaries and who unhap-
pily cannot share at present in the freedom that has
come. They are of us and remain of us whatever may
happen and we shall be the sharers in their good [or] ill
fortune alike.*

While Nehru is hopeful that India will move forward
as a unified country, he pairs his positive outlook with
an awareness of the challenges facing his new nation.
He cautions against “petty and destructive criticism...ill-will or blaming others.” And, Nehru clearly voices
his opposition to communal strife:

*All of us, to whatever religion we may belong, are
equally the children of India with equal rights, privi-
leges and obligations. We cannot encourage communal-
ism or narrow-mindedness, for no nation can be great
whose people are narrow in thought or in action.*

Equally important is Nehru’s keen awareness of and
plans for India’s participation in world politics: “Our...dreams are for India...are also for the world, for all the
nations and peoples are too closely knit together today
for anyone of them to imagine that it can live apart,” he
says. According to Nehru, all the countries in the world
are closely connected. No one can live in isolation. Peace,
freedom, and prosperity are the common property of all
humanity. Nehru warns the people that a disaster in one
part of the world can affect everyone else, as the world
cannot be divided into small isolated pieces.

Nehru concludes his speech with the Hindi slogan “Jai
Hind,” a common patriotic salutation in Indian orations,
which can be roughly translated as “victory to India,” but
besides this short phrase, one of the most striking fea-
tures of Nehru’s inaugural address is the fact that it was
delivered in English, the language of the erstwhile colo-
nizer. Thus, this speech reinforces the idea that India de-
developed its own “complex” (in Salman Rushdie’s words)
relationship with the English language that cannot be
fully understood in a narrow postcolonial framework.

**“IMAGINARY HOMELANDS,” “THE RIDDLE
OF MIDNIGHT: INDIA, AUGUST 1987,” AND
“COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE’ DOES
NOT EXIST” BY SALMAN RUSHDIE**

Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie (b. 1947) is one of the
most influential British writers of the Indian diaspora.
He was born in India and migrated to Pakistan and then
England to study at King’s College, University of Cam-
bridge. He started his career as a copywriter with Ogilvy
and Mather, an advertising agency, and published his
first book, *Grimus* (1975), while working there. His sec-
ond book, *Midnight’s Children* (1981), met with signifi-
cant critical acclaim and won the 1981 Booker Prize. In
1993 and 2008, it was awarded the Best of the Bookers
for being the best novel to have received the prize dur-
ing the first twenty-five and forty years of the award.
*Midnight’s Children* is often hailed as the “quintessential”
postcolonial novel that set the tone of the field of post-
colonial studies because of its discussion of the indepen-
dent nation state and its relationship with its colonizer.2

While Rushdie received much critical acclaim for
*Midnight’s Children*, it was his publication of his con-
 troversial novel, *Satanic Verses* (1988) that truly brought
him worldwide renown. Parts of this novel portray the
Prophet Mohammad in an irreverent light, and in 1989
Iran’s spiritual leader, the Ayatollah Khomenei, pro-
nounced a *fatwa* (a ruling on a point of Islamic law given
by a recognized authority) for the execution of Rushdie
because Khomenei felt that *The Satanic Verses* blasphemed
Islam as a whole. Muslims across the world were given
the injunction to kill the writer on sight. As a result of
this constantly looming threat to his life, Rushdie lived
under police protection for a number of years and con-
tinuously shifted locations. *The Satanic Verses* was banned
in several countries, such as Iran, Bangladesh, Pakistan,
Sudan, and South Africa among others, and the book is
still banned in India. Despite the life-changing *fatwa*,
Rushdie continues to be vocal against fundamentalist Is-
lam and against the tyranny of totalitarian nation states.

*The Satanic Verses* is written in a magical realist style.
The religious elements that were deemed offensive oc-
cur in dream sequences of the main characters, Gibreel
Farishhta and Saladin Chamcha, Indian Muslims who are

Author Salman Rushdie, pictured holding
his fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*,
both actors. Farishta is a Bollywood star who specializes in playing Hindu deities. Chamcha is an emigrant who has broken with his Indian identity and works as a voiceover artist in England. Rushdie has often explained in interviews and essays that his goal in writing *Satanic Verses* was not to paint the Prophet Mohammad in a poor light, but rather to discuss the experience of migration. In the article “Book Burning (1989),” Rushdie wrote the following:

The Satanic Verses is not, in my view, an antireligious novel. It is, however, an attempt to write about migration, its stresses and transformations, from the point of view of migrants from the Indian subcontinent to Britain. This is, for me, the saddest irony of all; that after working for five years to give voice and fictional flesh to the immigrant culture of which I am myself a member, I should see my book burned, largely unread, by the people it’s about….

Indeed, migration and the diaspora have been abiding themes in Rushdie’s novels. In an interview with *The Paris Review,* Rushdie claimed that his life had given him his most important subject—the experience of living in an increasingly interconnected world, in which people move from one country to the next and where different nations and cultures come into contact and collide:

…worlds in collision. How do you make people see that everyone’s story is now a part of everyone else’s story? It’s one thing to say it, but how can you make a reader feel that is their lived experience?

As we see in Rushdie’s three essays that are included in this resource guide, he is concerned with the gains of “translation” and the ways in which experiences of migration—of encountering and inhabiting a different culture—are productive and valuable. Rushdie compares migration to translation, not only because of their etymological roots that imply a “bearing across,” but also because both processes require that people and literatures transform from one cultural vocabulary to another, becoming intelligible in both. The three essays under discussion here betray a preoccupation with themes of nationalism, nations and diaspora, memory and history, and the role of literature. All three essays were published in Rushdie’s collection titled *Imaginary Homelands* (1991).

**Postmodernism**

Rushdie is often regarded as a postmodernist and a postcolonial writer. A postmodernist sees multiple competing realities instead of one “real” or “objective” reality. Postmodernism believes that we do not simply represent or describe one reality, though mechanisms of power—governments as well as political or religious movements—may make it seem as if a particular idea is the real or true one. In the PBS General Glossary, “postmodernism” is defined as follows:

Postmodernism is highly skeptical of explanations that claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person. In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually. Postmodernism questions abstract principles, knowing always that the outcome of one’s own experience will necessarily be fallible and relative, rather than certain and universal.

Rushdie values the experiences of migration because they provide a dual perspective on any reality. Diasporic experiences highlight the contingency of the idea of the nation, recognizing that nations do not end with their geographical borders. Instead, they also manifest in various ways in the cultural life of the diaspora.

**Magical Realism**

Magical realism is a literary technique that allows a writer to portray paradoxical realities that do not fit into neat boxes and to give life to a pluralistic vision of the world. It shows the “unexpected alteration of reality” through fantasy. Here, the magical and the real are not separate but intertwined and mutually formative in a way that their logic and validity cannot be disputed. Magical realism shows the simultaneity of two separate, almost incompatible, realities. So it is an ideal means by which to depict the perspective of someone like Salman Rushdie, as it de-familiarizes a commonplace experience or scene and debunks notions of what is to be expected from a colonized country such as India. Magical realism allows the writer and the reader to access deeper layers of hybridity and cross-connections that are easy to miss in an attempt to provide a homogenous picture that supports Western assumptions or Indian nationalist ambitions.
The idea of the nation as a uniform and a homogenous community is one that Rushdie wishes to call attention to in different ways in the three essays on which we are focused. This is most readily apparent in the essay “The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1987,” where Rushdie ponders the existence of India and questions what holds it together. In “Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist” and in “Imaginary Homelands,” Rushdie challenges the simplistic idea that a literary work must correspond to a singular national culture. He claims that an Indian or a South African writer needn’t only write about India or South Africa in a narrow sense and contends that the words “Indian” or “South African” do not have clear definitions in the way, for instance, that Hindu nationalists might want.

Rushdie’s views on nations and nationalism are very similar to those of the scholar Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Anderson calls the nation an imagined political community, noting that “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” Nationalism thus becomes an artificial, but not unnecessary, exercise by which citizens of a nation are made to seem like they have much in common and by which they are held together.
The Commonwealth of Nations

The Commonwealth of Nations is a body comprised of fifty-three member states that were previously territories of the British Empire. It was formally constituted by the London Declaration in 1949 and has England’s Queen Elizabeth II as its head. The Commonwealth was, primarily, a way to define the relationship of England with its colonies that had gained their independence from the British Empire in the twentieth century. It survives largely as a vestige of colonialism. According to political writer James Astill, as quoted in the BBC article “What Is the Relevance of the Commonwealth Today,” the Commonwealth today is “a large and somewhat anomalous club, which devotes most of its energies to maintaining its strange existence.”

Selected Work

“THE RIDDLE OF MIDNIGHT: INDIA, AUGUST 1987”

BY SALMAN RUSHDIE


Forty years ago, the independent nation of India and I were born within eight weeks of one another. I came first. This gave rise to a family joke—that the departure of the British was occasioned by my arrival on the scene—and the joke, in turn, became the germ of a novel, Midnight’s Children, in which not just one child, but one thousand and one children born in the midnight hour of freedom, the first hour of 15 August 1947, were comically and tragically connected to the birth of a nation.

(1 worked out, by the way, that the Indian birth rate in August 1947 was approximately two babies per second, so my fictional figure of 1,001 per hour was, if anything, a little on the low side.)

The chain reaction continued. The novel’s title became, for many Indians, a familiar catch-phrase defining that generation which was too young to remember the Empire or the liberation struggle; and when Rajiv Gandhi became Prime Minister, I found his administration being welcomed in the newspapers by such headlines as: ‘Enter midnight’s children.’

So when forty came around, it occurred to me to take a look at the state of the Indian nation that was, like me, entering its fifth decade; and to look, in particular, through the eyes of the class of ‘47, the country’s citizen-twins, my generation. I flew to the subcontinent in search of the real-life counterparts of the imaginary beings I once made up. Midnight’s real children: to meet them would be like closing a circle.

There was a riddle I wanted to try and answer, with their help: Does India exist? A strange, redundant sort of inquiry, on the face of it. After all, there the gigantic place manifestly is, a rough diamond two thousand miles long and more or less as wide, as large as Europe though you’d never guess it from the Mercator projection, populated by around a sixth of the human race, home of the largest film industry on earth, spawning Festivals the world over, famous as the ‘world’s biggest democracy’. Does India exist? If it doesn’t, what’s keeping Pakistan and Bangladesh apart?

It’s when you start thinking about the political entity, the nation of India, the thing whose fortieth anniversary it is, that the question starts making sense. After all, in all the thousands of years of Indian history, there never was such a creature as a united India. Nobody ever managed to rule the whole place, not the Mughals, not the British. And then, that midnight, the thing that had never existed was suddenly ‘free’. But what on earth was it? On what common ground (if any) did it, does it, stand?

Some countries are united by a common language; India has around fifteen major languages and numberless minor ones. Nor are its people united by race, religion or culture. These days, you can even hear some voices suggesting that the preservation of the union is not in the common interest. J. K. Galbraith’s description of India as ‘functioning anarchy’ still fits, but the stresses on the country have never been so great. Does India exist? If it doesn’t, the explanation is to be found in a single word: communalism. The politics of religious hatred.

There is a medium-sized town called Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh, and in this town there is a fairly commonplace mosque named Babri Masjid. According to the Ramayana, however, Ayodhya was the home town of Rama himself, and according to a local legend the spot where he was born—the Ramjanmabhoomi—is the one on which the Muslim place of worship stands today. The site has been disputed territory ever since independence, but for most of the forty years the lid has been kept on the problem by the very Indian method of shelving the case, locking the mosque’s gates, and allowing neither Hindus nor Muslims to enter.

Last year, however, the case finally came to court, and the judgement seemed to favour the Hindus. Babri...
Masjid became the target of the extremist Hindu fundamentalist organization, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Since then, Hindus and Muslims all over North India have been clashing, and in every outbreak of communal violence the Babri Masjid affair is cited as a primary cause.

When I arrived in Delhi the old Walled City was under heavy curfew because of just such an outbreak of communal violence. In the little alleys of Chandni Chowk I met a Hindu tailor, Harbans Lal, born in 1947 and as mild and gentle a man as you could wish to find. The violence terrified him. ‘When it started,’ he said, ‘I shut up the shop and ran away.’ But in spite of all his mildness, Harbans Lal was a firm supporter of the Hindu nationalist party that used to be called the Jan Sangh and is now the BJP. ‘I voted for Rajiv Gandhi in the election after Mrs. Gandhi died,’ he said. ‘It was a big mistake. I won’t do it again.’ I asked him what should be done about the Babri Masjid issue. Should it be locked up again as it had been for so many years? Should it be a place where both Hindus and Muslims could go to worship? ‘It’s a Hindu shrine,’ he said, ‘it should be for the Hindus.’ There was no possibility, in his mind, of a compromise.

A couple of days later the Walled City was still bubbling with tension. The curfew was lifted for an hour or two every day to enable people to go out and buy food. The rest of the time, security was very tight. It was Eid, the great Muslim festival celebrating the end of the month of fasting, but the city’s leading imams had said that Eid should not be celebrated. In Meerut, the mutilated corpses of Muslims floated in the river. The city’s predominantly Hindu police force, the PAC, had run amok. Once again, Babri Masjid was one of the bones of contention.

I met Abdul Ghani, a Delhi Muslim who worked in a sari shop, and who, like Harbans Lal, India and me, was 1947-born. I was struck by how much like Harbans Lal he was. They were both slightly built, mild-mannered men with low, courteous voices and attractive smiles. They each earned about 1,000 rupees (100 dollars) a month, and dreamed of own shops, knowing they never would. And when it came to the Hindu-Muslim communal divide, Abdul Ghani was just as unyielding as Harbans Lal had been. ‘What belongs to the Muslims,’ he said when I asked about Babri Masjid, ‘should be given back to the Muslims. There is nothing else to be done.’

The gentleness of Harbans Lal and Abdul Ghani made their religious divisions especially telling. Nor was Babri Masjid the only issue between the faiths. At Ahmedabad, in the state of Gujarat, Hindu-Muslim violence was again centred in the old walled-city area of Manek Chowk, and had long ago acquired its own internal logic: so many families had lost members in the fighting that the cycle of revenge was unstoppable. Political forces were at work, too. At Ahmedabad hospital the doctors found that many of the knife wounds they treated were professionally inflicted. Somebody was sending trained killers into town.

All over India—Meerut, Delhi, Ahmedabad, Bombay—tension between Hindus and Muslims was rising. In Bombay, a (1947-born) journalist told me that many communal incidents took place in areas where Muslims had begun to prosper and move up the economic scale. Behind the flashpoints like Ayodhya, she suggested, was Hindus’ resentment of Muslim prosperity.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad has a list of over a hundred disputed sites of the Babri Masjid type. Two are especially important. In Mathura, a Muslim shrine stands on the supposed birthplace of the god Krishna; and in Benares, a site allegedly sacred to Shiva is also in Muslim hands...

In Bombay, I found a ‘midnight child’, a clerical worker in the docks, a Muslim named Mukadam who was such a super-citizen that he was almost too good to be true. Mukadam was absolutely dedicated to the unity of India. He believed in small families. He thought all Indians had a duty to educate themselves, and he had put himself through many evening courses. He had been named Best Worker at his dock. In his village, he claimed proudly, people of all faiths lived together in complete harmony. ‘That is how it should be,’ he said. ‘After all, these religions are only words. What is behind them is the same, whichever faith it is.’

But when communal violence came to the Bombay docks in 1985, Mukadam’s super-citizenship wasn’t of much use. On the day the mob came to his dock, he was saved because he happened to be away. He didn’t dare to return to work for weeks. And now, he says, he worries that it may come again at any time.

Like Mukadam, many members of Indian minority groups started out as devotees of the old, secular definition of India, and there were no Indians as patriotic as the Sikhs. Until 1984, you could say that the Sikhs were the Indian nationalists. Then came the storming of the Golden Temple, and the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi; and everything changed.

The group of Sikh radicals led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the religious leader who died in the Golden Temple storming, could not be said to represent more than a small minority of all Sikhs. The campaign for a separate Sikh state, Khalistan, had similarly found few takers among India’s Sikhs—until November 1984, when Indira Gandhi died, and it became known that her assassins were Sikhs.

In Delhi, angry Hindu mobs—among whom party workers of Mrs. Gandhi’s Congress—I were everywhere observed—decided to hold all Sikhs responsible for the deeds of the assassins. Thus an entirely new form of communal violence—Hindu-Sikh riots—came into being.
and in the next ten days the Sikh community suffered a series of traumatizing attacks from which it has not recovered, and perhaps never will.

In Block 32 of the Delhi suburb called Trilokpuri, perhaps 350 Sikhs were burned alive. I walked past streets of charred, gutted houses in some of which you could still see the bones of the dead. It was the worst place I have ever seen, not least because, in the, surrounding streets, children played normally, the neighbours went on with their lives. Yet some of these neighbours were the very people who perpetrated the crime of 32 Trilokpuri, which was only one of the many massacres of Sikhs that took place that November. Many Sikh ‘midnight children’ never reached forty at all.

I heard about many of these deaths, and will let one story stand for all. When the mob came for Hari Singh, a taxi-driver like so many Delhi Sikhs, his son fled into a nearby patch of overgrown waste land. His wife was obliged to watch as the mob literally ripped her husband’s beard off his face. (This beard-ripping ritual was a feature of many of the November killings.) She managed to get hold of the beard, thinking that it was, at least, a part of him that she could keep for herself, and she ran into their house to hide it. Some members of the mob followed her in, found the beard and removed it. Then they poured kerosene over Hari Singh and set fire to him. They also chased his teenage son, found him, beat him unconscious, and burned him, too. They knew he was a Sikh even though he had cut his hair, because when they found his father’s beard they found his cut hair as well. His mother had preserved the sacred locks that identified her son.

Another taxi-driver, Pal Singh (born November 1947), told me that he had never had time for the Khalistan movement, but after 1984 he had changed his mind. ‘Now it will come,’ he said, ‘maybe within ten years.’ Sikhs were selling up their property in Delhi and buying land in the Punjab, so that if the time came when they had to flee back to the Sikh heartland they wouldn’t have to leave their assets behind. I’m doing it, too,’ Pal Singh said.

Almost three years after the 1984 massacres, not one person has been charged with murdering a Sikh in those fearsome days. The Congress-I, Rajiv Gandhi’s party, increasingly, relies on the Hindu vote, and is reluctant to alienate it.

The new element in Indian communalism is the emergence of a collective Hindu consciousness that transcends caste, and that believes Hinduism to be under threat from other Indian minorities. There is evidence that Rajiv’s Congress-I is trying to ride that tiger. In Bombay, the tiger is actually in power. The ruling Shiv Sena Party, whose symbol is the tiger, is the most overtly Hindu-fundamentalist grouping ever to achieve office anywhere in India. Its leader, Bal Thackeray, a former cartoonist, speaks openly of his belief that democracy has failed in India. He makes no secret of his open hostility towards Muslims. In the Bhiwandi riots of 1985, a few months before the Shiv Sena won the Bombay municipal elections, Shiv Sena activists were deeply involved in the anti-Muslim violence. And today, as the Sena seeks to spread its influence into the rural areas of Maharashtra (the state of which Bombay is the capital), incidents of communal violence are being reported from villages in which nothing of the sort has ever happened before.

I come from Bombay, and from a Muslim family, too. ‘My’ India has always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity: ideas to which the ideologies of the communalists are diametrically opposed. To my mind, the defining image of India is the crowd, and a crowd is by its very nature superabundant, heterogeneous, many things at once. But the India of the communalists is none of these things.

I spent one long evening in the company of a (‘47-born) Bengali intellectual, Robi Chatterjee, for whom the inadequacies of society are a cause for deep, permanent, operatic anguish. ‘Does India exist?’ I asked him.

‘What do you mean?’ he cried. ‘Where the hell do you think this is?’ I told him that I meant the idea of the nation. Forty years after a nationalist revolution, where could it be said to reside?

He said, ‘To the devil with all that nationalism. I am an Indian because I am born here and I live here. So is everyone else of whom that is true. What’s the need for any more definitions?’

I asked, ‘If you do without the idea of nationalism, then what’s the glue holding the country together?’

‘We don’t need glue,’ he said. ‘India isn’t going to fall apart. All that Balkanization stuff. I reject it completely. We are simply here and we will remain here. It’s this nationalism business that is the danger.’

According to Robi, the idea of nationalism in India had grown more and more chauvinistic, had become narrower and narrower. The ideas of Hindu nationalism had infected it. I was struck by a remarkable paradox: that, in a country created by the Congress’s nationalist campaign, the wellbeing of the people might now require that all nationalist rhetoric be abandoned.

Unfortunately for India, the linkage between Hindu fundamentalism and the idea of the nation shows no signs of weakening. India is increasingly defined as Hindu India, and Sikh and Muslim fundamentalism grows ever fiercer and entrenched in response. ‘These days,’ a young Hindu woman said to me, ‘one’s religion is worn on one’s sleeve.’ She was corrected by a Sikh friend. ‘It is worn,’ he said, ‘in a scabbard at the hip.’

I remember that when Midnight’s Children was first
published in 1981, the most common Indian criticism of it was that it was too pessimistic about the future. It's a sad truth that nobody finds the novel's ending pessimistic anymore, because what has happened in India since 1981 is so much darker than I had imagined. If anything, the book's last pages, with their suggestion of a new, more pragmatic generation rising up to take over from the midnight children, now seem absurdly, romantically optimistic.

But India regularly confounds its critics by its resilience, its survival in spite of everything. I don't believe in the Balkanization of India any more than Robi Chatterjee does. It's my guess that the old functioning anarchy will, somehow or other, keep on functioning, for another forty years, and no doubt another forty after that. But don't ask me how.

1987

The Babri Masjid mosque is overtaken by Hindu nationalists in 1992. In his essay “The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1987,” Rushdie finds that Hindus and Muslims are largely unwilling to compromise on matters of religious and communal strife—including the issue of the Babri Masjid.

Analysis of “The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1987”

In this essay, the writer Salman Rushdie sets out, forty years after Nehru’s “Tryst with Destiny” speech, to find people who were born—like Rushdie—in the same year as the independent Indian state, in 1947. This exercise draws, in part, from his book Midnight’s Children, which is about the interconnected lives of children born at midnight of August 14–15, 1947. Rushdie hopes to explore and answer the “riddle” referenced in his essay’s title—this riddle takes the form of a simple and yet an extremely profound question: “Does India exist? On what common ground does it stand?” As we quickly discover, Rushdie’s question is a deeply political one that cuts to the heart of what sustains the “imagined community” of the Indian nation. For while Rushdie clearly is aware of the physical, geographic existence of the Indian nation—a rough diamond two thousand miles long—he is above all concerned with establishing the existence of “the political entity, the nation of India, the thing whose fortieth anniversary it is….”

Rushdie perceptively points out what is indeed true—that India does not have one common religion, culture, or language. In fact, India prides itself on its diversity, and yet in Rushdie’s estimation it may be the very challenge of this diversity that denies India its existence as a unified nation; he writes: “Does India exist? If it doesn’t then the explanation is to be found in a single word: communalism. The politics of religious hatred.”

The degree to which religious and political friction affects the mindsets of Indians across the cultural spectrum is made exceedingly clear as Rushdie interviews both a Hindu and a Muslim. Rushdie first describes his conversation with Harbans Lal, a Hindu tailor, born, like Rushdie, in 1947. Lal is “…as mild and gentle a man as you could wish to find. The violence terrified him.” But in spite of his mild personal aspect, Lal supports the Hindu nationalist party and is unwilling to compromise his view that the site of the Babri Masjid mosque should be for the Hindus only. After describing his conversation with Lal, Rushdie then details a similar discussion he has with Abdul Ghani, a Muslim garment shop worker, also born in 1947. Rushdie highlights the similarities between the Muslim Ghani and the Hindu Lal, which are striking:

I was struck by how much like Harbans Lal he [Ghani] was. They were both slightly built, mild-mannered men with low, courteous voices and attractive smiles. They each earned about 1,000 rupees (100 dollars) a month, and dreamed of owning their own shops, knowing they never would.

Rushdie realizes that the two men are remarkably similar, not only in appearance and demeanor, but also in their deeply entrenched views; they are both unwilling to seek compromise and have become even more polarized in the wake of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Whereas Lal believes the Babri Masjid should be for Hindus only, a similarly unyielding Ghani claims the mosque rightfully belongs to Muslims, saying “What belongs to the Muslims…should be given back to the Muslims. There is nothing else to be done.”

The intractability of their political views contrasts starkly with the men’s meek dispositions, a contrast on which Rushdie directly comments: “The gentleness of Harbans Lal and Abdul Ghani made their religious divisions especially telling.” And there is no lack of irony in the fact that these two men—who are so much alike
not only in their physical aspect and their personalities, but also in their stations in life and their hopes and dreams for the future—are nevertheless clinging to political views that place them in polar opposition to one another.

Rushdie’s next interview is with a Muslim clerical worker named Mukadam. Mukadam’s open-minded outlook presents a clear contrast to the polarizing vantage points of Lal and Ghani. Rushdie describes Mukadam as being “absolutely dedicated to the unity of India.” Mukadam contends that people can and should live together in peace regardless of religious differences:

In his village, he claimed proudly, people of all faiths lived together in complete harmony. ‘That is how it should be,’ he said. ‘After all, these religions are only words. What is behind them is the same, whichever faith it is.’

But despite his yearning to believe in a secular, unified nation of India, Mukadam soon realizes that his idealism can’t shield him from the harsh realities of communal strife—he narrowly escapes religious violence and lives in fear that he may fall victim to such violence again at any given moment.

Next, Rushdie takes up the topic of India’s Sikh population. Rushdie compares the Sikhs’ historical outlook on India to that of Mukadam: “Like Mukadam, many members of Indian minority groups started out as devotees of the old, secular definition of India, and there were no Indians as patriotic as the Sikhs.” However, after then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was killed in 1984 by Sikh assassins (in response to the storming of the Sikh Golden Temple by Mrs. Gandhi’s forces), a new form of communal violence—violence the between Hindus and Sikhs—takes root.

As he does throughout this essay, Rushdie uses the experience of one person, one family, to illustrate a larger political and historical event; Rushdie tells the grim story of Hari Singh, a Sikh taxi driver, and his family who are brutally attacked by a Hindu mob simply because they are Sikhs. Rushdie points to how the traditional Sikh view of a unified India has been changed by communal violence. Rushdie further illustrates this disheartening change via his interview with another Sikh taxi driver, Pal Singh (also 1947-born). Pal Singh says that he previously had not placed much value on the notion of a separate Sikh nation (Khalistan), but after the violence of 1984, he has changed his mind.

The reality that has confronted Rushdie in his interviews with his fellow 1947-born Indians is one that stands diametrically opposed to the author’s own concept of India. Rushdie imagines India as a huge crowd...
that does not hold partisan ideologies and defies all narrow categorizations:

‘My India has always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity: ideas to which the ideologies of the communalists are diametrically opposed. To my mind, the defining image of India is the crowd, and a crowd is by its very nature superabundant, heterogeneous, many things at once. But the India of the communalists is none of these things.’

It is the impulse to define the nation as either Hindu or Muslim, to contain its diversity, that spells death for the idea of India. Rushdie echoes the views of the intellectual Robi Chatterjee (also 1947-born), whom he interviewed, that it is because we are so preoccupied with labeling who belongs to the nation of India, or who embodies the true spirit of its nationalism, that we have become insensitive to the very people the state of India was founded to serve. Whereas nationalism has historically been seen as a means of unifying a nation’s people, in India’s case, nationalism has weakened and divided the nation. Rushdie questions whether a nation can maintain itself without nationalism, asking: “If you do without the idea of nationalism, then what is the glue holding the country together?” But Chatterjee responds that, “We don’t need glue…We are simply here and we will remain here. It’s this nationalism business that is the danger.”

Rushdie points to the paradoxical nature of India’s state of being—that independent India was a country created by a nationalist campaign of the Congress (as we saw in Nehru and Gandhi’s speeches) that aimed to unite the people of India against the British, but the present well being of the Indian people now requires that all nationalist rhetoric be cast aside for the sake of national unity. Rushdie’s status check in his home nation forty years after its, and his own, birth clearly leaves him disheartened. His interviews with other “midnight children” have made him well aware of the fact that “India is increasingly defined as Hindu India, and Sikh and Muslim fundamentalism grows ever fiercer and entrenched in response.” Yet in spite of the darkness of Rushdie’s conclusions and the experiences of those he has interviewed, he does not foresee the demise of the Indian nation. Rather, Rushdie notes that India will very likely continue to survive as a nation even if it doesn’t live up to the hopes expressed by Gandhi and Nehru and the dreams of its generation of “midnight children”:

India regularly confounds its critics by its resilience, its survival in spite of everything…It’s my guess that the old functioning anarchy will, somehow or another, keep on functioning, for another forty years, and no

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**SELECTED WORK**

**“IMAGINARY HOMELANDS” BY SALMAN RUSHDIE**


An old photograph in a cheap frame hangs on a wall of the room where I work. It’s a picture dating from 1946 of a house into which, at the time of its taking, I had not yet been born. The house is rather peculiar—a three-storied gabled affair with tiled roofs and round towers in two corners, each wearing a pointed tile hat. ‘The past is a foreign country,’ goes the famous opening sentence of L. P. Hartley’s novel *The Go-Between*, ‘they do things differently there.’ But the photograph tells me to invert this idea; it reminds me that it’s my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time.

A few years ago I revisited Bombay, which is my lost city, after an absence of something like half my life. Shortly after arriving, acting on an impulse, I opened the telephone directory and looked for my father’s name. And, amazingly, there it was; his name, our old address, the unchanged telephone number, as if we had never gone away to the unmentionable country across the border. It was an eerie discovery. I felt as if I were being claimed, or informed that the facts of my faraway life were illusions, and that this continuity was the reality. Then I went to visit the house in the photograph and stood outside it, neither daring nor wishing to announce myself to its new owners. (I didn’t want to see how they’d ruined the interior.) I was overwhelmed. The photograph had naturally been taken in black and white; and my memory, feeding on such images as this, had begun to see my childhood in the same way, monochromatically. The colours of my history had seeped out of my mind’s eye; now my other two eyes were assaulted by colours, by the vividness of the red tiles, the yellow-edged green of cactus-leaves, the brilliance of bougainvillaea creeper. It is probably not too romantic to say that that was when my novel *Midnight’s Children* was really born; when I realized how much I wanted to restore the past to myself, not in the faded greys of old family-album snapshots, but whole, in Cinemascope and glorious Technicolor.

Bombay is a city built by foreigners upon reclaimed land; I, who had been away so long that I almost quali-
fied for the title, was gripped by the conviction that I, too, had a city and a history to reclaim.

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.

Writing my book in North London, looking out through my window on to a city scene totally unlike the ones I was imagining on to paper, I was constantly plagued by this problem, until I felt obliged to face it in the text, to make clear that (in spite of my original and I suppose somewhat Proustian ambition to unlock the gates of lost time so that the past reappeared as it actually had been, unaffected by the distortions of memory) what I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory, so that my India was just that: 'my' India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions. I tried to make it as imaginatively true as I could, but imaginative truth is simultaneously honourable and suspect, and I knew that my India may only have been one to which I (who am no longer what I was, and who by quitting Bombay never became what perhaps I was meant to be) was, let us say, willing to admit I belonged.

This is why I made my narrator, Saleem, suspect in his narration; his mistakes are the mistakes of a fallible memory compounded by quirks of character and of circumstance, and his vision is fragmentary. It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost.

But there is a paradox here. The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed. Let me again try and explain this from my own experience. Before beginning Midnight's Children, I spent many months trying simply to recall as much of the Bombay of the 1950s and 1960s as I could; and not only Bombay—Kashmir, too, and Delhi and Aligarh, which, in my book, I've moved to Agra to heighten a certain joke about the Taj Mahal. I was genuinely amazed by how much came back to me. I found myself remembering what clothes people had worn on certain days, and school scenes, and whole passages of Bombay dialogue verbatim, or so it seemed; I even remembered advertisements, film-posters, the neon Jeep sign on Marine Drive, toothpaste ads for Binaca and for Kolynos, and a footbridge over the local railway line which bore, on one side, the legend 'Esso puts a tiger in your tank' and, on the other, the curiously contradictory admonition: 'Drive like Hell and you will get there.' Old songs came back to me from nowhere: a street entertainer's version of 'Good Night, Ladies', and, from the film Mr 420 (a very appropriate source for my narrator to have used), the hit number 'Mera Joota Hai Japani', which could almost be Saleem's theme song.

I knew that I had tapped a rich seam; but the point I want to make is that of course I'm not gifted with total recall, and it was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. There is an obvious parallel here with archaeology. The broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects.

It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated; that its loss is part of our common humanity. Which seems to me self-evidently true; but, I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being elsewhere. This may enable him to speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal.

But let me go further. The broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present.

John Fowles begins Daniel Martin with the words: 'Whole sight: or all the rest is desolation.' But human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated,

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* Mera joota hai Japani
Yé patloon Inglistani
Sar pé lal topi Rusi—
Phir bhi díl bal Hindustani
—whoch translates roughly as:
O, my shoes are Japanese

On my head, red Russian hat—
My heart's Indian for all that.
[This is also the song sung by Gibreel Farishta as he tumbles from the heavens at the beginning of 'The Satanic Verses.']

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people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death. The Fowles position seems to me a way of succumbing to the guru-illusion. Writers are no longer sages, dispensing wisdom of the centuries. And those of us who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have perhaps had modernism forced upon us. We can’t lay claim to Olympus, and are thus released to describe our worlds as provisional. Writers are no longer sages, dispensing wisdom of the centuries. And those of us who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have perhaps had modernism forced upon us. We can’t lay claim to Olympus, and are thus released to describe our worlds as provisional.

In *Midnight’s Children*, my narrator Saleem uses, at one point, the metaphor of a cinema screen to discuss this business of perception: ‘Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, ...until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars’ faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; ... it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality.’ The movement towards the cinema screen is a metaphor for the novel’s movement through time towards the present, and the book itself, as it nears contemporary events, quite deliberately loses deep perspective, becomes more ‘partial’. I wasn’t trying to write about (for instance) the Emergency in the same way as I wrote about events half a century earlier. I felt it would be dishonest to pretend, when writing about the day before yesterday, that it was possible to see the whole picture. I showed certain blobs and slabs of the scene.

So literature can, and perhaps must, give the lie to official facts. But is this a proper function of those of us who write from outside India? Or are we just dilettantes in such affairs, because we are not involved in their day-to-day unfolding, because by speaking out we take no risks, because our personal safety is not threatened? What right do we have to speak at all?

My answer is very simple. Literature is self-validating. That is to say, a book is not justified by its author’s worthiness to write it, but by the quality of what has been written. There are terrible books that arise directly out of experience, and extraordinary imaginative feats dealing with themes which the author has been obliged to approach from the outside.

So if I am to speak for Indian writers in England I would, say this, paraphrasing G. V. Desani’s H. Hatterr: ‘The migrations of the fifties and sixties happened. ‘We are. We are here.’ And we are not willing to be excluded from any part of our heritage; which heritage includes both a Bradford-born Indian kid’s right to be treated as a full member of British society, and also the right of any member of this post-diaspora community to draw on its roots for its art, just as all the world’s community of displaced writers has always done. (I’m thinking, for instance, of Grass’s Danzig-become-Gdansk, of Joyce’s
Let me override at once the faintly defensive note that has crept into these last few remarks. The Indian writer, looking back at India, does so through guilt-tinted spectacles. (I am of course, once more, talking about myself.) I am speaking now of those of us who emigrated ... and I suspect that there are times when the move seems wrong to us all, when we seem, to ourselves, post-lapsarian men and women. We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. Arid as a result—as my use of the Christian notion of the Fall indicates—we are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles. Or it may be that that is simply what we must think in order to do our work.

_Midnight's Children_ enters its subject from the point of view of a secular man. I am a member of that generation of Indians who were sold the secular ideal. One of the things I liked, and still like, about India is that it is based on a nonsectarian philosophy. I was not raised in a narrowly Muslim environment; I do not consider Hindu culture to be either alien from me or more important than the Islamic heritage. I believe this has something to do with the nature of Bombay, a metropolis in which the multiplicity of commingled faiths and cultures curiously creates a remarkably secular ambience. Saleem Sinai makes use, eclectically, of whatever elements from whatever sources he chooses. It may have been easier for his author to do this from outside modern India than inside it.

I want to make one last point about the description of India that _Midnight's Children_ attempts. It is a point about pessimism. The book has been criticised in India for its allegedly despairing tone. And the despair of the writer—from-outside may indeed look a little easy, a little pat. But I do not see the book as despairing or nihilistic. The point of view of the narrator is not entirely that of his author to do this from outside modern India than inside it.

England's Indian writers are by no means all the same type of animal. Some of us, for instance, are Pakistani. Others Bangladeshi. Others West, or East, or even South African. And V. S. Naipaul, by now, is something else entirely. This word 'Indian' is getting to be a pretty scattered concept. Indian writers in England include political exiles, first-generation migrants, affluent expatriates whose residence here is frequently temporary, naturalized Britons, and people born here who may never have laid eyes on the subcontinent. Clearly, nothing that I say can apply across all these categories. But one of the interesting things about this diverse community is that, as far as Indo-British fiction is concerned, its existence changes the ball game, because that fiction is in future going to come from much as addresses from London, Birmingham and Yorkshire as from Delhi or Bombay.

One of the changes has to do with attitudes towards the use of English. Many have referred to the argument about the appropriateness of this language to Indian themes. And I hope all of us share the view that we can't simply use the language in the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes. Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free.

But the British Indian writer simply does not have the option of rejecting English, anyway. His children, her children, will grow up speaking it, probably as a first language; and in the forging of a British Indian identity the English language is of central importance. It must, in spite of everything, be embraced. (The word 'translation' comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across'. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.)

To be an Indian writer in this society is to face, every day, problems of definition. What does it mean to be 'Indian' outside India? How can culture be preserved without becoming ossified? How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies? What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make any concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from the ones that came here with us? These questions are all a single, existential question: How are we to live in the world?

I do not propose to offer, prescriptively, any answers to
these questions; only to state that these are some of the issues with which each of us will have to come to terms.

To turn my eyes outwards now, and to say a little about the relationship between the Indian writer and the majority white culture in whose midst he lives, and with which his work will sooner or later have to deal:

In common with many Bombay-raised middle-class children of my generation, I grew up with an intimate knowledge of, and even sense of friendship with, a certain kind of England: a dream-England composed of Test Matches at Lord’s presided over by the voice of John Arlott, at which Freddie Trueman bowled unceasingly and without success at Polly Umrigar; of Enid Blyton and Billy Bunter, in which we were even prepared to smile indulgently at portraits such as ‘Hurree Jamset Ram Singh’, ‘the dusky nabob of Bhanipur’. I wanted to come to England. I couldn’t wait. And to be fair, England has done all right by me; but I find it a little difficult to be properly grateful. I can’t escape the view that my relatively easy ride is not the result of the dream-England’s famous sense of tolerance and fair play, but of my social class, my freak fair skin and my ‘English’ English accent. Take away any of these, and the story would have been very different. Because of course the dream-England is no more than a dream.

Sadly, it’s a dream from which too many white Britlons refuse to awake. Recently, on a live radio programme, a professional humorist asked me, in all seriousness, why I objected to being called a wog. He said he had always thought it a rather charming word, a term of endearment. ‘I was at the zoo the other day,’ he revealed, ‘and a zoo keeper told me that the wogs were best with the animals; they stuck their fingers in their ears and wiggled them about and the animals felt at home.’ The ghost of Hurree Jamset Ram Singh walks among us still.

As Richard Wright found long ago in America, black and white descriptions of society are no longer compatible. Fantasy, or the mingling of fantasy and naturalism, is one way of dealing with these problems. It offers a way of echoing in the form of our work the issues faced by all of us: how to build a new, ‘modern’ world out of an old, legend-haunted civilization, an old culture which we have brought into the heart of a newer one. But whatever technical solutions we may find, Indian writers in these islands, like others who have migrated into the north from the south, are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective: because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society. This stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer in place of ‘whole sight’.

There is one last idea that I should like to explore, even though it may, on first hearing, seem to contradict much of what I’ve so far said. It is this: of all the many elephant traps lying ahead of us, the largest and most dangerous-pitfall would be the adoption of a ghetto mentality. To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers, would be, I believe, to go voluntarily into that form of internal exile which in South Africa is called the ‘homeland’. We must guard against creating, for the most virtuous of reasons, British-Indian literary equivalents of Bophuthatswana or the Transkei.

This raises immediately the question of whom one is writing ‘for’. My own, short, answer is that I have never had a reader in mind. I have ideas, people, events, shapes, and I write ‘for’ those things, and hope that the completed work will be of interest to others. But which others? In the case of Midnight’s Children I certainly felt that if its subcontinental readers had rejected the work, I should have thought it a failure, no matter what the reaction in the West. So I would say that I write ‘for’ people who feel part of the things I write ‘about’, but also for everyone else whom I can reach. In this I am of the same opinion as the black American writer Ralph Ellison, who, in his collection of essays Shadow and Act, says that he finds something precious in being black in America at this time; but that he is also reaching for more than that. ‘I was taken very early,’ he writes, ‘with a passion to link together all I loved within the Negro community and all those things I felt in the world which lay beyond.’

Art is a passion of the mind. And the imagination works best when it is most free. Western writers have always felt free to be eclectic in their selection of theme, setting, form; Western visual artists have, in this century, been happily raiding the visual storehouses of Africa, Asia, the Philippines. I am sure that we must grant ourselves an equal freedom.

Let me suggest that Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. We can quite legitimately claim as our ancestors the Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews; the past to which we belong is an English past, the history of immigrant Britain. Swift, Conrad, Marx are as much our literary forebears as Tagore or Ram Mohan Roy. America, a nation of immigrants, has created great literature out of the phenomenon of cultural transplantation, out of examining the ways in which people cope with a new world; it may be that by discovering what we have in common with those who preceded us into this country, we can begin to do the same.

I stress this is only one of many possible strategies. But we are inescapably international writers at a time when the novel has never been a more international form (a writer like Borges speaks of the influence of Robert Louis Stevenson on his work; Heinrich Böll acknowledges the influence of Irish literature; cross-pollination...
is everywhere); and it is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents. My own—selected half consciously, half not—include Gogol, Cervantes, Kafka, Melville, Machado de Assis; a polyglot family tree, against which I measure myself, and to which I would be honoured to belong.

There’s a beautiful image in Saul Bellow’s latest novel, The Dean’s December. The central character, the Dean, Corde, hears a dog barking wildly somewhere. He imagines that the barking is the dog’s protest against the limit of dog experience. ‘For God’s sake,’ the dog is saying, ‘open the universe a little more!’ And because Bellow is, of course, not really talking about dogs, or not only about dogs, I have the feeling that the dog’s rage, and its desire, is also mine, ours, everyone’s. ‘For God’s sake, open the universe a little more!”

1982

**Analysis of “Imaginary Homelands”**

**Memory and “Imaginative Truth”**

This essay continues Rushdie’s search for the nation, but here the search for India becomes more personal—it is Rushdie’s own search for his home and his attempt to reckon what it means for him to write about the Indian experience while living his life outside the geographical bounds of India. Rushdie reflects upon what it means to be an emigrant, on the role of memory in constructing an “imaginary homeland,” and on the value and insight that can be gained when one writes and views life through a lens of displacement and distance from one’s place of origin. Rushdie begins his essay by referencing the well-known quote written by L. P. Hartley: “The past is a foreign country.” Rushdie’s own experience, however, runs counter to Hartley’s statement; as an émigré who lives far from his home country, Rushdie finds, “that it’s [his] present that is foreign, and that the past is home.”

During one of his visits to Bombay (now Mumbai), the city where he spent his childhood, Rushdie is surprised to discover how much—in bits and pieces—he remembers from his younger days and how much information about that time is preserved in archives, such as phonebooks and photographs. Rushdie contrasts his own faulty and partial memory with memory as it is preserved in such photos and phonebooks. Whereas personal memory always seems incomplete and made up of singular perspectives, institutional memory seems eerily complete in its portrayal of definite truths and facts about the past. Though his trip to Bombay is a homecoming for him, Rushdie nonetheless feels like he is virtually a foreigner to India:

*Bombay is a city built by foreigners upon reclaimed land; I, who had been away so long that I almost qualified for the title, was gripped by the conviction that I, too, had a city and a history to reclaim.*

Rushdie is well aware that the distance that separates “exiles or emigrants or expatriates” from their home countries will inescapably alter their perspective on them:

*…our physical alienation from India almost inevitability means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.*

According to Rushdie, the way an emigrant can lay claim to a nation and make it his or her home is by embracing the imperfection of his or her own cracked memory. It is only by reconstructing the past through “broken mirrors” that the Indian writer from outside the country can create his or her own India. Whereas in “The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1987” Rushdie interviews people to discover clues to national identity, here he resorts to his own “fallible” memory. In Rushdie’s estimation, the fragmented view of the Indian writer who writes from outside of India—the cracks in the broken mirror—may in fact prove to be an asset rather than a flaw:

*The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed...It was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities.*

Moreover, the fragmented perspective of a diasporic writer not only speaks to the experiences of fellow émigrés, but also speaks to a more universal human experience, for as Rushdie contends:

*It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is a part of our common humanity...the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form... This may enable him to speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal.*

Furthermore, Rushdie notes that human beings are “not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions,” and thus the perspective of expatriate writers reflects a very human and wholly universal point of view.

**The Role of Literature**

Rushdie likens the task of the writer to an archeologi-
cal exercise where one examines the available remains and fossils to construct a story about what might have been in an ancient time. “Imaginary Homelands” clarifies Rushdie’s postmodernist tendencies, as he claims that meaning is a “shaky thing” and that the way we perceive the world and understand it is far more important and interesting than chancing a singular vision of what the nation or the world should be; he writes: “my India was just that: ‘my’ India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions.”

According to Rushdie, the goal of literature to represent and reflect our reality is not a humble one. Description in literature is itself a political act because it gives life to realities that may have been discredited by powerful governments or corporations or religious groups; according to Rushdie, “redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it.” This is why Rushdie claims that “writers and politicians are natural rivals.” A politician may want us to think that there is only way to be Indian or American or nationalistic. However, writers expose a million different everyday realities and experiences to prove the inherent falsity of such an approach.

**Diaspora**

The word “diaspora” refers to the scattering of a people across geographical areas due to migration. According to Rushdie, the diaspora and diasporic writers play an important role, as their adaptation to other cultures and their global points of reference show that there is no specific way to be Indian, no one Indian identity. The diaspora also disputes the cliché that there is only one home, but often shows the way people can feel at home in different geographical and cultural spaces. The distance an emigrant writer has traveled from the “home country” provides him or her with a new and often critical perspective on what is left behind:

> We are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles.

These “new angles” are made possible by the “fallible” personal memories of the diasporic writer and the archaeological process of reconstruction that results.

While Rushdie contends that emigrant writers have access to valuable perspectives and insights, he cautions against lumping them all together into one category without respect for their diversity:

> England’s Indian writers are by no means all the same type of animal…. Indian writers in England include political exiles, first-generation migrants, affluent expatriates whose residence here is frequently tempo-

This resistance to the oversimplification and “pigeon-holing” aspect of literary labels is a theme Rushdie will take up once more in his essay “Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist.” But while Rushdie opposes painting a vast group of writers with too broad a brush, he does nonetheless acknowledge that the question of identity is unavoidable for British Indian writers, noting that “To be an Indian writer in this [British] society is to face, every day, problems of definition.” However, Rushdie is emphatic in his insistence that “…the largest and most dangerous pitfall would be the adoption of a ghetto mentality. To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong….”

Rushdie also directly addresses the racism and prejudice faced by Indians who migrate to the metropole. He notes that many Indians of his generation felt a kinship and a connection with Britain and British culture. However, much like the India that is imagined by the writers of the Indian diaspora, the England that is imagined by the members of the Commonwealth Nations is likewise an “imaginary homeland”—it is, as Rushdie terms it, “dream-England.” While “dream-England” is a land of polite cricket matches, the real England is a far more complex culture, one in which Indians are generally viewed as outsiders and faced with racism and post-colonial studies scholar Homi Bhabha has used the term “hybridity” to signify the appearance of cultures and practices from the colonizing culture in the identities of the colonized.
Another topic Rushdie addresses is the use of the English language. He challenges the very commonly heard argument that the English language is not an appropriate medium for writing about India. This assumption stems from an understanding of the English language as foreign and alien to Indian realities. While this may have been true at the time British colonialism took root in India, reality has been much altered since. As is evident in Nehru and Gandhi’s cases, it is not so easy to simply separate British culture from Indian culture. Instead, it is important, and indeed ethical, to embrace the complex historical entanglements between the two countries that resulted from colonization.

Here, Rushdie argues in favor of what the literary theorist Homi Bhabha terms “hybridity.” The word “hybridity” usually refers to a cross between two distinct cultures or races. In postcolonial studies, however, it has come to signify the appearance of cultures and practices from the colonizing culture in the identities of the colonized. Rushdie wishes to take seriously India’s linguistic struggle with English because he sees in it a reflection of other social and political struggles. Inasmuch as English was a language available to Indians through the deeply exploitative and unequal colonial experience, using it and shaping it to convey Indian experiences becomes a way to defeat its legacy of oppression. In Rushdie’s own words, “to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free.” As in the case of migration, much is to be gained from the cultural encounter between England and India—it is not always a relationship of antagonism, and it would be a denial of history to claim otherwise. As Rushdie concludes, “It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.”

SELECTED WORK

“‘COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE’ DOES NOT EXIST”
BY SALMAN RUSHDIE

When I was invited to speak at the 1983 English Studies Seminar in Cambridge, the lady from the British Council offered me a few words of reassurance. It’s all right,’ I was told, ‘for the purposes of our seminar, English studies are taken to include Commonwealth literature.’ At all other times, one was forced to conclude, these two would be kept strictly apart, like squabbling children, or sexually incompatible pandas, or, perhaps, like unstable, fissile materials whose union might cause explosions.

A few weeks later I was talking to a literature don—a specialist, I ought to say, in English literature—a friendly and perceptive man. ‘As a Commonwealth writer,’ he suggested, ‘you probably find, don’t you, that there’s a kind of liberty, certain advantages, in occupying, as you do, a position on the periphery?’

And then a British magazine published, in the same issue, interviews with Shiva Naipaul, Buchi Emecheta and myself. In my interview, I admitted that I had begun to find this strange term, ‘Commonwealth literature,’ unhelpful and even a little distasteful; and I was interested to read that in their interviews, both Shiva Naipaul and Buchi Emecheta, in their own ways, said much the same thing. The three interviews appeared, therefore, under the headline: ‘Commonwealth writers ... but don’t call them that!’

By this point, the Commonwealth was becoming unpopular with me.

Isn’t this the very oddest of beasts, I thought—a school of literature whose supposed members deny vehemently that they belong to it. Worse, these denials are simply disregarded! It seems the creature has taken on a life of its own. So when I was invited to a conference about the animal in—of all places—Sweden, I thought I’d better go along to take a closer look at it.

The conference was beautifully organized, packed with erudite and sophisticated persons capable of discussing at length about the new spirit of experiment in English-language writing in the Philippines. Also, I was able to meet writers from all over the world—or, rather, the Commonwealth. It was such a seductive environment that it almost persuaded me that the subject under discussion actually existed, and was not simply a fiction, and a fiction of a unique type, at that, in that it has been created solely by critics and academics, who have then proceeded to believe in it wholeheartedly... but the doubts did, in spite of all temptations to succumb, persist.

Many of the delegates, I found, were willing freely to
admit that the term ‘Commonwealth literature’ was a bad one. South Africa and Pakistan, for instance, are not members of the Commonwealth, but their authors apparently belong to its literature. On the other hand, England, which, as far as I’m aware, has not been expelled from the Commonwealth quite yet, has been excluded from its literary manifestation. For obvious reasons. It would never do to include English literature, the great sacred thing itself, with this bunch of upstarts, huddling together under this new and badly made umbrella.

At the Commonwealth literature conference I talked with and listened to the Australian poet Randolph Stow; the West Indian, Wilson Harris; Ngugi wa Thiong’o from Kenya; Anita Desai from India and the Canadian novelist Aritha van Herk. I became quite sure that our differences were so much more significant than our similarities, that it was impossible to say what ‘Commonwealth Literature’—which had, after all, made possible our assembly—might conceivably mean. Van Herk spoke eloquently about the problem of drawing imaginative maps of the great emptinesses of Canada; Wilson Harris soared into great flights of metaphysical lyricism and high abstraction; Anita Desai spoke in whispers, her novel the novel of sensibility, and I wondered what on earth she could be held to have in common with the committed Marxist Ngugi, an overtly political writer, who expressed his rejection of the English language by reading his own work in Swahili, with a Swedish version read by his translator, leaving the rest of us completely bemused. Now obviously this great diversity would be entirely natural in a general literature conference—but bemused. Now obviously this great diversity would be entirely natural in a general literature conference—but I was trying to work out what that school was supposed to be.

The nearest I could get to a definition sounded distinctly patronizing: ‘Commonwealth literature’, it appears, is that body of writing created, I think, in the English language, by persons who are not themselves white Britons, or Irish, or citizens of the United States of America. I don’t know whether black Americans are citizens of this bizarre Commonwealth or not. Probably not. It is also uncertain whether citizens of Commonwealth countries writing in languages other than English—Hindi, for example—or who switch out of English, like Ngugi, are permitted into the club or asked to keep out.

By now ‘Commonwealth literature’ was sounding very unlikeable indeed. Not only was it a ghetto, but it was actually an exclusive ghetto. And the effect of creating such a ghetto was, is, to change the meaning of the far broader term ‘English literature’—which I’d always taken to mean simply the literature of the English language—into something far narrower, something topographical, nationalistic, possibly even racially segregationist.

It occurred to me, as I surveyed this muddle, that the category is a chimera, and in very precise terms. The word has of course come to mean an unreal, monstrous creature of the imagination; but you will recall that the classical chimera was a monster of a rather special type. It had the head of a lion, the body of a goat and a serpent’s tail. This is to say, it could exist only in dreams, being composed of elements which could not possibly be joined together in the real world.

The dangers of unleashing such a phantom into the groves of literature are, it seems to me, manifold. As I mentioned, there is the effect of creating a ghetto, and that, in turn, does lead to a ghetto mentality amongst some of its occupants. Also, the creation of a false category can and does lead to excessively narrow, and sometimes misleading readings of some of the artists it is held to include; and again, the existence—or putative existence—of the beast distracts attention from what is actually worth looking at, what is actually going on. I thought it might be worth spending a few minutes reflecting further on these dangers.

I’ll begin from an obvious starting place. English is by now the world language. It achieved this status partly as a result of the physical colonization of a quarter of the globe by the British, and it remains ambiguous but central to the affairs of just about all the countries to whom it was given, along with mission schools, trunk roads and the rules of cricket, as a gift of the British colonizers.

But its present-day pre-eminence is not solely—perhaps not even primarily—the result of the British legacy. It is also the effect of the primacy of the United States of America in the affairs of the world. This second impetus towards English could be termed a kind of linguistic neo-colonialism, or just plain pragmatism on the part of many of the world’s governments and educationists, according to your point of view.

As for myself, I don’t think it is always necessary to take up the anti-colonial—or is it post-colonial?—cudgels against English. What seems to me to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it—assisted by the English language’s enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers.

To take the case of India, only because it’s the one with which I’m most familiar. The debate about the appropriateness of English in post-British India has been raging ever since 1947; but today, I find, it is a debate which has meaning only for the older generation. The children of independent India seem not to think of English as being irredeemably tainted by its colonial provenance. They use it as an Indian language, as one of the tools they have to hand.

(I am simplifying, of course, but the point is broadly true.)

There is also an interesting North-South divide in Indian attitudes to English. In the North, in the so-called
‘Hindi belt’, where the capital, Delhi, is located, it is possible to think of Hindi as a future national language; but in South India, which is at present suffering from the attempts of central government to impose this national language on it, the resentment of Hindi is far greater than of English. After spending quite some time in South India, I’ve become convinced that English is an essential language in India, not only because of its technical vocabularies and the international communication which it makes possible, but also simply to permit two Indians to talk to each other in a tongue which neither party hates.

Incidentally, in West Bengal, where there is a State-led move against English; the following graffiti, a sharp dig at the State’s Marxist chief minister, Jyoti Basu, appeared on a wall, in English: it said, ‘My son won’t learn English; your son won’t learn English; but Jyoti Basu will send his son abroad to learn English.’

One of the points I want to make is that what I’ve said indicates, I hope, that Indian society and Indian literature have a complex and developing relationship with the English language. This kind of post-colonial dialectic is propounded as one of the unifying factors in ‘Commonwealth literature’; but it clearly does not exist, or at least is far more peripheral to the problems of literatures in Canada, Australia, even South Africa. Every time you examine the general theories of ‘Commonwealth literature’ they come apart in your hands.

English literature has its Indian branch. By this I mean the literature of the English language. This literature is also Indian literature. There is no incompatibility here. If history creates complexities, let us not try to simplify them.

So: English is an Indian literary language, and by now, thanks to writers like Tagore, Desani, Chaudhuri, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Anita Desai and others, it has quite a pedigree. Now it is certainly true that the English-language literatures of England, Ireland and the USA are older than, for example, the Indian; so it’s possible that ‘Commonwealth literature’ is no more than an unnameable name for the world’s younger English literatures. If that were true or, rather, if that were all, it would be a relatively unimportant misnomer. But it isn’t all. Because the term is not used simply to describe, or even misdescribe, but also to divide. It permits academic institutions, publishers, critics and even readers to dump a large segment of English literature into a box and then more or less ignore it. At best, what is called ‘Commonwealth literature’ is positioned below English literature ‘proper’—or, to come back to my friend the don, it places Eng. Lit. at the centre and the rest of the world at the periphery. How depressing that such a view should persist in the study of literature long after it has been discarded in the study of everything else English.

What is life like inside the ghetto of ‘Commonwealth literature’? Well, every ghetto has its own rules, and this one is no exception.

One of the rules, one of the ideas on which the edifice rests, is that literature is an expression of nationality. What Commonwealth literature finds interesting in Patrick White is his Australianness; in Doris Lessing, her Africanness; in V. S. Naipaul, his West Indianess, although I doubt that anyone would have the nerve to say so to his face. Books are almost always praised for using motifs and symbols out of the author’s own national tradition, or when their form echoes some traditional form, obviously pre-English, and when the influences at work upon the writer can be seen to be wholly internal to the culture from which he ‘springs’. Books which mix traditions, or which seek consciously to break with tradition, are often treated as highly suspect. To give one example. A few years ago the Indian poet, Arun Kolatkar, who works with equal facility in English and Marathi, wrote, in English, an award-winning series of poems called Jejuri, the account of his visit to a Hindu temple town. (Ironically, I should say, it won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize.) The poems are marvellous, contemporary, witty, and in spite of their subject they are the work of a non-religious man. They aroused the wrath of one of the doyens of Commonwealth literary studies in India, Professor C. D. Narasimhaiah, who, while admiring the brilliance of the poems, accused Kolatkar of making his work irrelevant by seeking to defy tradition.

What we are facing here is the bogy of Authenticity. This is something which the Indian art critic Geeta Kapur has explored in connection with modern Indian painting, but it applies equally well to literature. ‘Authenticity’ is the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism. It demands that sources, forms, style, language and symbol all derive from a supposedly homogeneous and unbroken tradition. Or else. What is revealing is that the term, so much in use inside the little world of ‘Commonwealth literature’, and always as a term of praise, would seem ridiculous outside this world. Imagine a novel being eulogized for being ‘authentically English’, or ‘authentically German’. It would seem absurd. Yet such absurdities persist in the ghetto.

In my own case, I have constantly been asked whether I am British, or Indian. The formulation ‘Indian-born British writer’ has been invented to explain me. But, as I said last night, my new book deals with Pakistan. So what now? ‘British-resident Indo-Pakistani writer’? You see the folly of trying to contain writers inside passports.

One of the most absurd aspects of this quest for national authenticity is that—as far as India is concerned, anyway—it is completely fallacious to suppose that there is such a thing as a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw. The only people who seriously believe this are religious extremists. The rest of us understand that the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed
tradition, a mélange of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal and contemporary Coca-Cola American. To say nothing of Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, Christian, Jewish, British, French, Portuguese, Marxist, Maoist, Trotskyist, Vietnamese, capitalist, and of course Hindu elements. Eclecticism, the ability to take from the world what seems fitting and to leave the rest, has always been a hallmark of the Indian tradition, and today it is at the centre of the best work being done both in the visual arts and in literature. Yet eclecticism is not really a nice word in the lexicon of ‘Commonwealth literature’. So the reality of the mixed tradition is replaced by the fantasy of purity.

You will perhaps have noticed that the purpose of this literary ghetto—like that of all ghettos, perhaps—is to confine, to restrain. Its rules are basically conservative. Tradition is all; radical breaches with the past are frowned upon. No wonder so many of the writers claimed by ‘Commonwealth literature’ deny that they have anything to do with it.

I said that the concept of ‘Commonwealth literature’ did disservice to some writers, leading to false readings of their work; in India, I think this is true of the work of Ruth Jhabvala and, to a lesser extent, Anita Desai. You see, looked at from the point of view that literature must be nationally connected and even committed, it becomes simply impossible to understand the cast of mind and vision of a rootless intellect like Jhabvala’s. In Europe, of course, there are enough instances of uprooted, wandering writers and even peoples to make Ruth Jhabvala’s work readily comprehensible; but by the rules of the Commonwealth ghetto, she is beyond the pale. As a result, her reputation in India is much lower than it is in the West. Anita Desai, too, gets into trouble when she states with complete honesty that her work has no Indian models. The novel is a Western form, she says, so the influences on her are Western. Yet her delicate but tough fictions are magnificent studies of Indian life. This confuses the cohorts of the Commonwealth. But then, where ‘Commonwealth literature’ is concerned, confusion is the norm.

I also said that the creation of this phantom category served to obscure what was really going on, and worth talking about. To expand on this, let me say that if we were to forget about ‘Commonwealth literature’, we might see that there is a kind of commonality about much literature, in many languages, emerging from those parts of the world which one could loosely term the less powerful, or the powerless. The magical realism of the Latin Americans influences Indian-language writers in India today. The rich, folk-tale quality of a novel like Sandro of Chegém, by the Muslim Russian Fazil Iskander, finds its parallels in the work—for instance—of the Nigerian, Amos Tutuola, or even Cervantes. It is possible, I think, to begin to theorize common factors between writers from these societies—poor countries, or deprived minorities in powerful countries—and to say that much of what is new in world literature comes from this group. This seems to me to be a ‘real’ theory, bounded by frontiers which are neither political nor linguistic but imaginative. And it is developments of this kind which the chimera of ‘Commonwealth literature’ obscures.

This transnational, cross-lingual process of pollination is not new. The works of Rabindranath Tagore, for example, have long been widely available in Spanish-speaking America, thanks to his close friendship with the Argentinian intellectual Victoria Ocampo. Thus an entire generation, or even two, of South American writers have read Gitanjali, The Home and the World and other works, and some, like Mario Vargas Llosa, say that they found them very exciting and stimulating.

If this ‘Third World literature’ is one development obscured by the ghost of ‘Commonwealth literature’, then ‘Commonwealth literature’s’ emphasis on writing in English distracts attention from much else that is worth our attention. I tried to show how in India the whole issue of language was a subject of deep contention. It is also worth saying that major work is being done in India in many languages other than English; yet outside India there is just about no interest in any of this work. The Indo-Anglians seize all the limelight. Very little is translated; very few of the best writers—Premchand, Anantha Moorthy—or the best novels are known, even by name.

To go on in this vein: it strikes me that, at the moment, the greatest area of friction in Indian literature has nothing to do with English literature, but with the effects of the hegemony of Hindi on the literatures of other Indian languages, particularly other North Indian languages. I recently met the distinguished Gujarati novelist, Suresh Joshi. He told me that he could write in Hindi but felt obliged to write in Gujarati because it was a language under threat. Not from English, or the West: from Hindi. In two or three generations, he said, Gujarati could easily die. And he compared it, interestingly, to the state of the Czech language under the yoke of Russian, as described by Milan Kundera.

This is clearly a matter of central importance for Indian literature. ‘Commonwealth literature’ is not interested in such matters.

It strikes me that my title may not really be accurate. There is clearly such a thing as ‘Commonwealth literature’, because even ghosts can be made to exist if you set up enough faculties, if you write enough books and appoint enough research students. It does not exist in the sense that writers do not write it, but that is of minor importance. So perhaps I should rephrase myself: ‘Commonwealth literature’ should not exist. If it did not, we could appreciate writers for what they are, whether in English or not; we could discuss literature in terms of its real groupings, which may well be national, which may well be linguistic, but which may also be international,
and based on imaginative affinities; and as far as Eng. Lit. itself is concerned, I think that if all English literatures could be studied together, a shape would emerge which would truly reflect the new shape of the language in the world, and we could see that Eng. Lit. has never been in better shape, because the world language now also possesses a world literature, which is proliferating in every conceivable direction.

The English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago. Perhaps ‘Commonwealth literature’ was invented to delay the day when we rough beasts actually slouch into Bethlehem. In which case, it’s time to admit that the centre cannot hold.


**Analysis of “Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist”**

As Rushdie discusses the growing body of literature from ex-colonies in the English Language in “Imaginary Homelands,” he claims that Indo-British writers changed the game of English literature. They called attention to the new life of English in the hands of those who hitherto did not speak or know the language. In his essay “Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist,” Rushdie expresses dissatisfaction with the global reception of this body of work and with it being categorized as “Commonwealth literature.” This grouping marks its members as minors, belonging—in most cases—to erst-while British colonies. At the same times, it collapses the diversity of their experiences, colonial or otherwise. Used to lump together writers in the English language who are not themselves British or from the United States, the category of Commonwealth literature ghettoizes these writers and restricts their growth and creativity. It is a categorization that attempts to reduce a vast body of differences to certain commonalities and key features.

Though his topic is indeed a serious one, Rushdie’s tone at the outset is pointedly humorous as he describes his experience at a seminar where he is informed that “English studies are taken to include Commonwealth literature.” It is clear that this approach is seen as the exception rather than the rule, and Rushdie can’t help but question why such a clear distinction is drawn between “English” literature and “Commonwealth literature”:

…one was forced to conclude that these two [English literature and Commonwealth literature] would be kept strictly apart, like squabbling children, or sexually incompatible pandas, or perhaps, like unstable, fissile materials whose union might cause explosions.

Rushdie further underscores the seeming absurdity of the category of “Commonwealth writers” as he muses:

Isn’t this the very oddest of beasts, I thought—a school of literature whose supposed members deny vehemently that they belong to it. Worse, these denials are simply disregarded!

Rushdie then proceeds to outline his case for why the label of “Commonwealth literature” not only fails to make sense, but also is a damaging and seemingly racist categorization. When Rushdie attends a Commonwealth literature conference, he becomes pointedly aware that “our differences were so much more significant than our similarities.” As Rushdie tries to puzzle out what precisely it means to be a Commonwealth writer, he questions the influence of race and language in determining which writers are awarded status as “English writers” and which are grouped into the category of “Commonwealth writers”:

…the effect of creating such a ghetto was, is, to change the meaning of the far broader term ‘English litera-
Rushdie contends that the classification of “Commonwealth writers” creates a ghetto, and he not only highlights the fact that the bounds of this ghetto are based on false assumptions, but also outlines the reasons why this false categorization is so damaging:

...the effect of creating a ghetto...does lead to a ghettol mentality amongst some of its occupants. Also, the creation of a false category can and does lead to excessively narrow, and sometimes misleading, readings of some of the artists it is held to include...the existence—or putative existence—of the beast distracts attention from what is actually worth looking at....

The category of Commonwealth literature denies also India’s experience with the English language outside of a colonial experience. Rushdie’s dissatisfaction with the term “Commonwealth literature” arises in part from the fact that it does not adequately reflect the reality of English in the world. The relationship of India to English is complex and not always explained by a hatred for India’s erstwhile rulers. Rushdie sees English as a means by which writers of the ex-colonies can redress the balance of power that has traditionally favored the imperialists. As it is remade in the hands of those who it once excluded and subjugated, the English language offers opportunities to change the complexion of the relationship between England and its former colonies:

...those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it...they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers.... The children of independent India seem not to think of English as being irredeemably tainted by its colonial provenance. They use it as an Indian language, as one of the tools they have to hand.

Interestingly, Rushdie also points out that an advantage of English—at least within the realm of the literature of India and the Indian diaspora—is that it actually offers an aspect of neutrality, as he notes that in South India “resentment of Hindi is far greater than of English.” Rushdie claims that English can “permit two Indians to talk to each other in a tongue which neither party hates.”

Moreover, Rushdie considers literature by Indian authors that is written in English to be wholly within the realm of English literature, rather than being simply “Commonwealth literature,” contending that classifications ought not oversimplify what are rather complex realities:

English literature has its Indian branch. By this I mean the literature of the English language. This literature is also Indian literature. There is no incompat-

iblity here. If history creates complexities, let us not try to simplify them.

Rushdie further delineates the negative impact of labels such as “Commonwealth literature” by underlining the fact that such a category reinforces the assumption that literature is a straightforward expression of some authentic nationality, pointing to the “bogy of Authenticity” and highlighting “the folly of trying to contain writers inside passports.” In fact, a “cult of authenticity” has always plagued the Indian English novel. In his article “The Cult of Authenticity,” Indian English writer Vikram Chandra echoes similar disappointments and challenges. He says, “to write about India in English is at best a brave failure, and at worst a betrayal of Indian ‘realities’ because the English language is always assumed to be incapable of conveying the ‘real’ and the ‘authentic’ India.”

Salman Rushdie, in this essay, forces us to abandon this fantasy of pure nationalism and to embrace the mixed-ness that exists in reality:

...the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition.... Eclecticism, the ability to take from the world what seems fitting and to leave the rest, has always been a hallmark of the Indian tradition.

Rushdie does not deny that there are connections, affinities, and commonalities among the works of certain writers, but his point is that these connections are not necessarily determined by language or nationality. And, the creation of false categories on the basis of nationalitiy serves to mask those commonalities that do in fact exist:

...the creation of this phantom category served to obscure what was really going on, and worth talking about...if we were to forget about ‘Commonwealth literature,’ we might see that there is a kind of commonality about much literature emerging from those parts of the world which one could loosely term the less powerful, or the powerless.... This seems to me to be a ‘real’ theory, bounded by frontiers which are neither political nor linguistic but imaginative.

Thus, Rushdie concludes with his central point—that the categorization of writers should be based on “imaginative affinities” rather than being guided by linguistic or national boundaries. Rushdie purports that such a grouping would far more accurately reflect the realities of our modern interconnected world:

...if all English literatures could be studied together, a shape would emerge which would truly reflect the new shape of the language in the world, and we could see that Eng. Lit has never been in better shape, because the world language now also possesses a world literature, which is proliferating in every conceivable direction.

Rushdie closes with a reference to William Butler Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming”:

Perhaps ‘Commonwealth literature’ was invented to...
delay the day when we rough beasts actually slouch into Bethlehem. In which case, it’s time to admit that the centre cannot hold.

Many critics read Yeats’ poem, which he penned in the aftermath of the First World War, as a lament for the end of an era, a requiem for the downfall of Western, or at least European, civilization. While Yeats’ poem is bleakly apocalyptic, it is clear that Rushdie uses these lines here somewhat tongue in cheek—perhaps to address the view of those chauvinistic enough to feel that English literature ought to only include works by white Anglo-Saxon British-born writers. For Rushdie, the end of the era in which English was “the sole possession of the English” marks the beginning of a new age, an era in which the canon of English literature ought to be expansive enough to encompass works by writers from across the cultural and global spectrum.

“BACKGROUND, CASUALLY” BY NISSIM EZEKIEL

Nissim Ezekiel (1924–2004) was born to a Bene Israel family in Bombay (now, Mumbai), India. His parents were both educators. Ezekiel studied in Christian missionary-led high schools. During his undergraduate years, he came under the influence of the radical Communist activist and political theorist, Manabendra Nath Roy. Ezekiel remained an active member of Roy’s Radical Democratic Party, which fought for India’s independence, until 1947. In November 1948, he borrowed money to go to England to study philosophy at Birkbeck College. It was there that he published his first book of poems, *A Time to Change*, in 1952. That same year, Ezekiel left England and returned home to India, working as a deck-scrubber and coal-carrier on an English cargo ship. Upon his return to India, Ezekiel worked as an editor with a number of different publications, including *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and the Indian *P.E.N.* (Poets, Essayists, Novelists). He also taught courses at Bombay University and Leeds University. Ezekiel received the Sahitya Akademi (Indian Academy of Letters) Award in 1983 for his poetry collection *Latter-Day Psalms* (1982).

Ezekiel was one of the most notable writers of Indian English poetry in the early years after Independence. He has been called the “founding father of modern Indian poetry.” His poetic work reckons with post-Independence India in all its uneven development and its class- and caste-inflected complexity, without resorting to a glorified vision of a pre-colonial past. His poems in Indian English, which deployed an Indian English idiom, with quirky grammar and inflections, became very popular. Ezekiel’s tone in these poems was always ironic, but his work showed a way to embrace the English language on local and native terms without pandering to an external criterion of poetic merit.

Ezekiel’s poetry has many characteristic features. Very often, it deals with city life, with Bombay specifically, its high rises and its squalor, its “calm and clamor.” Poems like “The Edinburgh Interlude,” “A Time to Change” and “Urban,” for instance, have a distinctly urban tenor. Through writing that is conversational and situational, Ezekiel explores ordinary, everyday experiences to find clues to identity and belonging. His ironic approach takes nothing too seriously as he looks for a home in multifarious mundane experiences. Vinay Lal, a professor of History and Asian American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, writes about Ezekiel that, “in everything he does, he strives for a certain equipoise, a certain reasonableness and tranquility of mind.” This writing style has earned Ezekiel the title of “The Poet of the Mean.”

Called the “founding father of modern Indian poetry,” the poet Nissim Ezekiel was one of the most notable writers of Indian English poetry in the early years after Independence.

A Bene Israel family in Bombay, c.1901. The Bene Israel (“Sons of Israel”) are a community of Jews who settled in India centuries ago.
**Bene Israel**

The Bene Israel (“Sons of Israel”) are a community of Jews in India, who settled there centuries ago. In the nineteenth century, it was noticed that their traditions resembled those of normative Judaism. The Bene Israel community gained profitable positions under the British colonial authority. However, since then they have had little political clout either in India or in Israel. Vinay Lal has said that it is indeed ironic that one of modern India’s greatest poets should belong to a small community that has become almost negligible in recent years. Ezekiel’s poetic personas are often haunted by political anonymity and a precariousness of identity that may be attributed to the limited political privileges and minority role of the Bene Israel in India as well as Israel.

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**SELECTED WORK**

“BACKGROUND, CASUALLY” BY NISSIM EZEKIEL

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A poet-rascal-clown was born,
The frightened child who would not eat
Or sleep, a boy of meager bone.
He never learned to fly a kite,
His borrowed top refused to spin.
I went to Roman Catholic school,
A mugging Jew among the wolves.
They told me I had killed the Christ,
That year I won the scripture prize.
A Muslim sportsman boxed my ears.
I grew in terror of the strong
But undernourished Hindu lads,
Their prepositions always wrong,
Repelled me by passivity.
One noisy day I used a knife.
At home on Friday nights the prayers
Were said. My morals had declined.
I heard of Yoga and of Zen.
Could I, perhaps, be rabbi saint?
The more I searched, the less I found.
Twenty two: time to go abroad.
First, the decision, then a friend
To pay the fare. Philosophy,
Poverty and Poetry, three
Companions shared my basement room.
The London seasons passed me by.
I lay in bed two years alone,
And then a Woman came to tell
My willing ears I was the Son
Of Man. I knew that I had failed
In everything, a bitter thought.
The wise survive and serve—to play
The fool, to cash in on
The inner and the outer storms.
The Indian landscape sears my eyes.
I have become a part of it
To be observed by foreigners.
They say that I am singular,
Their letters overstate the case.
I have made my commitments now.
This is one: to stay where I am,
As others choose to give themselves
In some remote and backward place.
My backward place is where I am.

**Analysis of “Background, Casually”**

“Background, Casually” is an autobiographical poem that alternates between the poet’s own assessment of himself and society’s assessment of him. The two perspectives challenge and undercut each other. Ezekiel’s work demonstrates his abiding interest in inherent contradictions and ironies as they help him arrive at a more nuanced understanding of reality. The use of irony in this poem, which is often directed inward at the speaker himself, illuminates the gap between appearance and reality. As the title indicates, the poem enacts the casual way in which socially determined identity markers come to define an individual. Like many of Ezekiel’s other poems, such as “Enterprise,” “Background, Casually” is also preoccupied with the question of identity, which is formed and contested in the tussle between personal desires and sociopolitical forces.

The poem opens with a third-person description of the narrator where he is referred to not only as a poet, but also as a rascal and a clown. Any expected self-agrandizement from the poet about his vocation is immediately cut down to size by this description. He is remembered as a weak child who did not know how to fly a kite or spin a top. This is followed by a first-person narrative that goes back to his childhood and narrates his experiences at school. The poem’s speaker describes the prejudice he faces at his Roman Catholic school as a Jewish student. Here, Ezekiel’s own personal experience as a minority in India comes to the fore. Ezekiel refers again to his Jewish heritage when he describes his ancestors as “aliens crushing seed for bread.”

It is ironic that as a Jewish boy, who is taught to reject the idea of a god in human form, the poet-narrator aced his Bible Scripture exam. This episode also points to the kind of pressures and cultural-religious interactions that can occur in a highly cosmopolitan society like that of Bombay (now Mumbai). There is no sense of regret or ill will as the narrator mentions his violent encounters with Muslims and Hindus, where he pulled a knife. These acts of violence (presumably, also the fact that he aced his Scripture exam) lead his parents to worry about his faith and to pray for him: “At home on Friday nights the prayers / Were said. My morals had declined.”

After this, almost as if through shorthand, we are confronted with a deep and touching identity crisis experienced by the narrator, as he is exposed to multiple cultures and religions: “I heard of Yoga and of Zen. Could I, perhaps, be rabbi saint?” Perhaps because he constantly looks outward to social constructs for answers, the poet-narrator’s identity continues to elude him. The antithetical line “The more I searched, the less I found” conveys the pathos of his frustrating search.

The first three stanzas of Ezekiel’s poem show the plight of a minority community in post-Independence India. Unlike Nehru and Gandhi’s vision of all communities living amicably together what we have is a scenario that is increasingly determined by the bounds of religion and culture. Lines like “I prepared for the worst,” and the description of the narrator’s father characterizing Hindus as loud talkers conveys an overwhelming sense of vexation in everyday living. However, as we learn by the end of the poem, despite its divisive communal politics and the everyday aggravations, the narrator accepts Bombay as his home. The narrator feels that a poet cannot grow, cannot have visions of his own, if he fails to establish a relationship with the place he inhabits. Ezekiel, in spite of his Jewish origin, relates himself to India, as represented by Bombay.

Following the autobiographical sequence of Ezekiel’s own life story, the speaker in this poem journeys to England to study and then later returns to India on a cargo ship. Ezekiel’s self-identification as a poet becomes stronger here. While it is no longer tinged with the irony of “rascal” and “clown,” his poetry is still besieged by experiences of poverty as a student. Perhaps the most important lines in the poem are: “How to feel it home, was the point. / Some reading had been done, but what / Had I observed, except my own / Exasperation?” In a sense, this poem details a coming of age story, a quest for identity; the speaker has traveled and studied—presumably in an effort at self-discovery and an attempt to determine his “home”—but feels exasperated when his studies and explorations don’t give him the answers he seeks.
The next stanza elaborates on the narrator’s poetic career and poetic cred:

The later dreams were all of words.
I did not know that words betray
But let the poems come, and lost
That grip on things the worldly prize.
I would not suffer that again.
I look about me now, and try
To formulate a plainer view:
The wise survive and serve—to play
The fool, to cash in on
The inner and the outer storms.

Ezekiel betrays a complex but pragmatic attitude to poetry. For him, the inner and the outer storms are not problems to be solved, and it is not even wise to attempt solving them. Instead, they must be approached in writing, creatively. The wisdom lies in playing the fool and cashing in on these inner and outer storms by making them the subject of one’s poetry.

Ezekiel’s return home after a stint in England is very different from Rushdie’s in “Imaginary Homelands,” as the former is committed to making the land of his birth his home. What is common to both Rushdie and Ezekiel is that they are not uncritical of the India that they see as they wrangle between their personal impressions and sociopolitical institutions. Ezekiel manages a stance that is not shy of scathing criticism, yet asserts the value of home. It is thus that Ezekiel develops a critique of V.S. Naipaul, a Nobel Prize-winning Trinidadian author of Indian origin. In his essay, “Naipaul’s India and Mine” (1965), Ezekiel contends that Naipaul’s book An Area of Darkness (1964) is full of prejudice toward India, as Naipaul seemingly views India as an uncivilized, povertystricken, dark place. Even more damning for a poet like Ezekiel, who seeks to weave together the sociopolitical and the personal, is the fact that Naipaul’s perspective on India is entirely self-absorbed and drawn from a personal sense of discomfort.

For Ezekiel, it is imperative that he feels at home in India because a sense of rootedness and belonging is what holds the clues to his identity: “I have made my commitments now. / This is one. To stay where I am, / As others choose to give themselves / In some remote and backward place. My backward place is where I am.” The speaker’s use of “backward” here can be seen as a reflection of views of India held by others; the speaker’s words evoke a clear fondness for his home, as he affectionately calls it “my backward place.” The poem’s final line implies a dual meaning, for not only is India the physical locale that the poet has chosen as his home, it is also seemingly a place where the speaker can find himself and can establish his true identity—it is “where I am.”
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Lahiri’s work depicts the quotidian lives of Indians or Indian immigrants. Her writing is characterized by a simple prose as it attempts to make meaning of the conflicting experiences of the diaspora. “Home” and “homeland” are abiding concerns in Lahiri’s work, as are questions of identity amid cross-cultural encounters.

Bangladesh

The Republic of Bangladesh was established after a war of independence (also known as the Bangladesh Liberation War or Muktijuddho in Bengali) with West Pakistan in 1971. Pakistan, made up of an East and a West Pakistan (with India standing between them geographically) had come into existence as an Islamic state after the partition of India in 1947. War broke out on March 26, 1971, when the West Pakistani Army launched a military operation called Operation Searchlight against East Pakistani civilians, students, intelligentsia, and armed personnel, who were demanding that either the results of the first democratic elections (1970) won by an East Pakistan Party be accepted or East and West Pakistan be separated. In response to Operation Searchlight, East Pakistani politicians and army officers declared the independence of East Pakistan as Bangladesh. Bengali military, paramilitary, and civilians formed the Liberation Army (Mukti Bahini). Bangladesh’s government in exile was set up in Calcutta, West Bengal in India. India entered the war on December 3, 1971, after West Pakistan launched preemptive air strikes on northern India. Overwhelmed by two war fronts, (West) Pakistan was defeated by India and Bangladesh on December 16, 1971.

Map of India and Pakistan—then comprised of East Pakistan and West Pakistan—prior to the establishment of Bangladesh as an independent nation in 1971.

was nominated for the Man Booker Prize. Much of Lahiri’s work depicts the quotidian lives of Indians or Indian immigrants. Her writing is characterized by a simple prose as it attempts to make meaning of the conflicting experiences of the diaspora. “Home” and “homeland” are abiding concerns in Lahiri’s work, as are questions of identity amid cross-cultural encounters.

Selected Work

“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”

By Jhumpa Lahiri


In the autumn of 1971 a man used to come to our house, bearing confections in his pocket and hopes of ascertaining the life or death of his family. His name was Mr. Pirzada, and he came from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but then a part of Pakistan. That year Pakistan was engaged in civil war. The eastern frontier, where Dacca was located, was fighting for autonomy from the ruling regime in the west. In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched, and shelled by the Pakistani army. Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped. By the end of the summer, three hundred thousand people were said to have died. In Dacca Mr. Pirzada had a three-story home, a lectureship in botany at the university, a wife of twenty years, and seven daughters between the ages of six and sixteen whose names all began with the letter A. “Their mother’s idea,” he explained one day, producing from his wallet a black-and-white picture of seven girls at a picnic, their braids tied with ribbons sitting cross-legged in a row, eating chicken curry off of banana leaves. “How am I to distinguish? Ayesha, Amira, Amina, Aziza, you see the difficulty.”

Each week Mr. Pirzada wrote letters to his wife, and sent comic books to each of his seven daughters, but the
Postal system, along with most everything else in Dacca, had collapsed, and he had not heard word of them in over six months. Mr. Pirzada, meanwhile, was in America for the year, for he had been awarded a grant from the government of Pakistan to study the foliage of New England. In spring and summer he had gathered data in Vermont and Maine, and in autumn he moved to a university north of Boston, where we lived, to write a short book about his discoveries. The grant was a great honor, but when converted into dollars it was not generous. As a result, Mr. Pirzada lived in a room in a graduate dormitory, and did not own a proper stove or a television set. And so he came to our house to eat dinner and watch the evening news.

At first I knew nothing of the reason for his visits. I was ten years old, and was not surprised that my parents, who were from India, and had a number of Indian acquaintances at the university, should ask Mr. Pirzada to share our meals. It was a small campus, with narrow brick walkways and white pillared buildings, located on the fringes of what seemed to be an even smaller town. The supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbors never dropped by without an invitation, and of these things, every so often, my parents complained. In search of compatriots, they used to trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world. It was in this manner that they discovered Mr. Pirzada, and phoned him, and invited him to our home.

I have no memory of his first visit, or of his second or his third, but by the end of September I had grown so accustomed to Mr. Pirzada's presence in our living room that one evening, as I was dropping ice cubes into the water pitcher, I asked my mother to hand me a fourth glass from a cupboard still out of my reach. She was busy at the stove, presiding over a skillet of fried spinach with radishes, and could not hear me because of the drone of the exhaust fan and the fierce scrapes of her spatula. I turned to my father, who was leaning against the refrigerator, eating spiced cashews from a cupped fist.

“What is it, Lilia?”

“A glass for the Indian man.”

“Mr. Pirzada won't be coming today. More importantly, Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian,” my father announced, brushing salt from the cashews out of his trim black beard.

“Not since Partition. Our country was divided. 1947.”

When I said I thought that was the date of India's independence from Britain, my father said, “That too. One moment we were free and then we were sliced up,” he explained, drawing an X with his finger on the counter-top, “like a pie. Hindus here, Muslims there. Dacca no longer belongs to us.” He told me that during Partition Hindus and Muslims had set fire to each other's homes.

For many, the idea of eating in the other's company was still unthinkable.

It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. Nevertheless my father insisted that I understand the difference, and he led me to a map of the world taped to the wall over his desk. He seemed concerned that Mr. Pirzada might take offense if I accidentally referred to him as an Indian, though I could not really imagine Mr. Pirzada being offended by much of anything. “Mr. Pirzada is Bengali, but he is a Muslim,” my father informed me. “Therefore he lives in East Pakistan, not India.” His finger trailed across the Atlantic, through Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and finally to the sprawling orange diamond that my mother once told me resembled a woman wearing a sari with her left arm extended. Various cities had been circled with lines drawn between them to indicate my parents’ travels, and the place of their birth, Calcutta, was signified by a small silver star. I had been there only once and had no memory of the trip. “As you see, Lilia, it is a different country, a different color,” my father said. Pakistan was yellow, not orange. I noticed that there were two distinct parts to it, one much larger than the other, separated by an expanse of Indian territory; it was as if California and Connecticut constituted a nation apart from the U.S.

My father rapped his knuckles on top of my head. “You are, of course, aware of the current situation? Aware of East Pakistan's fight for sovereignty?”

I nodded, unaware of the situation.

We returned to the kitchen, where my mother was draining a pot of boiled rice into a colander. My father opened up the can on the counter and eyed me sharply over the frames of his glasses as he ate some more cashews. “What exactly do they teach you at school? Do you study history? Geography?”

“Lilia has plenty to learn at school,” my mother said. “We live here now, she was born here.” She seemed genuinely proud of the fact, as if it were a reflection of my character. In her estimation, I knew, I was assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity. I would never have to eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from my rooftop, or hide neighbors in water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had. “Imagine having to place her in a decent school. Imagine her having to read during power failures by the light of kerosene lamps. Imagine the pressures, the tutors, the constant exams.” She ran a hand through her hair, bobbed to a suitable length for her part-time
job as a bank teller. “How can you possibly expect her to know about Partition? Put those nuts away.”

“But what does she learn about the world?” My father rattled the cashew can in his hand. “What is she learning?”

We learned American history, of course, and American geography. That year, and every year, it seemed, we began by studying the Revolutionary War. We were taken in school buses on field trips to visit Plymouth Rock, and to walk the Freedom Trail, and to climb to the top of the Bunker Hill Monument. We made dioramas out of colored construction paper depicting George Washington crossing the choppy waters of the Delaware River, and we made puppets of King George wearing white tights and a black bow in his hair. During tests we were given blank maps of the thirteen colonies, and asked to fill in names, dates, capitals. I could do it with my eyes closed.

The next evening Mr. Pirzada arrived, as usual, at six o’clock. Though they were no longer strangers, upon first greeting each other, he and my father maintained the habit of shaking hands.

“Come in, sir. Lilia, Mr. Pirzada’s coat, please.”

He stepped into the foyer, impeccably suited and scarved, with a silk tie knotted at his collar. Each evening he appeared in ensembles of plums, olives, and chocolate browns. He was a compact man, and though his feet were perpetually splayed, and his belly slightly wide, he nevertheless maintained an efficient posture, as if balancing in either hand two suitcases of equal weight. His ears were insulated by tufts of graying hair that seemed to block out the unpleasant traffic of life. He had thickly lashed eyes shaded with a trace of camphor, a mole shaped like a flattened raisin in the very center of his left cheek. On his head he wore a black fez made from the wool of Persian lambs, secured by bobby pins, without which I was never to see him. Though my father always offered to fetch him in our car, Mr. Pirzada preferred to walk from his dormitory to our neighborhood, a distance of about twenty minutes on foot, studying trees and shrubs on his way, and when he entered our house his knuckles were pink with the effects of crisp autumn air.

“Another refugee, I am afraid, on Indian territory.”

“They are estimating nine million at the last count,” my father said.

Mr. Pirzada handed me his coat, for it was my job to hang it on the rack at the bottom of the stairs. It was made of finely checkered gray-and-blue wool, with a striped lining and horn buttons, and carried in its weave the faint smell of limes. There were no recognizable tags inside, only a hand-stitched label with the phrase “Z, Sayeed, Suitors” embroidered on it in cursive with glossy black thread. On certain days a birch or maple leaf was tucked into a pocket. He unlated his shoes and lined them against the baseboard; a golden paste clung to the toes and heels, the result of walking through our damp, unraked lawn. Relieved of his trappings, he grazed my throat with his short, restless fingers, the way a person feels for solidity behind a wall before driving in a nail. Then he followed my father to the living room, where the television was tuned to the local news. As soon as they were seated my mother appeared from the kitchen with a plate of mincemeat kebabs with coriander chutney. Mr. Pirzada popped one into his mouth.

“One can only hope,” he said, reaching for another, “that Dacca’s refugees are as heartily fed. Which reminds me.” He reached into his suit pocket and gave me a small plastic egg filled with cinnamon hearts. “For the lady of the house,” he said with an almost imperceptible splay-footed bow.

“Really, Mr. Pirzada,” my mother protested. “Night after night. You spoil her.”

“I only spoil children who are incapable of spoiling.”

It was an awkward moment for me, one which I awaited in part with dread, in part with delight. I was charmed by the presence of Mr. Pirzada’s rotund elegance, and flattered by the faint theatricality of his attentions, yet unsettled by the superb ease of his gestures, which made me feel, for an instant, like a stranger in my own home. It had become our ritual, and for several weeks, before we grew more comfortable with one another, it was the only time he spoke to me directly. I had no response, offered no comment, betrayed no visible reaction to the steady stream of honey-filled lozenges, the raspberry truffles, the slender rolls of sour pastilles. I could not even thank him, for once, when I did, for an especially spectacular peppermint lollipop wrapped in a spray of purple cellophane, he had demanded, “What is this thank-you? The lady at the bank thanks me, the cashier at the shop thanks me, the librarian thanks me when I return an overdue book, the overseas operator thanks me as she tries to connect me to Dacca and fails. If I am buried in this country I will be thanked, no doubt, at my funeral.”

It was inappropriate, in my opinion, to consume the candy Mr. Pirzada gave me in a casual manner. I coveted each evening’s treasure as I would a jewel, or a coin from a buried kingdom, and I would place it in a small keepsake box made of carved sandalwood beside my bed, in which, long ago in India, my father’s mother used to store the ground areca nuts she ate after her morning bath. It was my only memento of a grandmother I had never known, and until Mr. Pirzada came to our lives I could find nothing to put inside it. Every so often before brushing my teeth and laying out my clothes for school the next day, I opened the lid of the box and ate one of his treats.
That night, like every night, we did not eat at the dining table, because it did not provide an unobstructed view of the television set. Instead we huddled around the coffee table, without conversing, our plates perched on the edges of our knees. From the kitchen my mother brought forth the succession of dishes: lentils with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in a yogurt sauce. I followed with the water glasses, and the plate of lemon wedges, and the chili peppers, purchased on monthly trips to Chinatown and stored by the pound in the freezer, which they liked to snap open and crush into their food.

Before eating Mr. Pirzada always did a curious thing. He took out a plain silver watch without a band, which he kept in his breast pocket, held it briefly to one of his tufted ears, and wound it with three swift flicks of his thumb and forefinger. Unlike the watch on his wrist, the pocket watch was one of those things. When I saw it that night, as he wound it and arranged it on the coffee table, an uneasiness possessed me; life, I realized, was being lived in Dacca first. I imagined Mr. Pirzada’s daughters rising from sleep, tying ribbons in their hair, anticipating breakfast, preparing for school. Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged.

Now that I had learned Mr. Pirzada was not an Indian, I began to study him with extra care, to try to figure out what made him different. I decided that the pocket watch was one of those things. When I saw it that night, as he wound it and arranged it on the coffee table, an uneasiness possessed me; life, I realized, was being lived in Dacca first. I imagined Mr. Pirzada’s daughters rising from sleep, tying ribbons in their hair, anticipating breakfast, preparing for school. Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged.

At six-thirty, which was when the national news began, my father raised the volume and adjusted the antennas. Usually I occupied myself with a book, but that night my father insisted that I pay attention. On the screen I saw tanks rolling through dusty streets, and fallen buildings, and forests of unfamiliar trees into which East Pakistani refugees had fled, seeking safety over the Indian border. I saw boats with fan-shaped sails floating on wide coffee-colored rivers, a barricaded university; newspaper offices burnt to the ground. I turned to look at Mr. Pirzada; the images flashed in miniature across his eyes. As he watched he had an immovable expression on his face, composed but alert, as if someone were giving him directions to an unknown destination.

During the commercial my mother went to the kitchen to get more rice, and my father and Mr. Pirzada deplored the policies of a general named Yahyah Khan. They discussed intrigues I did not know, a catastrophe I could not comprehend. “See, children your age, what they do to survive,” my father said as he served me another piece of fish. But I could no longer eat. I could only steal glances at Mr. Pirzada, sitting beside me in his olive green jacket, calmly creating a well in his rice to make room for a second helping of lentils. He was not my notion of a man burdened by such grave concerns. I wondered if the reason he was always so smartly dressed was in preparation to endure with dignity whatever news assailed him, perhaps even to attend a funeral at a moment’s notice. I wondered, too, what would happen if suddenly his seven daughters were to appear on television, smiling and waving and blowing kisses to Mr. Pirzada from a balcony. I imagined how relieved he would be. But this never happened.

That night when I placed the plastic egg filled with cinnamon hearts in the box beside my bed, I did not feel the ceremonial satisfaction I normally did. I tried not to think about Mr. Pirzada, in his lime-scented overcoat, connected to the unruly, sweltering world we had viewed a few hours ago in our bright, carpeted living room. And yet for several moments that was all I could think about. My stomach tightened as I worried whether his wife and seven daughters were now members of the drifting, clamoring crowd that had flashed at intervals on the screen. In an effort to banish the image I looked around my room, at the yellow canopied bed with matching flounced curtains, at framed class pictures mounted on white and violet papered walls, at the penciled inscriptions by the closet door where my father recorded my height on each of my birthdays. But the more I tried to distract myself, the more I began to convince myself that Mr. Pirzada’s family was in all likelihood dead. Eventually I took a square of white chocolate out of the box, and unwrapped it, and then I did something I had never done before. I put the chocolate in my mouth, letting it soften until the last possible moment, and then as I chewed it slowly, I prayed that Mr. Pirzada’s family was safe and sound. I had never prayed for anything before, had never been taught or told to, but I decided, given the circumstances, that it was something I should do. That night when I went to the bathroom I only pretended to brush my teeth, for I feared that I would somehow rinse the prayer out as well. I wet the brush and rearranged the tube of paste to prevent my parents from asking any questions, and fell asleep with sugar on my tongue.

No one at school talked about the war followed so faithfully in my living room. We continued to study the American Revolution, and learned about the injustices of taxation without representation, and memorized passages from the Declaration of Independence. During recess the boys would divide in two groups, chasing each other wildly around the swings and seesaws, Redcoats against the colonies. In the classroom our teacher, Mrs. Kenyon, pointed frequently to a map that emerged like a movie screen from the top of the chalkboard charting the route of the Mayflower, or showing us the location of the Liberty Bell. Each week two members of the class gave a report on a particular aspect of the Revolution, and so one day I was sent to the school library with my friend.
Dora to learn about the surrender at Yorktown. Mrs. Kenyon handed us a slip of paper with the names of three books to look up in the card catalogue. We found them right away, and sat down at a low round table to read and take notes. But I could not concentrate. I returned to the blond-wood shelves, to a section I had noticed labeled “Asia.” I saw books about China, India, Indonesia, Korea. Eventually I found a book titled *Pakistan: A Land and Its People*. I sat on a footstool and opened the book. The laminated jacket crackled in my grip. I began turning the pages, filled with photos of rivers and rice fields and men in military uniforms. There was a chapter about Dacca, and I began to read about its rainfall, and its jute production. I was studying a population chart when Dora appeared in the aisle.

“What are you doing back here? Mrs. Kenyon’s in the library. She came to check up on us.”

I slammed the book shut, too loudly. Mrs. Kenyon emerged, the aroma of her perfume filling up the tiny aisle, and lifted the book by the tip of its spine as if it were a hair clinging to my sweater. She glanced at the cover, then at me.

“Is this book a part of your report, Lilia?”

“No, Mrs. Kenyon.”

“Then I see no reason to consult it,” she said, replacing it in the slim gap on the shelf. “Do you?”

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As weeks passed it grew more and more rare to see any footage from Dacca on the news. The report came after the first set of commercials, sometimes the second. The press had been censored, removed, restricted, rerouted. Some days, only a death toll was announced, prefaced by a reiteration of the general situation. More poets were executed, more villages set ablaze. In spite of it all, night after night, my parents and Mr. Pirzada enjoyed long, leisurely meals. After the television was shut off, and the dishes washed and dried, they joked, and told stories, and dipped biscuits in their tea. When they tired of discussing political matters they discussed, instead, the progress of Mr. Pirzada’s book about the deciduous trees of New England, and my father’s nomination for tenure, and the peculiar eating habits of my mother’s American coworkers at the bank. Eventually I was sent upstairs to do my homework, but through the carpet I heard them as they drank more tea, and listened to cassettes of Kishore Kumar, and played Scrabble on the coffee table, laughing and arguing long into the night about the spellings of English words. I wanted to join them, wanted, above all, to converse Mr. Pirzada somehow. But apart from eating a piece of candy for the sake of his family and praying for their safety, there was nothing I could do. They played Scrabble until the eleven o’clock news, and then, sometime around midnight, Mr. Pirzada walked back to his dormitory. For this reason I never saw him leave, but each night as I drifted off to sleep I would hear them, anticipating the birth of a nation on the other side of the world.

One day in October Mr. Pirzada asked upon arrival, “What are these large orange vegetables on people’s doorsteps? A type of squash?”

“Pumpkins,” my mother replied. “Lilia, remind me to pick one up at the supermarket.”

“And the purpose. It indicates what?”

“You make a jack-o’-lantern,” I said, grinning ferociously. Like this. To scare people away.

“I see,” Mr. Pirzada said, grinning back. “Very useful.”

The next day my mother bought a ten-pound pumpkin, fat and round, and placed it on the dining table. Before supper, while my father and Mr. Pirzada were watching the local news, she told me to decorate it with markers, but I wanted to carve it properly like others I had noticed in the neighborhood.

“Yes, let’s carve it,” Mr. Pirzada agreed, and rose from the sofa. Hang the news tonight.” Asking no questions, he walked into the kitchen, opened a drawer, and returned, bearing a long serrated knife. He glanced at me for approval. “Shall I?”

I nodded. For the first time we all gathered around the dining table, my mother, my father, Mr. Pirzada, and I. While the television aired unattended we covered the tabletop with newspapers. Mr. Pirzada draped his jacket over the chair behind him, removed a pair of opal cuff links, and rolled up the starched sleeves of his shirt.

“First go around the top, like this,” I instructed, demonstrating with my index finger.

He made an initial incision and drew the knife around. When he had come full circle he lifted the cap by the stem; it loosened effortlessly, and Mr. Pirzada leaned over the pumpkin for a moment to inspect and inhale its contents. My mother gave him a long metal spoon with which he gutted the interior until the last bits of string and seeds were gone. My father, meanwhile, separated the seeds from the pulp and set them out to dry on a cookie sheet, so that we could roast them later on. I drew two triangles against the ridged surface for the eyes, which Mr. Pirzada dutifully carved, and crescents for eyebrows, and another triangle for the nose. The mouth was all that remained, and the teeth posed a challenge. I hesitated.

“Smile or frown?” I asked.

“You choose,” Mr. Pirzada said.

As a compromise I drew a kind of grimace, straight across, neither mournful nor friendly. Mr. Pirzada began carving without the least bit of intimidation, as if he...
had been carving jack-o’-lanterns his whole life. He had nearly finished when the national news began. The reporter mentioned Dacca, and we all turned to listen. An Indian official announced that unless the world helped to relieve the burden of East Pakistani refugees, India would have to go to war against Pakistan. The reporter’s face dripped with sweat as he relayed the information. He did not wear a tie or a jacket, dressed instead as if he himself were about to take part in the battle. He shielded his scorched face as he hollered things to the cameraman.

The knife slipped from Mr. Pirzada’s hand and made a gash dipping toward the base of the pumpkin.

“Please forgive me.” He raised a hand to one side of his face, as if someone had slapped him there. “I am—it is terrible. I will buy another. We will try again.”

“No at all, not at all,” my father said. He took the knife from Mr. Pirzada, and carved around the gash, evening it out, dispensing altogether with the teeth I had drawn. What resulted was a disproportionately large hole the size of a lemon, so that our jack-o’-lantern wore an expression of placid astonishment, the eyebrows no longer fierce, floating in frozen surprise above a vacant, geometric gaze.

For Halloween I was a witch. Dora, my trick-or-treating partner, was a witch too. We wore black capes fashioned from dyed pillowcases and conical hats with wide cardboard brims. We shaded our faces green with a fashion from dyed pillowcases and conical hats with geometric gaze.

When Mr. Pirzada arrived that evening he presented me with a box of chocolate-covered mints.

“In here,” I told him, and opened up the burlap sack.

“Trick or treat!”

“I understand that you don’t really need my contribution this evening,” he said, depositing the box. He gazed at my green face, and the hat secured by a string under my chin. Gingerly he lifted the hem of the cape, under which I was wearing a sweater and a zipped fleece jacket. “Will you be warm enough?”

I nodded, causing the hat to tip to one side.

He set it right. “Perhaps it is best to stand still.”

The bottom of our staircase was lined with baskets of miniature candy, and when Mr. Pirzada removed his shoes he did not place them there as he normally did, but inside the closet instead. He began to unbutton his coat, and I waited to take it from him, but Dora called me from the bathroom to say that she needed my help drawing a mole on her chin. When we were finally ready my mother took a picture of us in front of the fireplace, and then I opened the front door to leave. Mr. Pirzada and my father, who had not gone into the living room yet, hovered in the foyer. Outside it was already dark. The air smelled of wet leaves, and our carved jack-o’-lantern flickered impressively against the shrubbery by the door.

In the distance came the sounds of scampering feet, and the howls of the older boys who wore no costume at all except for a rubber mask, and the rustling apparel of the youngest children, some so young that they were carried from door to door in the arms of their parents.

“Don’t go into any of the houses you don’t know,” my father warned.

Mr. Pirzada knit his brows together. “Is there any danger?”

“No, no,” my mother assured him. “All the children will be out. It’s a tradition.”

Perhaps I should accompany them?” Mr. Pirzada suggested. He looked suddenly tired and small, standing there in his splayed, stockinged feet, and his eyes contained a panic I had never seen before. In spite of the cold I began to sweat inside my pillowcase.

“Really, Mr. Pirzada,” my mother said, “Lilia will be perfectly safe with her friend.”

“But if it rains? If they lose their way?”

“Don’t worry,” I said. It was the first time I had uttered those words to Mr. Pirzada, two simple words I had tried but failed to tell him for weeks, had said only in my prayers. It shamed me now that I had said them for my own sake.

He placed one of his stocky fingers on my cheek, then pressed it to the back of his own hand, leaving a faint green smear. “If the lady insists,” he conceded, and offered a small bow.

We left, stumbling slightly in our black pointy thrift-store shoes, and when we turned at the end of the driveway to wave good-bye, Mr. Pirzada was standing in the frame of the doorway, a short figure between my parents, waving back.

“Why did that man want to come with us?” Dora asked.

“His daughters are missing.” As soon as I said it, I wished I had not. I felt that my saying it made it true, that Mr. Pirzada’s daughters really were missing, and that he would never see them again.

“You mean they were kidnapped?” Dora continued. “From a park or something?”

“I didn’t mean they were missing, I meant, he misses them. They live in a different country, and he hasn’t seen them in a while, that’s all.”

We went from house to house, walking along path-
ways and pressing doorbells. Some people had switched off all their lights for effect, or strung rubber bats in their windows. At the McIntyres’ a coffin was placed in front of the door, and Mr. McIntyre rose from it in silence, his face covered with chalk, and deposited a fistful of candy corns into our sacks. Several people told me that they had never seen an Indian witch before. Others performed the transaction without comment. As we paved our way with the parallel beams of our flashlights we saw eggs cracked in the middle of the road, and cars covered with shaving cream, and toilet paper garlanding the branches of trees. By the time we reached Dora’s house our hands were chapped from carrying our bulging burlap bags, and our feet were sore and swollen. Her mother gave us bandages for our blisters and served us warm cider and caramel popcorn. She reminded me to call my parents to tell them I had arrived safely, and when I did I could hear the television in the background. My mother did not seem particularly relieved to hear from me. When I replaced the phone on the receiver it occurred to me that the television wasn’t on at Dora’s house at all. Her father was lying on the couch, reading a magazine, with a glass of wine on the coffee table, and there was saxophone music playing on the stereo.

After Dora and I had sorted through our plunder, and counted and sampled and traded until we were satisfied, her mother drove me back to my house. I thanked her for the ride, and she waited in the driveway until I made it to the door. In the glare of her headlights I saw that our pumpkin had been shattered, its thick shell strewn in chunks across the grass. I felt the sting of tears in my eyes, and a sudden pain in my throat, as if it had been scuffed with the sharp tiny pebbles that crushed with each step under my aching feet. I opened the door: expecting three of them to be standing in the foyer, waiting to receive me, and to grieve for our ruined pumpkin, but there was no one in the living room. Mr. Pirzada, my father, and mother were sitting side by side on the sofa. The television was turned off, and Mr. Pirzada had his head in his hands.

What they heard that evening, and for many evenings after that, was that India and Pakistan were drawing closer and closer to war. Troops from both sides lined the border, and Dacca was insisting on nothing short of independence. The war was to be waged on East Pakistani soil. The United States was siding with West Pakistan, the Soviet Union with India and what was soon to be Bangladesh. War was declared officially on December 4, and twelve days later, the Pakistani army, weakened by having to fight three thousand miles from their source of supplies, surrendered in Dacca. All of these facts I know only now, for they are available to me in any history book, in any library. But then it remained, for the most part, a remote mystery with haphazard clues. What I remember during those twelve days of the war was that my father no longer asked me to watch the news with them, and that Mr. Pirzada stopped bringing me candy, and that my mother refused to serve anything other than boiled eggs with rice for dinner. I remember some nights helping my mother spread a sheet and blankets on the couch so that Mr. Pirzada could sleep there, and high-pitched voices hollering in the middle of the night when my parents called our relatives in Calcutta to learn more details about the situation. Most of all I remember the three of them operating during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear.

In January, Mr. Pirzada flew back to his three-story home in Dacca, to discover what was left of it. We did not see much of him in those final weeks of the year; he was busy finishing his manuscript, and we went to Philadelphia to spend Christmas with friends of my parents. Just as I have no memory of his first visit, I have no memory of his last. My father drove him to the airport one afternoon while I was at school. For a long time we did not hear from him. Our evenings went on as usual, with dinners in front of the news. The only difference was that Mr. Pirzada and his extra watch were not there to accompany us. According to reports Dacca was repairing itself slowly, with a newly formed parliamentary government. The new leader, Sheikh Mujib Rahman, recently released from prison, asked countries for building materials to replace more than one million houses that had been destroyed in the war. Countless refugees returned from India, greeted, we learned, by unemployment and the threat of famine. Every now and then I studied the map above my father’s desk and pictured Mr. Pirzada on that small patch of yellow, perspiring heavily, I imagined, in one of his suits, searching for his family. Of course, the map was outdated by then.

Finally, several months later, we received a card from Mr. Pirzada commemorating the Muslim New Year, along with a short letter. He was reunited, he wrote, with his wife and children. All were well, having survived the events of the past year at an estate belonging to his wife’s grandparents in the mountains of Shillong. His seven daughters were a bit taller, he wrote, but otherwise they were the same, and he still could not keep their names in order. At the end of the letter he thanked us for our hospitality, adding that although he now understood the meaning of the words “thank you” they still were not adequate to express his gratitude. To celebrate the good news my mother prepared a special dinner that evening, and when we sat down to eat at the coffee table we toasted our water glasses, but I did not feel like celebrating. Though I had not seen him for months, it was only then that I felt Mr. Pirzada’s absence. It was only then, raising my water glass in his name, that I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months. He had no reason to return to us, and my par-
Summary of “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”

While “Background, Casually” is about finding one’s home in one’s land of birth, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” is a story of finding a home in a foreign land. Both deal with the experience of being minorities. In Lahiri’s short story, the subject is the experience of Indian immigrants to the United States. The story is set in 1971, at the time of the Bangladesh Liberation War, but it takes places near a small university “north of Boston.” It is narrated from the perspective of Lilia, who is the daughter of immigrant parents and is herself born in the United States. The narration is layered because it is from the perspective of the now grown up Lilia reflecting back upon the experiences of her childhood self, who is benefited by greater knowledge and a critical hindsight.

At the time of the events in the story, Lilia’s father works at the university, and her mother is a teller at a bank. Mr. Pirzada is a research scholar from Dacca (now, Dhaka) whom Lilia’s parents befriended, having found him while looking for Indian names in the university directory. As Lilia describes it:

The supermarket did not carry mustard oil, the doctors did not make house calls, neighbors did not drop by without an invitation, and of these things, every so often, my parents complained. In search of compatriots, they trailed their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of their world. It was in this manner that they discovered Mr. Pirzada, and phoned him, and invited him to our home.

As first-generation immigrants from India, Lilia’s parents miss many things about their home in West Bengal in India, and reaching out to people from the same native place is their way of fostering a home-like atmosphere while living abroad.

Though he was a professor of botany in Dacca, Mr. Pirzada lives on a small salary in a graduate student dormitory in the United States and does not own either a TV set or a stove. Thus, he visits Lilia’s family often to share dinners and to watch the evening news from Pakistan and Bangladesh. Back home in Dacca, he has a wife and seven daughters. However, due to the increasing violence and conflict in East Pakistan, he has little contact with them.

At first, Lilia does not particularly notice Mr. Pirzada’s entry into her home and her life. In her own words:

I have no memory of his first visit, or his second, or his third, but by the end of September I had grown so accustomed to Mr. Pirzada’s presence in our living room that one evening as I was dropping ice cubes into the water pitcher, I asked my mother to hand me a fourth glass….

Unlike Mr. Pirzada and her parents, who share tastes in meals and music and laugh at the same things, Lilia and Mr. Pirzada do not have a special relationship. Their only awkward conversation each evening occurs when he presents her with candy. She imagines him, unremarkably, as one of her parents’ Indian friends.

Lilia’s curiosity about him grows when she learns that Mr. Pirzada is from Pakistan. Her father takes her to a map of the world to show her the country: separated by India and at war at the time. Lilia observes of Pakistan that it is:

…a different country, a different color… Pakistan was yellow, not orange. I noticed that there were two distinct parts to it, one much larger than the other, separated by an expanse of Indian territory; it was as if California and Connecticut constituted a nation apart from the United States.

Armed with the knowledge of Mr. Pirzada’s national identity, Lilia begins to look for clues to his difference in his personality and personal effects:

Now that I had learned that Mr. Pirzada was not an Indian, I began to study him with extra care, to try to figure out what made him different. I decided that the pocket watch was one of those things. When I saw it that night, as he wound it and arranged it on the coffee table… life, I realized, was being lived in Dacca first… Our meals, our actions were only a lagging shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged.

After watching the news one day about the number of refugees and the damage caused by the war, Lilia starts praying for Mr. Pirzada’s family in her own childlike way that involves, very ritualistically, eating a piece of candy that Mr. Pirzada brings. Lilia feels deeply for Mr. Pirzada once she realizes the enormity of the crisis in East Pakistan and the possibility that he may never see his family again. However, she finds herself unable to say a comforting word to him, and this frustrated communication manifests itself in her eating of the candy she has gifted her and in her narrating the story so many years later.

As the war gains momentum, the elaborate cooking and games surrounding Mr. Pirzada’s visits disappear. Lilia’s mother prepares simple meals, and Lilia’s parents and Mr. Pirzada do not spend time listening to music or playing scrabble. Mr. Pirzada begins to sleep over at their house as they try to connect telephonically to East Pakistan late into the wee hours of the mornings.
Lilia notes in her narration that the precise memory of Mr. Pirzada’s departure from her life is as vague as that of his arrival. She remembers her parents putting Mr. Pirzada on a flight back home, to what is now Bangladesh, but little else. The story ends with a holiday card from Mr. Pirzada from Bangladesh thanking Lilia’s family for their help and hospitality. Mr. Pirzada writes that he is reunited with his family. Her parents toast with glasses of water to celebrate the news, and Lilia finally throws out her candy and stops praying for Mr. Pirzada and his family.

Analysis of “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”

The Immigrant Experience

Like many of the other stories in Interpreter of Maladies and like her novel The Namesake, Lahiri’s “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” deals with the experiences of the Bengali Indian diaspora in the United States. The story was first published in The Louisville Review in 1999, and it touches on many of the anxieties of Lilia’s parents as first-generation immigrants. Lilia’s mother and father seem to experience their diasporic life differently. Her mother seems more amenable to assimilation, with her hair bobbed for the teller’s bank job and her eagerness for the tradition of Halloween. She is very proud of the fact that Lilia was born in the United States as if being born in the United States were a reflection of [her] character.” Lilia reflects on her mother’s pride in the following lines:

In her estimation, I was assured a safe life, an easy life, a fine education, every opportunity. I would never have to eat rationed foods, or obey curfews, or watch riots from my rooftops, or hide neighbors in my water tanks to prevent them from being shot, as she and my father had.

Lilia’s father, on the other hand, expresses his concern over the erasure of their personal histories from the American history that Lilia is being taught at school.

The character of Mr. Pirzada enacts most poignantly the loneliness and anguish of being away from home. He has absolutely no contact with his wife or daughters, yet he writes and religiously sends comic books as gifts. He watches the news for information about the lives of his family, and he seeks his own children in Lilia. On the face of it, his experience contrasts sharply with that of Lilia and her parents, neither of whom are separated from their family in the same way. However, by the end of the story, Lilia who is born and brought up in the United States and who lives with her family, confesses to feeling the pain of an immigrant’s loneliness as she misses Mr. Pirzada. In this way, Lahiri redefines the contours of the diasporic experience—which traditionally results from travels away from the homeland—by situating it right within the confines of Lilia’s home.

Food

Lahiri uses food, cooking, and eating habits as an emotional vocabulary to show affinity or difference between characters in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” as well as in much of her writing. The title of the short story under discussion centralizes the experiences of Lilia and her family sharing dinners with Mr. Pirzada. It is their taste for the same kind of food, besides the language they speak, that gives Lilia the impression that Mr. Pirzada is Indian. For the elders in the story, the food they eat together is a reminder of the lives they have left behind—even if those lives have been placed in disparate national categories after the Partition of India in 1947. The food that they collectively enjoy establishes a bond of affinity between them as “they [eat] pickled mangoes with their meals, [eat] rice every night for supper with their hands…[chew] fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, [drink] no alcohol, and for dessert [dip] austere biscuits into successive cups of tea.” The shift in the menu to simple meals, toward the second half of the story, also indicates the ways food can be a marker of remorse as much as it may be an index for celebration.

The candy that Mr. Pirzada brings for Lilia is important in establishing his love and paternal instinct for her, and it encourages Lilia’s growing fondness for him. As she recalls, “it had become our ritual, and for several weeks before we grew more comfortable with one another, it was the only time he spoke to me directly.” It is also Mr. Pirzada’s way of recognizing that Lilia is a responsible child as he tells her parents, “I only spoil children who are incapable of spoiling.” Lilia, in turn, treasures the candy given to her by Mr. Pirzada like “a jewel, or a coin from a buried kingdom.” She stores it in a small keepsake box made of carved sandalwood that belonged to her grandmother. Finally, Lilia’s prayer ritual involving the candy brings her close to Mr. Pirzada and his family in a way that she is never able to be in her real life:

I wanted to console Mr. Pirzada somehow. But apart from eating a piece of candy for the sake of his family, and praying for their safety, there was nothing I could do.

Halloween

The candy that Lilia shares with Dora on Halloween serves to mark her as an American. Lilia’s family adopts the tradition of Halloween by carving out a pumpkin and by sending her trick-or-treating. Halloween is the one important occasion that brings Lilia closer to Mr. Pirzada as they carve the pumpkin. It is perhaps a sign of their failed relationship, where Lilia is never able to express her sympathy for him, that the pumpkin is later discovered to be smashed, and that Mr. Pirzada notes that Lilia does not need his contribution of candy that day. Mr. Pirzada’s concern for Lilia’s safety as she goes trick-or-treating with her friend Dora reflects and is a
proxy for his concern for the well-being of his daughters, which he cannot express in any tangible way since he has no contact with them. As she sorts through her candy at Dora's house, Lilia registers perhaps the most definitive marker of her family's foreignness as she realizes that the news which keeps her parents and Mr. Pirzada awake at night is not even played at Dora's house. The night of Halloween marks the final decisive shift in the rhythm of Mr. Pirzada's visits in Lilia's memory.

MEMORY AND HISTORY

“When Mr. Pirzada Comes to Dine” teems with instances of the disjunction between personal memory and institutional public history. The characters are always looking for reflections of themselves and of their lives in TV news, in history books in the library, and in history lessons at school. In this light, it is crucial to notice the difference between the kind of “document” about the Bangladesh Liberation War that Lilia prepares in narrating the story of “When Mr. Pirzada Comes to Dine” and the kinds that she herself encounters growing up and watching the news and reading the history books in the United States.

POSTNATIONALISM

As a concept, “postnationalism,” describes the process by which nations and national identities become less relevant in the face of globalization and processes of migration. The story highlights the modern-day experience of immigrants who make their homes in lands far apart from their homelands. “When Mr. Pirzada Comes to Dine” points to the limits of national identity. The story underscores how cultural and linguistic commonalities have been superficially obscured by political realities. The reader is made plainly aware of how much Mr. Pirzada has in common with Lilia’s parents, but yet their once shared homeland has, since 1947, been partitioned into two countries, and they identify with different religions. The instance where Lilia’s father turns to the map to explain the difference between himself and Mr. Pirzada is an especially moving example of this. Food also plays an important role here because it defies the institutional history of religious and cultural strife that explains the Partition of India into the two separate nations of India and Pakistan and also the partition of Pakistan with the formation of Bangladesh. The commonality of their palates and tastes and the way in which Lilia’s parents and Mr. Pirzada “operate as one body” seem to contradict the religious and linguistic differences that motivated the Partition of India and later that of Pakistan.

Lilia closes the story with a comment on the limits of strategies and devices that are used to bring the imagined community of a nation to life. After her family has heard from Mr. Pirzada, Lilia writes:

Every now and then I studied the map above my father’s desk and pictured Mr. Pirzada on that small patch of yellow, perspiring heavily, I imagined, in one of his suits, searching for his family. Of course, the map was outdated by then.

A map is used to give a shape to the idea of the nation. A map makes a nation identifiable in a way that is hard to do at an individual level, as we see in Lilia’s childlike attempts to discern what made Mr. Pirzada a citizen of a different country from her parents. The fact that in this case the map itself becomes outdated and loses its geographical points of reference serves to underscore the notion that politics and nationalism are not the sole markers of an individual’s identity—our identities are often fluid entities, reflecting the intersections of our past histories as well as the interconnectedness of our modern world.
Notes


4. Ibid.


12. Lal, 159.


