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MEG 304: Indian Writing in English



CENTRE FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING
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MEG 304: Indian Writing in English

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BLOCK III

**MODULE V: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS GENRE
IN INDIAN ENGLISH WRITING**

**UNIT 13: NIRAD CHAUDHURI, *AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF AN UNKNOWN INDIAN* (SELECTIONS)
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU, *AUTOBIOGRAPHY
(SELECTIONS)***

**UNIT 14: FEATURES OF WESTERN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
AND APPROPRIATION OF WESTERN
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**MODULE VI: MAHESH DATTANI: *ON A
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INTRODUCTION: BLOCK III

MEG-304: Indian Writing in English is the first and compulsory course which aims to introduce learners to the history and context of Indian Writing in English (IWE). In addition to that the course seeks to acquaint the learner with some landmark authors and texts of Indian Writing in English. It is hoped that the course will help the learner acquire an appreciation of the cultural complexity of IWE and a sense of how IWE is one of the contemporary literatures of India.

To make the course systematised the contents have been divided into three Blocks. Block I, as you have noticed, deals with the history and context of Indian English writing along with few prominent poets of Indian English Writing.

Block II deals with select early and later novelists and their works.

Block III will be discussing the genre of writing Autobiography in India in the model of western autobiography. Apart from that this block incorporates one of the recent dramatists writing in English, Mahesh Dattani. Inclusion of all genre of literature along with a compact discussion on the history of English writing in India makes this course self sufficient course on Indian writing in English.

Block III has two Modules. **Module V: Autobiography as genre in Indian English writing** is divided into two units. *Unit 13: Features of western autobiography in Brief* presents an elaborate discussion on autobiography along with its origins. The elements of autobiography along with the defining characteristics of autobiographical tradition in the West are also analyzed so that learners can understand the development of Western autobiography and how those have been amply used by our native writers to write their own stories.

Unit 14: Appropriation of western autobiography by Indian English writers. In the previous unit we saw how the beginnings of the genre of autobiography followed generally in the tradition of its Western counterparts. Gradually, like the Indian English novel, the autobiography also started developing

its uniqueness keeping in tandem with the Indian milieu. The appropriation of western style in Indian authors can be understood by reading Indian authors. In this unit we have selected Nirad Chaudhuri's *An Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (selections) and Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography* (selections) for reading.

Module VI: Mahesh Dattani: *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* will discuss about one of the most popular faces of contemporary Indian English drama, a full-time theatre personality, actor, director, and playwright in English. His plays constantly explore the issues of marginalisation and identity crisis seen in the contemporary society. **Unit 15: *Socio-psychological identity crisis in Dattani*** will discuss one of the most important plays of Dattani *A Muggy Night in Mumbai* where uncertainties and anxieties of minorities namely, gays and lesbians in a society dominated by heterosexist norms are foregrounded.

Though best attempt has been made to give a detail analysis of the prescribed texts in the Blocks, it is always suggested to the learners to go through the texts for extensive understanding of the issues discussed in this self learning material.

MODULE V: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A GENRE IN INDIAN ENGLISH WRITING

UNIT 13: FEATURES OF WESTERN AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN BRIEF

UNIT STRUCTURE

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13.5 Summing Up

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13.0 INTRODUCTION

The desire to express oneself and to form an identity is inherent to human nature. The process of self-expression, the revealing of the individual to the society at large involves articulation of the self into a narrative which constitutes a chronological history of the individual's life. This individual historical portrayal can be in varied forms like memoirs, letters, diaries, journals, personal essays etc. But at the same time, the individual portrayal is not an act in isolation since it involves the society in which the individual resides and takes part in the daily affairs. Therefore, a personal narrative is also a reflection of the individual in society and is thus a representation of the society too. In this unit you will learn about the definition of autobiography along with its origins. The elements of autobiography along with the defining characteristics of autobiographical tradition in the West will also be analysed so that you can understand the development of Western autobiography.

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- define autobiography and understand the problematics of the definition
- trace the history of the development of autobiography in the west
- understand the features of autobiography

13.2 DEFINING AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A simplistic definition of autobiography is that it is a record of various events of a person's life which he/she deems to be important and is written by the person himself/herself. It is believed that William Taylor in 1797 first used the word "autobiography" disapprovingly in the periodical *The Monthly Review* where he referred to it as a hybrid word and was censorious of it as being "pedantic". Robert Southey is generally attributed with the usage of the term 'autobiography' in its present sense in 1809 in the *Quarterly Review*. In Greek, "autos" means self, "bios" is life, and "graphe" means writing. Seen from this perspective, autobiography is the writing of one's life by the self. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines autobiography as "the story of a person's life, written by that person". But such simplistic definitions by-themselves cannot encompass within them the complexity of human lives and the act of writing also. The problematics of definition is conveyed by Georg Misch in *The History of Autobiography in Antiquity* (2002) when he says that autobiography is dissimilar to other forms of literary writings since it involves a form whose margins are not well-constructed and is a less easily defined. It draws its concept from life itself and is therefore moulded by the specific historical period which provides scope for the individual's revelation and portrayal. A more comprehensive definition of autobiography has been provided by French theorist Philippe Lejeune who says in *On Autobiography* (1989) that it is "the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence when he puts the principal accent upon his life, especially upon the story of his own personality" (qtd. in Smith and Watson 1). James Olney in his definition of autobiography in "Autobiography and the Cultural Movement" breaks the word into its etymology of 'autos', 'bios' and 'graphe' and emphasises that 'graphe' is the most

important factor in the definition (6). John Sturrock in *The Language of Autobiography* (1994) again says that it is the writing which allows the self to reveal oneself “where he poses to be the protagonist to allow the emergence of the contour of a life though the final product is not life, but an artful representation of life” (25). Northrop Frye further problematises the definition of autobiography by saying that it is a form of “prose fiction” as the past events cannot be exactly termed as facts. The role that memory plays in capturing the past is also at fault since memory cannot be a definite medium through which facts of one’s life can be faithfully recorded. All these definitions stress the fact that autobiography deals with an individual’s life and are reflective of the important events in the individual’s life written in retrospection. There are and can be numerous other definitions of autobiography which can define and at the same time problematise the concept of autobiographical writing. It would suffice to say that the notions of self, truth, memory, the act of narration etc. play a definitive role in the shape that an autobiography takes. Susan Anderson makes an important assessment regarding autobiography which determines the importance and proliferation of autobiography in the West and is significant in the context of your study here. She says, “The impulse to examine the history of the self, to turn systematic retrospection into art is a European one and the genre of autobiography is indigenous to Western, post-Roman civilization; only in modern times has it been produced in the other civilizations” (398).

13.2.1 DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND MEMOIRS, LETTERS, DIARIES, AND JOURNALS

While going through the above you have formed an idea regarding autobiography. You might have found that very often, in general parlance, autobiography is used interchangeably with memoirs, letters, diaries, and journals. But in actual usage there are some differences and it is necessary here to distinguish autobiography from memoirs, letters, diaries, and journals. An apt difference is provided by *A Handbook to Literature* (2008) which says that autobiography is the “story of a person’s life as written by that person. Although a common loose use of the term includes memoirs, diaries, journals, and letters, distinctions among these forms need to be made. Diaries, journals, and letters are not extended, organized narratives prepared for the public eye;

autobiographies and memoirs are. But, whereas memoirs deal at least in part with public event and noted personages other than the author, an autobiography is a connected narrative of the author's life, with some stress on introspection" (49).

You would understand the concepts better if a differentiation between the terms is provided here:

- The similarity between auto biographies, memoirs, diaries and journals is that they have elements of autobiography. But while an autobiography chronicles the life of a person for a prolonged period, journals and diaries are of a limited period pertaining to only the time when these were written. An autobiography, on the other hand, cannot supply material for diaries and journals but the vice versa can happen. Diaries and journals can be used to have a detailed analysis of certain periods of a person's life and can be used for autobiography and even writing biography.
- Diaries and journals are private in nature, not meant for the public eyes and are in fact hidden from it. The writing style is therefore informal with many incidents recorded which reflect on the inner workings of the individual. The autobiography, on the other hand, is primarily meant to be published and therefore has a more formal style of writing. At the same time, the author chooses carefully what to reveal and what not to. Thus, unlike diaries and journals, the autobiography cannot exactly be an unbiased outlook towards the individual's life. But the same can be argued regarding those journals and diaries which are published as they too are restrictive in nature.
- Autobiographies by nature record the chronological details of the individual's life. As such, they detail the life and activities of the individual from almost birth till a most recent period of time along with an analysis of his/her relation with other individuals like family and friends. Diaries and journals being more personalised in nature are not necessarily chronological with the emphasis on the individual's perceptions and feelings of a present period.
- Memoirs by themselves are autobiographical in nature but they in fact record a significant portion of the individual's life and not necessarily the whole life. Memoirs deal with important events and not a chronological record.

LET US STOP AND THINK



- While autobiography is in written form the record of a person's life, do you think all the events described can be authenticated if necessary?
- How is the notion of the self-represented through the autobiography and can autobiography be free of self-created assumptions that might mislead the reader?
- The emphasis on the individual's life that the autobiography lays through its form and structure is again open to questioning as it is not only the individual's life that is laid bare to the readers but a host of associated lives that are also interrogated.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who first used the word autobiography?

2. What plays a definitive role in shaping an autobiography?

13.3 BRIEF GENEALOGY OF WESTERN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The development of autobiographical writing in the West can be said to have started with Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (c.398-400 AD). Though there are examples of autobiography in antiquity like Cicero's *Brutus* and Julius Caesar's *Commentaries*, it is with Augustine's *Confessions* that "marking a historical beginning and of setting up a model for other, later texts" began (Anderson 18). The emphasis here was on an introspection of the inner self with Augustine chronicling various stages of his life particularly his childhood, more importantly his innermost conflicts in search of a higher truth and his ultimate conversion into Christianity. You, as students, in order to understand the tradition of writing autobiography, should understand the importance of the reason why Augustine's *Confessions* is termed as a watershed in autobiographical writing and a landmark work in itself. Karl Weintraub, early on in his work, *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (1978), says that he searches for "that proper form of autobiography" in which "a self-reflective person asks 'who am I?' and 'how did I become what I am?'" (1). *Confessions* in a sense answers these questions through Augustine's examination of his own self in the context of the society and his own understanding of the particular nature of his experiences which will influence later writings (45). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson make another very important and relevant remark in this context. They say, "The identity that is the subject of Augustine's text is a paradoxical one. In this process of conversion, loss of self as it is commonly understood defines identity, and self-effacement becomes a means to a higher state, being subsumed in God" (85). Another 12th century document titled *Historia Calamitatum* by Peter Abelard also follows the tradition of Augustine's *Confessions*. While these early examples do serve the purpose of elucidating the beginnings of the genre, the proper exposition of autobiographical writings can be discerned in Renaissance sculptor and artist Benvenuto Cellini's work written around 1558 and very aptly titled as *Vita* which is the Italian for life.

The early fifteenth century *Book of Margery Kempe* is a significant example of a new form of autobiographical writings written in the third person narrative describing the religious experiences and travel of Margery Kempe. It is often considered to be one of the first examples of autobiography in English though it is again a disputed fact. Montaigne's *Essais* (1580) constituted a different sort of self-revelation where philosophical and historical insights were merged with personal anecdotes and presented in the form of essays. The seventeenth century tradition of maintaining diaries, journals, memoirs also had an impetus on autobiographical writings. The diaries and journals particularly arose from a sense of the self which found revelation through God's order of the universe and man's place in this scheme of things. Religious autobiographies therefore abounded during this time and two important works of this period include John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief Sinners* (1666) and Richard Baxter's *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696). On the other hand, diarists Evelyn Hugh and Samuel Pepys also made significant contribution to the field of autobiography through their diaries.

The eighteenth and nineteenth century saw a proliferation of life writings and depiction of the self where the emphasis shifted from man's relationship with God to finding his individual identity and a shift away from religion and church. It is in fact in the eighteenth century that the English word "autobiography" was first coined. Romanticism also lent great strength to this phenomena and thus we have Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Les Confessions* (1781, 1788), Edward Gibbon's *Autobiography* (1796) and John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (1873). Rousseau's *Confessions* is an archetype of the eighteenth-century shift of the modern man from religious ideals to worldly ideals. It is again an example of the romantic emphasis on emotions of individuals which becomes a prototype for western autobiography. On the other hand, we also have examples like Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1799), a long autobiographical poem, which reflects on Wordsworth's development as a poet and Thomas De Quincey's *The Confessions of an Opium Eater* (1821) which is a depiction of his opium addiction. The novel as a genre evolving in the eighteenth century has also given rise to fictionalised autobiography and thus we have works like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1850) D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1903)

and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man* (1916). In the twentieth century, one of the prominent examples of autobiography include Bertrand Russell's *Autobiography* published in three volumes. The first volume was published in 1967 and the last in 1970, just before the death of Russell. Russell's autobiography is significant because he interweaves fiction and truth to both reveal and hide his life leaving the reader perplexed regarding the whole exercise.

LET US STOP AND THINK

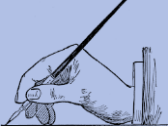


H.G. Wells once wrote a polemical essay attacking both biographers and autobiographers in a manner no less comprehensive than Orwell's. His primary aim

had been to extol the novel as the vehicle for truth-telling but the rest of the argument rang with such power that it looked as if he would never wish to escape from it. 'All biography has something of that post-mortem coldness and respect, and, as for autobiography, a man may show his soul in a thousand, half-conscious ways, but to turn on oneself to explain oneself is given to no one. It is the natural resort of liars and braggarts. Your Cellinis and Cassanovas, men with the habit of regarding themselves with a kind of objective admiration do best in autobiography.' Thus he argued in his 1911 essay that the task was well-nigh impossible. (Introduction by Michael Foot in *Autobiography* by Bertrand Russell, xi)

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Which work is considered to be the first autobiography in the English language?



2. Name a fictionalised autobiography.

13.4 FEATURES OF WESTERN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In order to understand the features of Western autobiography, it is necessary for you to get an idea regarding what the elements of autobiography are. It is the elements of autobiography that define and mould the autobiographical form of writing. After understanding the elements of autobiography, you will then come to know about the features that differentiate Western autobiography from autobiographies from other parts of the world.

13.4.1 ELEMENTS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

William L. Howarth in “Some Principles of Autobiography” identifies three basic elements of autobiographical writing which are character, technique, and theme.

- **Character:** In autobiography it is important to understand the concept of character and in defining this character the image of the self plays a crucial role. Along with it, the place, time, and the intent of writing are important too. At the same time, it is necessary to distinguish between the author/narrator and the character/protagonist who despite being the same person are different in time and place too. The author writes from hindsight and has privileged knowledge which the protagonist does not have.

- **Technique:** The second element is technique which includes imagery, structure, style etc. Though this element remains subservient to the other two, it is pertinent to reflect here that the style and structure of writing autobiography determines to a large extent how the content is presented to the reader.
- **Theme:** The last element is theme which is mainly the determining factor in the content of the autobiography. The theme may be varied depending upon the author's own personal beliefs, prejudices, philosophies etc. Also, the theme may arise out of historical conditions too and the autobiography is also representative of the times. Since the autobiography describes a life in progress it cannot end in the death of the author. Therefore, the theme should correspond with a suitable event that brings a closure to the events. The closure thus to a large extent determines the differences in writing strategy too. (Howarth 365 - 366)

13.4.2 DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF WESTERN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

It would probably not be entirely correct to say that Western autobiography is different from autobiographies written in other parts of the world as autobiography as a genre of writing essentially talks about a particular individual's life from his/her perspective. But at the same time, the development of the genre of writing took place at different times in history in different parts of the world and therefore Western autobiography has some essential differences or features which make it different than autobiographies written elsewhere. While discussing the differences between Western autobiography and Chinese autobiography, Qi Wang in *The Autobiographical Self in Time and Culture* (2013) discusses some of the seminal characteristics which define western autobiography. She says that these features also exemplify the basic distinction between the Western style of writing autobiography and the eastern style. She identifies seven important features of autobiographical writings and the Western attitude towards it. They are as follows:

1. Position of the Self: The self functions as the centre of the writings and acts as the protagonist too. The introspection is inward and the position that the self occupies in the narrative is of paramount importance. The position can be within the society or can

be an individualistic outlook, but the necessary belief is that it is the interest in the self which determines the narrative structure.

2. Detailedness and Emotionality: Emotions and nuanced details of life find reflection in the writings which help in making the narrative more comprehensive.

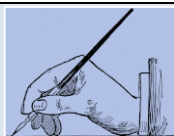
3. Subjectivity: The point of view is subjective as understandable from the immense emphasis on the self. It is the individual who chooses to reveal his/her identity through an exhaustive analysis of the inner life.

4. Role of Memory: Memory plays a crucial role in the construction of an autobiography as it acts as the main source through which the past facts are recollected and reproduced. Individual memory is valued above other markers of memory.

5. Attitude towards Childhood: The autobiography lays importance on childhood as the basis for the individual's life history. It is in fact the most crucial phase of life as it determines various aspects of later life.

6. Significance of Single Events: The importance of certain discrete incidents and circumstances that are significant turning points in the life of the individual is a necessary feature. The process of highlighting of events rather than a mere chronological depiction of events is an important necessity in Western autobiographical writings.

7. Functions: The most important function of Western autobiography is to establish the uniqueness and importance of the individual self vis-à-vis his/her experiences. The self acts as the pivotal point in the narrative and the autobiographical function is to construct the individual's singularity.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Why does the author of an autobiography have privilege over the protagonist of an autobiography?

2. Which phase of life is considered to be most crucial in writing autobiography in the West?

13.5 SUMMING UP

In this unit, you have learnt about the definition of autobiography from its etymological source in Greek (“autos” which means self, “bios” which means life, and “graphe” which means writing) to the problems in arriving at a conclusive definition of autobiography. You have also learnt that though autobiography is often conjugated with diaries, journals and letters yet there are some basic differences between autobiography and these forms of writing. Along with it, a history of the development of autobiography from its origins in Augustine’s *Confessions* to the twentieth century has been provided. You have also become acquainted with character, technique and theme which form the elements of autobiography. The seven primary features which differentiate Western autobiography from other autobiographies have also been discussed here.



13.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Define autobiography. How is autobiography problematic to define?
2. How is autobiography different from memoirs, diaries, journals, and letters?

3. Explain why Augustine's *Confessions* is considered as important in the history of autobiographical writings?
4. Explain the development of autobiography in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
5. What are the elements of autobiographical writing?
6. What features differentiate western autobiography from other autobiographical writings?



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UNIT 14: APPROPRIATION OF WESTERN AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY INDIAN ENGLISH WRITERS

UNIT STRUCTURE

- 14.0 Introduction
- 14.1 Learning Objectives
- 14.2 Writing Autobiography in India
- 14.3 Life and works of Nirad C. Chaudhuri
- 14.4 Studying *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*
- 14.5 Themes and Issues
- 14.6 Life and works of Jawaharlal Nehru
- 14.7 Studying *An Autobiography*
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- 14.9 Summing Up
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14.0 INTRODUCTION

The appropriation of the Western genre of novel happened during the Bengal renaissance and this form led further to the appropriation of the autobiography. But Indian English autobiographical writings can be said to have developed properly during the second part of the twentieth century during which time Indian English literature also flourished. The beginnings of this genre followed generally in the tradition of its Western counterparts. Gradually, like the Indian English novel, the autobiography also started developing its uniqueness keeping in tandem with the Indian milieu. In this unit you will learn about the beginnings of Indian English autobiography along with a detailed analysis of two Indian English autobiographies.

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to provide you with a general idea about the appropriation of the genre of autobiographical writings by Indian English writers. After reading this unit you will be able to:

- understand briefly the process of autobiographical writing in India.
- acquaint yourself with the life and works of two key figures in Indian life writing in English, namely Nirad Chaudhuri and Jawaharlal Nehru
- analyze two key texts in Indian English life writings i.e. Nirad Chaudhuri's *An Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* and Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*

14.2 WRITING AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN INDIA

A study of autobiography or more importantly life writings in the Indian subcontinent through oral folk narratives and other documents provides an interesting area of exploration. The basis for writing the self and a celebration of the great and the ordinary through writings in India is essentially within the context of the society. In the often generalised distinction between the Eastern and Western man, it is perceived that the man from the East is unwilling to reveal himself fully to the public. This reluctance is considered to have originated within the societal norms and customs which prevents an individual to realise his self fully and to see himself only as part of society. Many scholars and anthropologists have therefore assumed that society is prioritized or valorised in India. In the Indian subcontinent, the paradigm of 'collectivity' historically dominates most research, which assumes that life in the subcontinent revolves around caste, community, and kinship, and that individual agency and selfhood have been marginal to thought and behaviour. David Arnold in *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History* (2004) observes that while India is frequently assumed to be a nation where caste and religion is the most essential characteristic of the fabric of society, there have been attempts in life writings to overcome this basic assumption. But, as with so many other aspects of India which is problematic in nature, the concept of exclusivity with regards to collectivity and individuality is also problematic. Life writings in India therefore remain a site of "interaction and negotiation between the


two” (4). McKim Marriott in “Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism” puts forward a new concept called *dividuals* as opposed to individuals which can be best used to define Indians. He also argues that the person in South Asia is less discrete, less bounded and more permeable entity than a person in Europe or North America (111).

The history of autobiography in India also reflects on the importance of a collective identity rather than an individual identity. Even in the period prior to the British coming to India, autobiography as a genre prevailed and even there we find that works reflect on the individual’s presence in society and his contribution to it. The self-introspection that writing an autobiography entails has never been a problem for ancient Indians but the expression of such introspection would be equal to indulgence. This in part explains the dearth of autobiographical writings in India but there have also existed works like *Rig Veda’s Dhanustuti*, *Dhammapada* and *Jataka Tales* which have contributed to our understanding of the individual in society. This autobiographical impulse can also be seen reflected in works like Bana Bhatta’s *Hrisu-Carita*, written around 647 A. D., *Rujutarungini* written by Kalhana around 12th century A.D. and also include *Memoirs of Babur* or *Baburnama*, *Tuzuk ‘i’ Jahangiri* and *Ain-i-Akbari*. Despite the existence of these works, they are not exactly autobiographies in the sense of their Western counterparts where the emphasis on the self is of paramount importance. The gradual growth of the genre of autobiographical writing can be said to have started with the Indian Renaissance. The renaissance served as a medium through which a revival of Indian culture along with a renewed vigour for national integration took place. The desire to reveal personal experiences which connected to the masses led to the writing of autobiography and Raja Rammohan Roy presumably wrote the first autobiography which appeared in *Athenaeum and the Literary Gazette* in 1833. The path taken up by Raja Ram Mohan Roy was later on emulated, among others, by the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad etc. The rise of English education in India further paved the path for autobiography as a genre to flourish, particularly in English. The English educated Indian was better equipped to portray the struggles that the colonized individual faced and therefore most of the autobiographies written during the period of colonization and even after it were testimonies of the struggle of India as a nation. Despite the appropriation of the form of autobiography, in the Indian context it

still remained a genre which reflected on the nation rather than the individual. The earliest known example of Indian English autobiography is titled *Autobiography of Lutfullah, a Mohamedan Gentleman; and His Transactions with his Fellow-Creatures* (1857). This early example, while following the tradition of Western autobiography depicts the individual's life, but is also in a sense an appropriation as it is very much an Indian Muslim's understanding of the beginnings of colonization and the disparity between the East and the West. Other early instances include Lal Behari Dey's *Recollections of My School Days* which was serialised in the *Bengal Magazine* between 1873 and 1876, Nishikanta Chattopadhyaya's *Reminiscences of German University Life* (1892) and Rakhal Das Halder's *The English Diary of an Indian Student* (1861-2). The freedom movement in the early part of 19th century led to the writing of autobiographies like Lala Lajpat Rai's *The Story of My Deportation* (1908), Surendranath Banerjea's *A Nation Making* (1925) and Dhan Gopal Mukerji's *Caste and Outcaste* (1923). The growth of Indian English writing in the post-independence era led to the publication of some prominent autobiographies which include Mulk Raj Anand's *Apology for Heroism* (1945), Nayantara Sahgal's *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954), Kamala Das' *My Story* (1976), R.K. Narayan's *My Days* (1974).

The two autobiographies that have been taken up for study here are not only products of the English education referred to earlier but also very much a portrayal of individuals in society where the self becomes subsumed within the society. Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* tries to situate the 'unknown Indian' who has no claims to fame within the structures of the changing Indian milieu under colonization. Chaudhuri diligently portrays his self as a product of his times who is very much moulded by the process of Anglicization. Despite Chaudhuri's apparent love for the English, he is unequivocal in his critical portrayal of the process of colonization. On the other hand, Jawaharlal Nehru is a distinguished product of English education but his autobiography reflects more on his struggle as a political prisoner during India's freedom movement rather than on his individual life. You will now come to know about the background and the issues related to both autobiographies and come to an

understanding regarding the formulation of autobiographies written in the English language in the Indian context.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS	
	<p>1. What concept did McKim Marriot put forward to describe Indians?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
	<p>2. Which autobiography is considered to be the first autobiography in English?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
	<p>3. Where was Raja Rammohan Roy's autobiography published?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>

14.3 LIFE AND WORKS OF NIRAD C. CHAUDHURI

Nirad C. Chaudhuri was born on 23rd November, 1897 in a small town in erstwhile East Bengal. His father, Upendra Narayan Chaudhuri, was a lawyer and he was the second child among a family of eight children. He was brought up in a home where the religious ideals were not of contemporary Bengal. There was an ambience of Western liberalism and humanism in the family. His parents tried to give him and his siblings the best of education that they could afford at that time. His father himself

taught him English grammar which laid the foundation of his association with the English language. He received his primary education at Kishorganj and his secondary education at Ripon College in Calcutta. He then graduated with honours in History from Scottish Church College in Calcutta. He also enrolled for post-graduation from the University of Calcutta but having failed to appear for the exams, he did not clear the course.

Nirad Chaudhuri's failure to complete his M.A. degree left him unfit for a university job and thus he could secure for himself only a clerical post with the Accounts Department of the Indian Military. It was during this period of time that he started writing articles for magazines and one of his writings was published in *Modern Review*, one of the most widely circulated and prestigious magazines of that time. After a short stint with the Indian Military, he left his job and took his first steps in journalism and editing. During the period of 1937-1941, he served as a secretary to Saratchandra Bose (brother of Subhash Chandra Bose) and then he left Bengal for New Delhi where he took up a job with All India Radio where he worked from 1941 to 1952. Chaudhuri went to England for the first time in 1955 to work on a series commissioned by the BBC radio. He finally settled in England in 1970 where he lived till his death on 1st August, 1999 at the ripe old age of 102.

The first and most prominent work of Nirad Chaudhuri is *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* published in 1951 which chronicles the first 21 years of his life. His next work is *A Passage to England*, written as an outcome of his work commissioned by BBC radio which he published in 1959. *The Continent of Circe: An Essay on the Peoples of India* published in 1966, his most controversial work till date, chronicles the Indian past and civilization and was awarded the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize. His other works include *The Intellectual in India* (1967), *To Live or Not to Live* (1970), a biography of Max Muller titled *Scholar Extraordinary* (1974) which won him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1975. *Thy Hand! Great Anarch* published in 1987 is often considered to be a sequel to his first work *The Autobiography* and it carries forward his life history till 1952. His last work published in his hundredth year is *Three Horseman of the New Apocalypse* (1997).

14.4 READING AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN UNKNOWN INDIAN

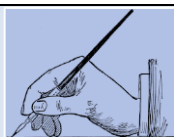
In this section an attempt has been made to acquaint you with the overall structure and content of Chaudhuri's autobiography. The work is significant from the perspective that Chaudhuri has been successful in blending together his personal history with that of the fast-changing nature of Bengal at that period of time. It is pertinent for you to understand here that what Chaudhuri set out to do is monumental in nature. An absolutely 'unknown Indian' who has no significant role to play in the rapid unfurling of events in turbulent Bengal could through his almost fanatical quest for knowledge write an autobiography in erudite English language. His ability to posit his life within the society makes the autobiography interesting reading because it is as much a work about his life as it is about his reflections on Bengal.

The autobiography comprises four books which are again sub-divided into four parts. The **first book** is titled '**Early Environment**' which consists of '**My Birth Place,**' '**My Ancestral Village,**' '**My Mother's Village,**' and '**England.**' The first three chapters are an account of Chaudhuri's life at Kishorganj where he spent his childhood till twelve while the fourth chapter is more of Chaudhuri's impressions of England from his extensive readings regarding the place. The place of his birth is Kishorganj, his ancestral village is Banagram and his mother's village is Kalikutch. The England that he describes here is primarily that of his imagination and which exerts a great influence on his developing years. Chaudhuri begins with a detailed description of his birth place Kishorganj which is situated in Mymensingh district of East Bengal. It was a non-descript place and was very cyclone prone. It was situated on the banks of a little river named Meghana which they called as their 'Nile'. Chaudhuri is also nostalgic about the monsoon season which changes every aspect of life in Bengal. In his account of Banagram, his ancestral village, Chaudhuri reveals his pride in his rootedness. He belonged to a family of landlords who were all proud of their rank and the house, called New House, was a spacious one surrounded with greenery. Chaudhuri also describes Kalikutch, his mother's village, as a village almost untouched by the intrusions of city life and is calm, serene and green in its outlook. The villagers were fond of music and poetry which was often played to mark various occasions. The

population comprised both Hindus and Muslims which gave rise to frequent quarrels amongst them. While Chaudhuri does give us a vivid picture of the three important places in the early years of his life, it is England which fascinates him more than any of the other places. The England that he describes here is gleaned from his reading about it rather than actually visiting it. He even compares Kishorganj to an English country town and makes a list of the English and European personalities whose names were familiar to him. It is English cricket and poetry which fascinates him more than anything else about England. In fact, it was the poetry which helped him to visualize England in his mind's eyes which led to his lifelong love for the place. The England of his imagination is at crossroads with the Englishman that he encounters in his daily life. The hatred for the Englishman existed side by side with his fixation on the white skin. **Book two** is titled **First Twelve Years** which is again divided into 'My Birth,' 'Parents' and 'Early Years,' 'Torch Race of the Indian Renaissance,' 'Enter Nationalism,' and 'We leave Kishorganj.' Chaudhuri inverts the quintessential structure of autobiography by describing his birth and early years in the second book and prioritising the environment in which he grew up by describing them in the first book. The formative years of Chaudhuri's life is discussed in the first chapter where he emphasises his father's interest and importance in educating his children and his own rising anglophilia. He starts with personal information like his date of birth which was 23rd November, 1897 and also recounts the religious beliefs of his parents. They were partly deists and at the same time partly believers of Hindu monotheism. The rational side of his parents forbade them from making horoscopes and his father also believed that whatever the horoscopes reveal only add to the worry of the person. He also records the fact that contrary to popular custom, all the eight children except the first two were born at his father's place rather than his mother's house. His father, Narayan Dutt Chaudhuri, was much interested in the education of his children and took much care regarding it. He in fact learned English grammar from his father himself though he was much more interested in the usage of the language than its construction. His mother, Susheela Sundari, was a woman of a religious bend of mind and she tried to inculcate the values of honesty and truth in her children too. Her honesty was given due credit even by her mother-in-law which was unheard of in society but despite it she believed

that her mother-in-law has laid a curse on her which led to her unfulfilled spiritual happiness. This idea brought in frustration and hysteria leading to an early death. The next two chapters dwell on the prevalent religious, social, and political scenario of Bengal in particular and India in general which have influenced Chaudhuri's ideologies over the years. Chaudhuri is also very enthusiastic about the Indian renaissance which he talks about in the chapter 'Torch Race of Indian Renaissance'. The Western and Eastern ideas confluence to bring forth the Indian renaissance and it influenced diverse aspects of life including literary, religious, ethical and even humanistic aspects. In 'Enter Nationalism', Chaudhuri rues the fact that the Indian civilisation is on the decline primarily due to the British rule. But he is also hopeful that it will be able to revive itself despite the problems. He is also critical of the notion that the concept of nationalism that arose after the partition of Bengal in 1905 was a Western import. **Book three** titled **Education** is made up of four chapters viz. '**Calcutta**,' '**Adolescence**,' '**Citizen Student**,' and '**Initiation into Scholarship**.' As the title suggests, this part is mainly concerned with the education of Chaudhuri. The first chapter is in fact more about Chaudhuri's impressions about the city of Calcutta than about his actual process of education. In his description of the three decades of stay in Calcutta, Chaudhuri very often reminisces about his life at Kishorganj and the discrete nature of his lives in both places. Despite being a city even at that point of time, Calcutta never could inspire Chaudhuri as did his native village. In fact, Chaudhuri wrote much about the squalor and desperate circumstances of life in the city. In the next chapter titled 'Adolescence', Chaudhuri writes about his experiences of growing up in the unknown atmosphere of first Mymensingh and then Calcutta. One of the highlights of his stay at Mymensingh was his sighting of the Halley's Comet which filled his mind with the beauty and splendour of the skies. He also describes his disdain in finding the Calcutta school boys' lack of intelligence but along with it the literary atmosphere of Calcutta enamoured him as also his English teacher Mr. Mazumdar who was an important influence on him. In 'Citizen Student', Chaudhuri recounts his experiences in the cramped and dirty mess where he had to reside with a number of other boys. Despite the hardships of life at the mess, Chaudhuri felt that this phase helped in facing with equanimity many of the problems faced later on in life. It was also a period of political turmoil in India with the

Indian freedom movement gradually gaining momentum. Like other students of his age Chaudhuri too took interest in politics but his ideologies were often at loggerheads with the general perception at that time. ‘Initiation into Scholarship’ brought to the fore the erudite personality of Chaudhuri which dominated most of his writings. He talked at length about his inclination of attaining scholarship, almost encyclopaedic knowledge, and his deep-rooted fascination with history. He also discussed the great teachers, books and personalities which left an indelible impression on him and were critical in shaping his personality. **The fourth and last book** in the autobiography is titled “**Into the World**” which is again divided into four chapters namely ‘**acyclic Man and Life in Calcutta,**’ ‘**New Politics,**’ ‘**Vanishing Landmarks,**’ and ‘**An Essay on the Course of Indian History.**’ The first chapter is a detailed description of his life in Calcutta where he touches upon the lives of different sections of society living there. Calcutta as a city was a living reminder of the greatness of modern India and was also in a flux of activity constantly. The natives of Calcutta took pride in their culture and were extremely condescending to all outsiders including the East Bengalis. They were also highly critical of the Reform Movement. ‘New Politics’ is about the present trends of political movements in India where he is profusely appreciative of Gandhi. In ‘Vanishing Landmarks’, Chaudhuri rues the fact that the rise of politics had led to the decline of values like morality and religion. The last chapter ‘An Essay on the Course of Indian History’ is written like a justification for having written the autobiography itself. It charts the national history rather than personal history. He views the Indian history as one where order is followed by disorder and then again restoration of order. The cycle repeats itself over periods of history.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Which work of Chaudhuri is considered to be the most controversial work till date?

2. How does Chaudhuri describe England in the first book of the autobiography?

3. What is Chaudhuri's view on Indian history?

14.5 THEMES AND ISSUES

In this section, you will become familiarised with the primary themes and issues which dominated the autobiography and Chaudhuri's treatment of the same.

ANGLOPHILIA AND ENGLAND

Nirad Chaudhuri's attitude towards the British is primarily consists of a sense of awe and respect which ultimately leads to his extreme anglophilia. He considered the British Empire in India to be the harbingers of modernisation and despite the problems

associated with the regime, he still believed that it was one of the best regimes in the world. The dedication to his autobiography which led to much outrage in India is explicit in his eulogy of the British Empire. But at the same time, it would be wrong to say that Chaudhuri was completely uncritical of the British. For all his praise regarding the Empire he was also sensitive to the savagery of British rule in India. He was disillusioned to an extent regarding the British during his residence in England when he saw the decadence of what he felt to be a great civilization but at the time of writing the autobiography Chaudhuri was very much enamoured of the British. This is very well reflected in the fact that while Book I of the autobiography describes his early years at Kishorganj, it also included a chapter on England which actually exists only in his imagination for he has never till the writing of his autobiography visited the place. It is quite extraordinary therefore that Chaudhuri provides an extensive idea of England gleaned from his various readings about the place. Chaudhuri accepts that the means through which his knowledge of England has been acquired is casual and the knowledge itself is “extraordinarily uneven”. Chaudhuri’s elucidation of his notion of England begins with his recounting of what he terms as “familiar names”. These include the likes of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, Napoleon, Shakespeare, and Raphael. Also, he includes names like Webster, Charles Lamb, Milton, Burke, Warren Hastings, Wellington, King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. The tone and tenor of Chaudhuri the narrator often verges on the ludicrous as he describes Queen Victoria as a “daughter-in-law baiting mother-in-law”, bringing in the comparison primarily from snippets of various historical events and the general tendencies of such relationships in Bengal. Chaudhuri thus seems to be a curious mixture of native knowledge and foreign ideas which often presents a much concocted version of history and of literature too. Thus, he easily makes comparisons between the *Ramayana* and the *Iliad* finding in both these epics a similar storyline and similarity in characters too.

Chaudhuri’s acquaintance with the English landscape is also gathered from his reading of English literature. The English landscape is reproduced for Chaudhuri primarily through cricket and through his reading of English poetry. Chaudhuri conjures a mental image of England being a land alongside the sea which is accentuated by his reading of English poetry the foremost amongst them being Tennyson’s “Break, Break,

Break”. Wordsworth’s “Upon Westminster Bridge” moves him profoundly along with Shakespeare’s sea dirge, “Full fathom five thy father lies” and Webster’s land dirge, “Call for the robin-red-breast and the wren”. Chaudhuri’s ideas regarding Englishmen are however not formed merely from reading about them but also from coming into contact with them. One of his first encounters with an Englishman, a Mr. Stapleton, the inspector of Schools, however, reflects on the convoluted knowledge that he has gathered regarding this race of people. Having once heard that the Englishmen are as fond of bananas as monkeys are, Chaudhuri and his brother jumped into a nearby ditch to save the bananas they are carrying. His first contact seems to be with Mr. Nathan and his wife and it is the wife who has made a lasting impression on his mind before any other Englishman. Thus, he remembers and talks about “her blue eyes, her flaxen hair, her dress and her hat for the whole day” (*Autobiography* 118). The general Indian’s so-called disregard for the white skin is challenged by Chaudhuri through his enunciation of the fetish for fair skin that plagues the Indian mindset especially during marriages. He feels that the Hindu fascination with colour actually emanates from a notion of superiority of its own status. At the same time, the downgrading of the white man’s fairness is nothing but an attempt to retain its superiority. In his description of his birthplace Kishorganj, Chaudhuri prefaces it with quotation from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* in an attempt to relate to it as an English country town. But he is not delusional enough as he sees that Kishorganj has nothing of the beauty of the English countryside and is only made up of huts and sheds.

Chaudhuri has inherited to an extent his love for England from his father himself. His father procured furniture from Dacca to furnish a part of his house in the European style and has also collected books like Milton’s poetical works, Burke’s speeches on the impeachment of Warren Hastings, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *Othello* etc. He had also collected paintings which are reproductions of Raphael’s Madonna della Sedia and the boy Christ sitting with a lamb. It was Chaudhuri’s father who with his fascination of the construction and structure of the English language bought dictionaries like Annandale’s *English Dictionary*, Chambers’ *Twentieth Century Dictionary* and Fowler’s *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. He also inculcated this love for the English language in Chaudhuri and imparted to his children a liberal education.

Chaudhuri's deep-seated respect for the English as a race was again revealed when he discusses the Indian Renaissance. He is appreciative of leaders of the Renaissance like Rammohan Roy and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee as they were a synthesis of both Western and Eastern values. The pioneers of Indian Renaissance felt that India could benefit from the scientific knowledge of the West and the British could do much for the development of the country. This ideology was much appreciated by Chaudhuri but he was critical of Gandhi for choosing passive resistance in place of active defiance. In the last chapter of the autobiography, Chaudhuri also says that India has always been a place which has been invaded from time to time leading to a society divided into various religious communities and a civilization deeply steeped in spiritualism and religion. Thus the country cannot progress without the intervention of science and technology which can only be brought about by Western domination.

You can now formulate some idea regarding Chaudhuri's love for England from your reading of the above dominant theme that pervades Chaudhuri's autobiography. It is also necessary to reiterate that Chaudhuri over and above emphasises that he is writing the national history rather than the personal history which he succinctly sums up in the last chapter of the book. Let us now therefore take a look at his conceptualisation of national history which moulded his personal life too.

PERSONAL CONCEPTION OF INDIAN HISTORY

Chaudhuri understands history to be an objective study of man in his development through the various epochs of life and is much dependent on the individual's own notions of religion, politics etc. History is therefore both objective and subjective and this is what Chaudhuri exhibits in his concluding chapter to the autobiography where he charts the entire course of Indian history.

"An Essay on the Course of Indian History" forms the concluding chapter in the autobiography and, as the name suggests, Chaudhuri intends the ending to reiterate what he has been trying to impress upon the reader all the while that the work is more about national history than about his own self. He makes this idea clear by saying that his hypothesis all along the writing of the autobiography has been "a view of the course of Indian history" (*Autobiography* 547). The autobiography therefore acts as a

repository of the social, political, and literary history of the time. In this sense, it is not only an autobiography of Chaudhuri himself but also of all unknown Indians like him whose lives have been shaped by the events of history. It thus seems very appropriate that he starts off by quoting the French historian Fustel de Coulanges: “No applause for me, please; it is not I whom you hear speaking to you; it is history which is speaking through my mouth” (*Autobiography* 548). The history that Chaudhuri narrates is not merely an external description but rather based on his own study and experience. He was a student of history but he differs from the conventional description of history. He says that his own views differ from that of his countrymen like that of “the difference between the Copernican and the pre-Copernican view regarding the earth: mine centres round a sun, that of my countrymen is egocentric” (*Autobiography* 547). He feels that the ideas held by the Indians in general, not necessarily regarding history only but all knowledge, are “unconscious or subconscious” while his own are based on meticulous research. This, he feels, is alienating him from his fellow Indians and the nation too. This anticipation is justified later not only figuratively but also literally. The publication of his autobiography has led to much criticism of Chaudhuri.

As a student of history, Chaudhuri has immersed himself into an arduous and extensive reading of history. But the ultimate realization of this reading has not been a pleasant one. He has reached the conclusion that civilization itself is in a state of decay and the situation is no different in India. The words of Chaudhuri are poignant in this respect as he looks at the crumbling down of history before his eyes. He says, “The symptoms indicated, not simply the decline of British Empire in India (which in those days would really have been welcomed by me), but of the civilization of modern India, that is to say, the civilization created by Indians in the nineteenth century under the impact of Western influences. The more I tried to discountenance the idea the more did it force itself on me” (*Autobiography* 552).

Chaudhuri visualizes the course of Indian history as made up of three cycles which stand “clean-cut and indivisible against what precedes and follows it” (*Autobiography* 553). Chaudhuri’s cyclic concept of history views history as a continuous cycle of order and disorder. One cycle of peace and order is followed by disorder and chaos and vice versa. This pattern according to Chaudhuri has always been

the path of Indian history. The way in which great civilizations and empires have risen and fallen is also the way in which the Hindu civilization has come into being. This fact is testified by the great epics of the world which narrate the tussle between good and evil, ultimately the good being triumphant. But this cyclic movement of rise and fall creates a certain amount of apprehension in Chaudhuri who says, “The reading of these episodes created within me the palpitating apprehension of a great disaster lurking within a great victory, of fulfillment being sardonically challenged by emptiness” (*Autobiography* 550). Indian civilization has progressed more or less on the same lines and the decline of order has been followed by disorder and so on. Thus the Mughal Empire’s fall has been succeeded by the rise of the British Empire in India and subsequently its decline due to India’s freedom movement and establishment of independent India. Nature follows a continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Indian history has followed three basic cycles. The first cycle, according to him, begins assumedly at around third century B.C. and ends around twelfth century B.C. with “catastrophic suddenness”, the second cycle starts with the defeat of Prithvi Raj Chauhan by Muhammad of Ghaur in 1192 A.D. and stretches till the Battle of Plassey in 1757 A.D., and the third cycle starts in the middle of the eighteenth century and is in a continual phase though outwardly it ended with the end of the British rule in India on 15th August, 1947. The three cycles are conventionally termed by history textbooks as Hindu, Islamic, and European respectively. On the other hand, the ethnic standpoint describes the three phases as Indo-Aryan, Indo-Turkish, and Indo-British respectively. Linguistically, the three cycles respectively are Sanskrit, Persian, and English. Chaudhuri feels that Indian history has been constantly moulded by some foreign influence or the other. The cycles that he has defined are in reality “India’s successive affiliations with some of the greatest movements in world history, and the cyclic changes have taken place only when affiliation has yielded place to another” (*Autobiography* 557). In the first phase of history, India has come into contact with the Persian Empire, the Hellenistic kingdoms, and the Roman Empire. India has also been invaded time and again by the Scythians, Kushans, Huns, and probably also by the Parthians. These people were looked down upon as *Mlechchhas*, or unclean foreigners, but they assimilated themselves into the Hindu society and contributed much towards

it. In the second phase, India became more intricately connected with the world history. India became a part of the Islamic world and the setting up of the Mogul Empire consolidated this position. In the third cycle, India became part of the greater European history primarily through the process of colonization. But the end of British rule does not necessarily entail the severing of this relationship. Culturally, each phase saw the dominance of the most developed culture at that time. Thus the first phase was dominated by Aryan culture, the second by Islamic, and the third saw a fusion of the East and the West. Chaudhuri looks at the development of history and culture as a gyre which expands in a spiral manner and the locus of India's historical development encompasses the whole history of India.

The Indian political order has been throughout history set up and nurtured by foreigners. The first of such order was established by the Turks. The Turks, Mughals, and Persians initially set up political order in India and then it was taken over by the Anglo-Saxons. Though the Anglo-Saxon power seems to be on the wane and Europe itself is in the process of fragmenting itself, in reality, it is reorganizing itself under the leadership of America. Chaudhuri, in a manner that smacks of servility to the West, says that all great men in India in the beginning got their recognition in the West. He gives example after example to prove his point that India accepts anyone only when that person has already been accepted in the West. Otherwise, we as a nation are unable to know or detect a genius even in our midst. This statement anticipates recognition of Chaudhuri's own works, particularly the autobiography, which became famous only after due recognition from the West. Both Rammohan Roy and Rabindranath Tagore received acceptance after they have were glorified by the West. Similarly, Vivekananda rose to fame only after the parliament of religions at Chicago recognised him, despite the fact that he had travelled the length and breadth of India for twelve years. The foreign influence is very much needed to bring back India to the path of human evolution and then only India could attain great heights.

Now that you have formed an idea regarding Chaudhuri's autobiography, let us look into another autobiography of almost the same epoch, Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*. Nehru's autobiography written particularly within the standpoint of

Indian political struggle for freedom is as much a testament to the person as to the nation.

14.6 LIFE AND WORKS OF JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

Jawaharlal Nehru was born on 14th of November, 1889 to Motilal Nehru and Swarupa Rani Nehru. He was born into an influential and wealthy Kashmiri Brahmin family in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. His father was a well-known advocate and political activist. The young Nehru grew up in a household where the English language was given encouragement to be spoken and Nehru's father engaged teachers for him to be taught the language. Nehru received his early education through home tutors and later on was sent to Harrow and Cambridge for higher education. He qualified as a barrister from Inner Temple, London. He returned to India in 1912 and joined the Allahabad High Court Bar. He married Kamala Kaul in 1916 and in 1917 his only child Indira Priyadarshini was born. Nehru was actively involved in the freedom movement of India and was jailed many times during the process. He and Mahatma Gandhi are considered to be the chief architects of the long struggle for Indian freedom. When India gained independence on 15th August, 1947, Nehru became the first prime minister of independent India. Nehru played a definitive role in shaping the fledgling country and bringing India into the world platform. However, the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962 not only debilitated his position as the leader of India but also was very harmful to his health which ultimately led to his demise on 27th May, 1963.

Nehru wrote prolifically and his prose style is marked by lucid language and careful construction. The bulk of his writings were done in prisons during his long stays there. The most prominent of his writings include *Letters from Father to Daughter* (1929), *An Autobiography* (1936), *Glimpses of World History* (1939), *The Discovery of India* (1946). *Letters from Father to Daughter* is a collection of thirty letters that Nehru wrote to his daughter when he was in Allahabad. The letters were mainly concerned with the subjects of natural and human history. *An Autobiography* is Nehru's attempt to find his individual self within the turbulent history of Indian freedom movement and is in fact more about the struggles of the nation than about the man himself. *Glimpses of*

World History is a two-volume treatise written as letters to his daughter and is an exhaustive compilation of the history of mankind from its earliest beginnings to the present times. *The Discovery of India* was written in Ahmednagar jail and it is a reflection on life in general and India in particular. It is a comprehensive volume charting the long and vivid history of India and is monumental in its conceptualisation of the Indian civilization.

14.7 READING AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

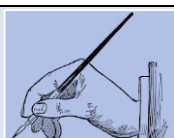
In this section you will become acquainted with the general structure of Nehru's autobiography and some of the prominent events which found mention in it. Nehru's attempt is replete with lucid language and intricate details of the long struggle for freedom. Along with it, you will also find that Nehru, the individual, like in Chaudhuri's autobiography, becomes subsumed within the concept of the nation.

Nehru's *An Autobiography* was written during his long periods of imprisonment from June 1934 to February 1935. The autobiography is divided into 67 chapters with an epilogue too. He also added a postscript and another chapter titled "Five Years Later". The first few chapters describe Nehru's Kashmiri ancestors' movement to the Mughal court, his childhood, and his education at Harrow and Cambridge and his return to India. The initial narrative depicts snippets of his personal life with emphasis on the history of his family and his father's establishment as a lawyer. Nehru also describes his relationship with his father and his mother and his much anglicised upbringing within the midst of luxury. In his description of his education at Harrow and Cambridge, Nehru talks about his sense of alienation in a foreign land. At the same time, Nehru gradually starts making friends and gets accustomed to his initial life at Harrow and later on at Cambridge. He describes his life at Cambridge to be one of calm and freedom. He also contemplated on what career he would take up and for a time considered the civil services but his family was not very happy with it. In 1912 he was called to the Bar and in the autumn of that year he returned to India. In chapter six of the autobiography he describes his marriage which took place in 1916 and it is here that we find that the narrative makes a marked shift. The autobiography no longer

remains a personal narrative and swerves into the political and national. The character of Nehru that we find evolving from here onwards is no longer that of a family man but rather a political figure whose life is entwined with the history of the nation. From chapter seven to chapter eleven he describes his early initiation into politics and his gradual engagement with the freedom movement of India. Chapter eleven also describes his first imprisonment which is a latent motif throughout the autobiography as most of the work was written in various prisons. Nehru clearly enunciates that his politics and association with it was primarily bourgeois in nature but the news of the coming of the Prince of Wales to India in 1921 brought matters to a head and changed many things for him. Till then, prison and getting arrested were a novelty to him and he was still ensconced within the luxuries of life. The first instance of his getting arrested was almost a time of bravado for Nehru and he was excited regarding the process too. This instance of his getting imprisoned was synchronous with the tumultuous times of the Non-Co-operation Movement in India and after sometime, while Nehru himself was in prison, Gandhi was also imprisoned. Nehru then talks about the concept of non-violence and Gandhi's adoption of it. While the Congress and Nehru himself was suspicious of the potentiality of the concept of non-violence, he is eventually reconciled to the concept and accepted that non-violence, despite its flaws, is necessary. In chapter thirteen where Nehru describes his internment at Lucknow District Jail, we get an idea regarding Nehru's preconceived notions regarding prison life and the actuality of it. From chapter fourteen to chapter twenty, we find the development of Nehru's political ideologies as well as his own grappling with doubts and concerns in his mind. In the intervening chapters, Nehru particularly desists from giving the reader any insight into his personal life except for the analysis of his own complex thoughts. Towards the end of chapter twenty we come to know that his wife, Kamala Nehru, is ill and needs further treatment at Switzerland. Nehru welcomed the idea and felt that going away from India for a while will also relieve his mind from his doubts and contradictions. His stay in Europe and particularly in England during the General Strike made Nehru aware of the oppression of the powerless that continues all over the world. He returns to India after a period of a year and nine months and thereafter again plunges into the political struggle for freedom. In chapter thirty three we come to know about the death of his father, Motilal

Nehru and in chapter thirty six we come to know about Nehru's own ill health and need for rest. The doctors had urged him to take rest and a change of scenario and thus he goes to Ceylon. It is in Ceylon that Nehru comes into contact with Buddhism but he says that more than the dogmas associated with the religion it is Buddha and his personality that fascinated him. From Ceylon, they proceeded towards a tour of the southern states of Mysore, Travancore, Cochin, Malabar, and Hyderabad. The next few chapters, while describing Nehru's engagements with the different national policies and movements that were part of the freedom struggle of India also dwell on Nehru's extended and almost ubiquitous prison life. It is in these chapters that Nehru talks about his prison life in details and also of many experiences and philosophical insights that he gained during his long stays in prison. Chapter forty five titled "Animals in Prison" remains one of the most widely read chapters of the autobiography and gives the reader an understanding of Nehru's nuances of writing as also his oneness with nature. In between, we also find Nehru discussing at length about his ideas regarding religion in chapter forty seven titled "What is Religion?" which becomes one of the more well-known portions of the autobiography. The rest of the autobiography is again more of a description of his association with the freedom movement and his own musings regarding the status of affairs which find reflections in such chapters like "India Old and New" and "Democracy in East and West". It is interesting to note that despite the autobiography being dedicated to his wife Kamala Nehru who, Nehru lets the reader know, is no longer with him, the actual recorded instances of Nehru's interactions with his wife is hardly there. It is towards the very last part of the autobiography, in chapter sixty five titled "Eleven Days", that the reader actually gets an insight into Nehru's relationship with his wife. Kamala Nehru is seriously ill and Nehru is given some respite from his prison life to meet his ailing wife. The period of his leave is indeterminate and it later on turns out to be only eleven days. In this chapter Nehru talks about his married life of eighteen years and how both his wife and he have grown during this period of time. He also regrets the fact that for long stretches of his married life he has been in prison and thereby missing a family life. His marriage has coincided with the new development of politics in India and thus his absorption in them has taken him farther and farther away from his family. He agrees that both of them were very different in

disposition but over the years they have grown fond of each other and Nehru regrets the fact that he had made her feel neglected and left alone for the many years of his marriage. After eleven days of freedom, Nehru is sent back to prison where he continues his sentence and in between his wife's condition deteriorates. He ends his narrative with an epilogue where he reminisces about the days and months spent in prison. He comes to a conviction that if he is allowed to live his life again, he would make changes in his personal life but not in the decisions of his public life for he feels that those decisions are beyond the scope of alteration.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the title of the collection of letters written by Nehru to his daughter?

2. Which two chapters of the autobiography are the two most widely read chapters?

3. Which portion of his life does Nehru say that he will be unable to change if given a second chance and why?

14.8 THEMES AND ISSUES

RELATIONSHIP WITH GANDHI

Nehru's autobiography is significant as it came some time after Gandhi's own very famous autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Its importance also stems from the fact that we have here one important leader of India commenting on another. We first encounter Gandhi in the narrative when Nehru talks about Gandhi's *satyagraha* and his father's unwillingness to let Nehru join the *satyagraha*. Nehru was enthusiastic about Gandhi's endeavour because he felt that this was a way through which the draconian Rowlatt Act could be opposed through non-violent means. But his father was sceptical about the whole procedure and as it was the early days of Gandhi joining the freedom movement, there was a lot of uncertainty about the ways adopted by him. On Motilal Nehru's request Gandhi came to Allahabad and after a long discussion he asked Nehru not to join the movement yet. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre changed events completely and Nehru became inevitably linked with the freedom movement. Gandhi first presided over the Congress in the Amritsar session and this was the beginning of the rise of Gandhi as a national leader. Along with it the Khilafat Committee also started making itself heard and it came more and more under the influence of Gandhi. Eventually the merging together of the Khilafat movement and the political movement took place with the Congress adopting Gandhi's non-violent non-co-operation movement. In a Moslem League meeting held earlier in the year of 1920, Gandhi addressed a group of people regarding involvement in the freedom struggle. Nehru was not very convinced regarding the ability of the people gathered there as he felt that they lacked the initiative and when Gandhi started speaking, the men gathered there were still unconvinced. Gandhi despite arguing for a non-violent struggle spoke with a lot of military metaphors and the impact of Gandhi's eloquence was such that all the men gathered there joined the movement.

Nehru gives an estimate of Gandhi's character with regards to his association with the freedom movement and his methods of achieving it. Gandhi was much disturbed by the way in which the concept of swaraj was carried out. He was in favour of complete non-violence and any association with violence was against his character.

Nehru charts clearly the rise and apparent decline of Gandhi's popularity not only among the masses but also among the intelligentsia and the British administration. Nehru is eulogistic regarding Gandhi's abilities despite his apparent frailty and quiet demeanour. He considers Gandhi to be even desperately meek and that Gandhi knew that it is this quality of his which allowed him to command the masses. Nehru also feels that Gandhi had almost a hypnotic hold over the audience when he spoke which has less to do with his oratory powers or the language he used. It was more the sincerity of the man and his personality which enamoured the audience as also a sense of great reserves of inner power. Nehru also emphasises that Gandhi's popularity and importance in the Indian political scene is also a result of the tradition that had grown about him. Anyone not knowledgeable of this tradition would not value or respect Gandhi as much as the Indian population. Nehru's ultimate tribute lies in his analysis of Gandhi having "found an inner peace, he radiated it to others and marched through life's tortuous ways with firm and undaunted step" (*An Autobiography* 130).

WHAT IS RELIGION?

Nehru's speculations regarding religion start with Gandhi's fast unto death because Ramsay MacDonald has given separate electorates to the Depressed Classes. Nehru is sceptical with regards to Gandhi's method of fighting the freedom movement. Nehru's approach to the relation between politics and religion is made very clear through his disapproval of Gandhi's use of religion in politics. He is in fact indignant that Gandhi has tried to mix politics and religion and thus he says: "I felt angry with him at his religious and sentimental approach to a political question, and his frequent references to God in connection with it. He even seemed to suggest that God had indicated the very date of the fast. What a terrible example to set!" (*An Autobiography* 370). The reverence and respect that the nation holds for Gandhi makes it difficult for rational and logical thoughts to cultivate. This attitude according to Nehru is not the right one for the nation's progress. Nehru therefore asks the most important question regarding the relationship between religion or faith and a nation as a whole: "(Gandhi) had the flair for action, but was the way of faith the right way to train a nation? It might pay for a short while, but in the long run?" (*An Autobiography* 374).

Nehru's anguish is evident as he struggles to come to terms with a nation which is close to his heart yet is alien to him. He says, "I felt lonely and homeless, and India, to whom I had given my love and for whom I had laboured, seemed a strange and bewildering land to me. Was it my fault that I could not enter into the spirit and ways of thinking of my countrymen?" (*An Autobiography* 374). Religion is a key factor in India and the various religions not only take pride in their existence but make their presence felt "by breaking heads". Organised religion has been a cause of horror for Nehru and yet he knows that there is more to it because otherwise it would not have been able to provide peace and succour to many impoverished souls. But he is very dissatisfied with the prevalent religions and he finds that be it Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism, religion seems to be not only a safe ground away from doubts and misgivings but also an assurance of a prosperity in a future life which will compensate for whatever this life hasn't been able to provide with. This notion of religion is not acceptable to Nehru for it immediately robs this life of any value in itself and rather attaches importance with something in future that is unseen by everyone. Nehru rather favours the Chinese way which is at once ethical but not really religious in sentiment. Nehru says that the word 'religion' is a very loaded one which is open to many interpretations. And in any language this particular word religion (or its equivalent) has a complex and mangled mass of meanings.

According to Nehru, religion "consists of the inner development of the individual, the evolution of his consciousness in a certain direction which is considered good. What the direction is will again be a matter for debate" (*An Autobiography* 399). In this definition of religion, Nehru does not refer to God, or any form of direct relationship between a Creator and His creation. There is also no allusion to soul or after life despite these concepts being an integral part of any religion. He accepts that religion has some amount of inner struggle and consciousness too but he categorically rejects that this internal development, particularly of that of people in the East, has happened because external or industrial development hasn't taken place. For Nehru, the schism that exists between the East and the West is not going to be covered through harbouring of notions that despite our external paucity of material wealth we are far advanced than the West internally.

Nehru tries to come to a conclusive definition of the term religion and therefore looks at the concept from the analysis of three different persons. First, he looks at Gandhi's concept of the term which says that it is impossible for any man to live without religion. Gandhi feels that people who say that they have no relation with religion do it out of their egotism rather than any real basis. For Gandhi, it is intense longing and devotion for truth that has drawn him towards politics and therefore those who feel that there is no relation between politics and religion actually do not know the meaning of religion. To this Nehru adds that Gandhi's definition of religion is probably more in a moral and ethical sense and thus the use of the same word but with different interpretations makes understanding even more difficult. Nehru then gives a more modern definition of religion which has been given by Professor John Dewey. According to Dewey, religion is "whatever introduces genuine perspective into the piecemeal and shifting episodes of existence" or "any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles, and in spite of threats of personal loss, because of conviction of its general and enduring value, is religious in quality". Nehru feels that if such a definition of religion is accepted then there can be no objection from anybody to it. Lastly, Nehru refers to Romain Rolland's rather elaborate definition of religion. For Rolland, religion implies a motivation for a search for truth at any cost and sacrifice for winning it. Even skepticism can be a form of religion if it emanates from a true nature and expresses strength rather than weakness. Nehru ends with the thought that he cannot probably fulfil every condition laid down by Rolland but he can definitely try to be a follower of this thought process.

PRISON LIFE

Before his first imprisonment in 1921, Nehru writes that prison life was an unknown feature of his life and almost a novelty. At the same time, imprisonment was not a new feature for people participating in the freedom movement in India. What was new for Nehru was the fact that till that point of time his politics was bourgeois in nature and he felt as if he was drifting along with the movement. It was his first arrest and imprisonment along with a series of it later on that put things in perspective for him.

Prison held a particular position in the general imagination which was not at all a flattering one and held tales of untold terror. Nehru records that prison was an unknown place of “isolation, humiliation, and suffering” for many people and it was imagined that the people inside the prisons were dangerous criminals. From the 1920s onwards there was voluntary courting of arrest and prison going which changed people’s perception of prison to a large extent. At the same time, the average middle class person who went to jail during the freedom movement was not exactly the common criminal and the authorities were perplexed how to treat such people. Such prisoners were also not interested in escaping as they had no necessity to do so. They could just say that they regret their actions in going against the British government and they would be allowed to go. However, such an action would not only bring ignominy but would also amount to withdrawing from the movement itself. As such, the prisoners were also a novelty to the jail authorities and they did not know what to do with such prisoners. In the early days, therefore, such prisoners were allowed certain luxuries like newspapers and interviews with relatives. However, such favours were strictly denied later on.

Nehru feels that prison life is a drab one and the overall ambience is one of oppression. There is in general violence and menace in the air and both the mind and the body is suppressed and repressed. Prison life has taught Nehru the importance of the most mundane of things. The constraints that life in prison puts on the body does not necessarily make the person give up his sense of property despite there being precious few to call one’s own. At the same time, there is a physical longing too for the simple pleasures of life which are denied inside the jail. Despite this, he has made himself accustomed to the prison life and keeps himself engaged in the daily work. Though life continues at its daily pace, there are often times when he feels irritated with things in general and is out of humour. The bright spot in this rather dull existence is the day when he gets to meet other people from outside, what he terms as “interview days”. These meetings can be good or bad depending on the news received but after they ended there is that inevitable feeling of “emptiness and loneliness”. There are also often intrusions from prison officials. Nehru later on even gives up these meetings because of the treatment his wife and mother have received at the hands of prison officials at Allahabad jail and later on from the government. This has made Nehru forsake meeting

his family for seven months altogether and this barren period is supplanted by the letters that he received. Letters bring immense pleasure to him but at the same time there is the anxiety also of unpleasant news. Nehru says that both writing and receiving letters in jail makes one unruffled. It disturbs the natural state of mind and makes it difficult to concentrate on daily activities. Prison life thus became almost his natural life and it allowed him some forced leisure which he used for his writing. He was initially irritated by the lack of privacy but later on he managed to take that into stride too. It is more the simple pleasures of life which he missed the most like the sound of women's and children's voices and once he realised that he has not heard the bark of a dog for nearly eight months.

On the other hand, Nehru feels that prison life has made it easier for him to understand the other non-political prisoners who were also part of the prisons in which he has been kept. He refuses to look at them as criminals and also empathises with their lot. His understanding of the circumstances in which many people find themselves imprisoned, sometimes for life, reflects on his ability to analyse human nature and weaknesses which drive people to commit crimes. Yet Nehru does not look at the 'criminal types' as beyond hope and feels that many of the people may not even be guilty of the crimes for which they are imprisoned. He feels that government support and encouragement can change many of the hardened criminals to become "valuable assets to the country". The long hours and days of confinement have compelled Nehru to think about prisoners' rights and how far it is possible to provide for the prisoners within the confined status. Nehru has realized that it is almost redundant to talk about the rights of prisoners when the whole of India is under siege. At the same time, Nehru says it is irrelevant to talk about emancipating the minds of prisoners as a large number of them are not allowed any reading or writing material. There are only the A class prisoners who are allowed to read or write and even that is very meagre compared to prisoners in the civilized countries. The fact that prison life should enable prisoners to reform themselves is lost in India.

Philip Holden says that prison for Nehru was an analogy for the process of colonisation itself where an outward show of efficiency was used to mask the cruelty and indifference to human suffering. The individual prisoner loses his identity and is

enforced into a process of incarceration stripping him of his spirit and enclosed in what Nehru terms as “stool pigeons”. On the other hand, Holden also points out that prison served a more important function as it acted as a disciplining ground for Nehru. It is the place in which Nehru perfected his bodily regime as well as invested time in reading and writing.

14.9 SUMMING UP

In this unit you have learned about the development of autobiography in India particularly of autobiographies written in English. The importance of the society rather than the individual finds reflection in many of the autobiographies written in India. At the same time you have gained a fair understanding of the two autobiographies taken up for analysis here. Both the autobiographies present the history of India but from very different perspectives. Chaudhuri’s labyrinthine narrative charts the social and political history of India but skirts around many important issues for which he has been aptly criticized. The fact that he has not been able to make much of his life probably acted as a detrimental factor in the autobiography inspiring any hope in the mind of the reader regarding the situations and thereby presenting a very bleak scenario. At the same time, Chaudhuri also suffered from the nagging thought that he is not a known figure and therefore his work should emphasize the social rather than the personal. Nehru, on the other hand, suffered from no such delusions and yet his work delved much on the social than on the personal. Though the output for both authors remained the same yet the factors influencing Nehru were very different. For Nehru, the circumstances provided an ideal platform for the revelation of the self within the context of the society, a self who has got potential and sees hope for change in a system which demands personalities like him. Set in the pre-independence era, Nehru’s work embodies not only the struggle that the nation itself is going through but also the fact that it is also the struggle of an individual trying to establish himself within these turbulent times and hoping for change. Nehru has accepted the past, not only of his own life but also of the nation, and tries to model the future on the basis of the past events and rectify them where necessary. Chaudhuri, however, looks back at the nation and his personal life from a presumed

notion of decay which is coloured by his slavishness to everything pertaining to England.

Chaudhuri's vantage point remains often that of an outsider trying to gauge out the faults of the system while Nehru looks inward to find possibilities of change. Despite that, Chaudhuri's version of India isn't a completely flawed and it looks at the nation from the perspective of a commoner who is not at the helm of affairs. The fact that Nehru is a historically important figure makes any reader of the autobiography take notice of what he is saying with alacrity as also probably a misguided belief in the truthfulness of the account. On the other hand, Chaudhuri's work speaks from the point of view of an "unknown" Indian who tries to make sense of the unfolding of history. But the problem that remains with Chaudhuri's work is its extreme affinity towards everything English and denouncing of anything Indian. It immediately restricts the reader in accepting even those facts which he presents with his uncanny power of observation and a knack for eloquence.

The basic points of departure between the two works remain Chaudhuri's extreme reluctance to talk about his personal life and his ending the autobiography with a grandiose essay on the history of India. Nehru, on the other hand, despite talking about the national affairs also posits before the reader nuggets of his own life which makes him more humane and not just a figure of national importance.



14.10 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the growth of autobiographical writing in India.
2. Discuss the early years of childhood of Chaudhuri's life and how his presentation of it is an inversion of the general method of writing autobiography?
3. Why is Chaudhuri so emphatic regarding the colour theory and the false sense of superiority?
4. Elucidate on Chaudhuri's anglophilia and the reflection of it in his autobiography.
5. What is Chaudhuri's personal conception of Indian history and how objective is it?
6. Discuss how Nehru conceptualises Gandhi as a person and Gandhi as a political figure.

7. What are Nehru's views on organised religion?
8. How is Nehru's struggle with religion also a struggle of ideology between Gandhi and himself with regards to politics?
9. Discuss the different definitions of religion given by Nehru. How are these definitions different from the prevalent definitions?
10. Why did Nehru consider his politics bourgeois before going to prison?
11. Analyse Nehru's concept of prison life.



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MODULE VI: MAHESH DATTANI: *ON A MUGGY NIGHT IN MUMBAI*

UNIT 15: SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL IDENTITY CRISIS IN DATTANI

UNIT STRUCTURE

- 15.0 Introduction
- 15.1 Learning Objectives
- 15.2 Mahesh Dattani: Life and Works
- 15.3 Indian English Drama: The Background
- 15.4 Reading the Play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*
- 15.5 Major Themes
- 15.6 Major Characters
- 15.7 Style of the Play
- 15.8 Summing Up
- 15.9 References and Recommended Readings

15.0 INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most popular faces of contemporary Indian English drama. A full-time theatre personality, Dattani is actively engaged in acting, directing, and writing plays in English. His plays constantly explore the issues of marginalisation and identity crisis seen in the contemporary society. This unit will discuss one of the most important plays of Dattani *A Muggy Night in Mumbai* where uncertainties and anxieties of minorities namely, gays and lesbians in a society dominated by heterosexist norms are foregrounded.

15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to familiarize the students with the dramatic writings of the noted Indian English playwright Mahesh Dattani. After reading this unit you will be able to

- know the life and works of Mahesh Dattani.

- do a close reading of one of his famous plays *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*
- investigate how, in the play, Dattani effectively and openly deals with the difficulties, handicaps, and fears encountered by people with alternative sexuality.

15.2 MAHESH DATTANI: LIFE AND WORKS

Born on the 7th of August 1958, in Bangalore, Dattani was educated in Baldwin's High School and St. Joseph's College of Arts and Science, Bangalore.

Mahesh Dattani started his career as a copywriter in an advertising firm. He formed **Playpen**, a theatre group of celebrated acclaim in 1984. In 1986, Dattani wrote his first full-length play *Where There's a Will*. In 1998, his own theatre studio was set up to train and promote new talents in the art of acting, directing, and stage writing. However, Dattani shot into fame after winning the Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection *Final Solutions and Other Plays* in 1998.

Till now Mahesh Dattani has written sixteen plays which include radio plays, screen plays and stage plays. He has two collections to his name entitled *Collected Plays Vol. 1* (2000), and *Collected Plays Vol. 2* (2005). The first volume consists of the plays- *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Do the Needful*, *Final Solutions*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Tara*, *Dance like a Man* and *Where There's a Will*. The second volume contains ten plays, namely *Dance like a Man*, *Seven Steps around the Fire*, *Thirty Days in September*, *Clearing the Rubble*, *Mango Souffle*, *The Swami and Winston*, *Morning Raga*, *Uma and the Fairy Queen*, *Ek Alag Mausam* and *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child*. He has also directed the films *Morning Raga* and *Mango Soufflé* based on his stage plays. Apart from writing and directing plays, Dattani is also actively involved in academic assignments. He regularly teaches theatre courses at Portland State University, Oregon, USA.

Mahesh Dattani's plays often deal with the complicated dynamics of modern urban family and focuses on the theme of identity. As a playwright, Dattani focuses on socially relevant subjects like alternative sexuality, gender identity, human relationships and communal harmony. Characters in his plays always reel under the

repressive weight of hegemonic cultural constructs such as sexuality, religion and tradition. His plays are about societies and contexts in which conventional and mainstream norms of sexuality smother differential identities. It is important to note is that the characters in Dattani's plays are often from the middle class.

As suggested earlier, Mahesh Dattani explores crucial issues that concern individual and collective sexual identity, in a society which is going through rapid and turbulent change. The centre-stage of his plays are occupied by individuals who are confronted with problematical and testing moral choices. Bijay Kumar Das in the preface to his book *Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays* (2008), puts it thus:

Dattani concentrates on contemporary society and reality in the fast changing world. His plays are topical dramas, and the questions he addresses are those relating to feminine identity, religion, communal tension and sexuality. What one loves in his plays is the fascinating way in which he presents the dynamics of personal and moral choices while focusing on human relationships.

Dattani's plays often dive deep into the problematic issue of sexuality and sexual identity. Sexuality is an important marker of identity. However, it is the issue of alternative sexuality that lie at the heart of Dattani's plays. The theme of gay sexuality finds treatment in most of his plays, namely, *Seven Steps around the Fire*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Do the Needful*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. In these plays Dattani explores the social psychological world of the gay and homosexuals, demonstrating how hegemonic or for that matter heterosexist norms of sexual behaviour stifle individual choices. As already suggested, these plays represent a group of individuals who are pitifully caught between the hegemony of conventional social norms of sexuality and their own sexual orientations. Almost every character in these plays experiences the angst largely borne out of the clash between normative sexuality and the individual sexual preference of the gay and homosexuals. These plays manage to uncover the distressing and pathetic life the gay, lesbian and transgendered are forced to live in a society where heterosexuality is the only acceptable way of sexual interaction. The characters in Dattani's plays are often

people with what is termed as alternative sexuality of different types – homosexuals, bisexuals and transgendered. It is not unexpected that the sexual orientations, desires and behaviours of these people are not accorded social approval in a heterosexist society, a society that categorizes sexuality either as male or female. In other words, these societies refuse to accommodate not only the sexual preferences of the homosexuals, gays, and lesbians but also their sexual identity. On the contrary, these people are often relegated to the margins of social life, compelled to live an alienated life. In other words, the homosexuals are forced to live like an outcaste in these societies where heterosexuality is the only accepted way of life. Dattani aims to deal with those tricky questions where the individuals with alternative sexuality are trying to negotiate a space and less constrained existence for themselves. Eventually, his plays problematise long-standing notions of sexuality and expose their inadequacies.

15.3 INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMA: THE BACKGROUND

The lineage of Indian English drama can be divided into two parts – pre-independence and post-independence. It is also noteworthy that most of the plays in Indian English are translated works from vernacular languages. In fact, very few of them are written originally in English. Therefore, the essence of these plays is quite Indian in flavour. Therefore, the use of vernacular words or phrases is a ubiquitous occurrence in them and justifiably it renders them the much-required realistic flavour.

Although India has a rich dramatic heritage, the development of Indian English play had been a staggering one. A good number of plays have been written and performed, but not many of them have met with success on stage. Indian English drama, like Indian English fiction and poetry, was an offspring of the colonial encounter. However, it has not been much acknowledged in terms of creativity or critical review. The reasons for this stagnation of Indian English drama in comparison to poetry or fiction are varied. The non-availability of stage-worthy plays is the chief among them. In fact the creation of a convincing theatre in English has always been the greatest challenge for Indian playwrights. It is often said that the earliest playwrights were not experimental enough either in their choice of subject matter or stagecraft. Another handicap was the lack of visual effect which marred what could

otherwise be spectacular theatrical performances. Another handicap was the language itself. The success of a play depends on its spectatorship. It was difficult for plays written in a foreign tongue to reach the illiterate masses of India. It is often cited as the chief reason why Indian plays written in English have been confined only to a limited metropolitan audience. Critics have often suggested that the dialogues of these plays lacked fluency and humour to sustain the interest of the viewers. On the contrary, the modern playwrights like Mahesh Dattani and Girish Karnad have tried to be experimental by using natural dialogues, realistic settings and cultivating new techniques in terms of stage-worthiness and dramatic craftsmanship. In recent times Indian English drama has developed a lot in terms of technique and subject matter but still its production has been midget.

15.3.1 PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

Despite the initial handicaps, Indian English plays have carved its niche in the realm of theatre. Tiding over initial hurdles the genre not only established itself but also began to blossom in the hands of masters like Rabindranath Tagore, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Sri Aurobindo, and T. P. Kailasam. Inspired by them in the entire pre-independence period generations of creative talents have been making efforts to write plays.

The honour of being the first Indian English playwright is attributed to Krishna Mohan Banerjee (1813-1885), whose play *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta* appeared in 1831. The play revolves around the life of a young Bengali youth who is caught amidst the conflict between traditional and liberal views. However, the real journey of Indian English drama is said to have begun with Michael Madhusudan Dutt's (1824-1873) translated play *Is this Called Civilization?* (1871), a play that deals with contemporary social life and issues.

In the pre-independence period there were playwrights like Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), T.P. Kailasam (1884-1946), A.S.P. Ayyar (1899-1963), H.N. Chattopadhyaya (1898-1990), Bharti Sarabhai (1912-1990), and

others. Most of these playwrights wrote plays about social problems; their plays bear a strong influence of myths and religious beliefs of the Indian society.

Rabindranath Tagore is celebrated more as a poet than as a playwright. In fact, his poetry tends to overshadow his dramatic oeuvre. His plays are ordained with a variety of ideas which form the very basis of his plays. The effect of Shakespeare, Ibsen and Kalidasa is quite visible on him. His plays are marked by his reflection upon as well as awareness of the changing time. He could see the uncertainty that fogged the life values of the changing Indian society. His plays are also important for the fact that in these Tagore effectively synthesized elements from the Bengali folk theatre of *jatra* with those from the Sanskrit drama. They are also remarkable for their profound symbolism. Tagore is primarily a humanist and it is not unusual that his plays primarily explore the mysterious existence of human life and its problems. Tagore's play *Sanyasi or the Ascetic* (1923), is an English transcreation of the Bengali play *Prakritir Pratisodh* and is concerned with human beings' search for the Infinite in the finite. Another play *Malini* (1923), depicts the conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism only to show that it is only the religion of love that is essential for a peaceful co-existence. Tagore's plays *Chitra* (1913), *Gandhari's Prayer* (1897), and *Karna and Kunti* are based on *The Mahabharata*. The play *Chitra* shows that true love transcends physical beauty and is formed by spiritual union. *The Waterfall or Muktaadhara* (1922), is based on the political convictions of the playwright where he tries to show that a science and technology that is not guided by rationality, compassion, and spirituality is a meaningless exercise. *The Cycle of Spring* (1917), a translation of his Bengali play *Phalguni*, celebrates the grandeur of life. Another play *Red Oleanders* (1926), translated from his Bengali play *Rakta Karabi* also celebrates humanistic values.

Tagore's dramatic technique is simple yet convincing. He is a gifted technician who uses simple props to substantiate his ideas. His plots are compact and are coloured by songs, stylized dialogue and prelude, a characteristic feature of Sanskrit plays. The influence of the local folk-theatre, 'Jatra' is seen in his accommodation of myths, legends, symbols and allegories.

Sri Aurobindo was influenced by both Eastern and Western thought which is also reflected in his dramatic works. He wrote five complete plays between 1905 and 1915, namely, *Perseus the Deliverer*, *Vasavadutta*, *Rodogune*, *The Viziers of Bassora* and *Eric the King of Norway*. However, it is only *Perseus the Deliverer* that was published in his lifetime, in the year 1907. His unfinished plays are *The Birth of Sin*, *The House of Brut*, *The Maid in the Mill*, *Prince of Edur* and *Prince of Mathura*. Love is the central theme of Aurobindo's plays. Interestingly, Sri Aurobindo wrote plays on the lines of Elizabethan drama and took the use of blank verse to new heights in his plays. At the same time the influence of classical Sanskrit drama is also discernible in them. With five complete blank verse plays and six complete plays his contribution to the field is priceless. All of his plays are divided in five Acts with different scenes and subplots.

The plays of H.N. Chattopadhyaya are social in nature. His collection *Five Plays* (1937) comprises of *The Window*, *The Parrot*, *The Sentry's Lantern*, *The Coffin* and *The Evening Lamp*. He was deeply inspired by the progressive movement and its effect is visible in the robust realism of his plays. He depicts the social problems of his contemporary time with a sympathetic humane touch. All of these plays reveal the social consciousness and commitment of their author and are symbolic in nature. Chattopadhyaya is a relentless champion of the cause of the wretched and the downtrodden. In fact, he is viewed as the first major Indian English playwright who took up the cause of the working class. His realism could be compared to the likes of Shaw, Ibsen and Galsworthy. He also authored seven plays in verse, which appeared under the title *Poems and Plays* in 1927. This set of plays also hold a place of great value in the tradition of Indian English drama as they are based on materials drawn from the lives of Indian saints and are known as hagiological plays.

Despite the richness of themes and the attempt to synthesize of more than one dramatic tradition, the plays of Tagore and Aurobindo failed to meet with any success on stage. The plays of H. N. Chattopadhyaya also failed to achieve any remarkable success. However, the historical value of these plays is incomparable as they laid the

foundation of an entire tradition of Indian English plays to be continued and nourished by successive band of writers.

A.S.P Ayyar writes about the social evils of the Indian society and his plays are replete with reformatory ideas. His play *Sita's Choice* (1935), is based on the theme of widowhood. *The Slave of Ideas* (1941), is a play that is based on the theme of marital relationship where the spiritual nature of the husband is shown in contrast to the materialistic outlook of a wife. *The Clutch of the Devil* (1926), questions the superstitions related to witchcraft which was and is still practised in some rural areas of India. Some of his plays like *The Trial of Science for the Murder of Humanity* (1942), is overtly allegorical in nature and is characterized by a light touch of humour and irony. Ayyar is also known as a pioneer of historical plays in Indian English. *A Mother's Sacrifice* (1937) is drawn out of the historical character of Panna who sacrifices her own son for Prince Udaya Singh. The play is also a protest against the exploitation of the lower caste. His plays are reformatory in tone and orientation

T.P. Kailasam wrote both in English and Kannada. His plays explore the rich cultural heritage of India by exploiting Indian myths and history. Some of his well-known plays are- *The Burden* (1933), *Fulfilment* (1933), *A Monologue* (1933), *The Purpose* (1944), *The Curse or Karna* (1946) and *Keechaka*. Kailasam's plays are based on Indian mythology. However, the playwright gives the mythological theme a modern day twist to make it of contemporary relevance. In *The Burden* he appropriates a single episode of *The Ramayana* to make it into a play. Similarly, the plots of *The Purpose*, *Fulfilment* and *The Curse or Karna* are taken from *The Mahabharata*.

Bharti Sarabhai has two plays to her credit, namely, *The Well of the People* (1943) and *Two Women* (1952). They stand tall for not only the playwright's brilliant exploitation of Gandhian perspectives and social but also for her excellent use of dialogues. The beauty of her play lies in her compassionate handling of the common man and his problems.

To sum up, the pre-independence Indian English drama failed to meet with any remarkable achievement chiefly for its lack of stageability. Despite their poetic

excellence, thematic variety, technical virtuosity, verbal texture and its foregrounding of human and moral values, except a few, the plays were not geared for actual stage production.

15.3.2 INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMA IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

Although Indian English drama showed very little development immediately after the independence, quite a few playwrights held it up high. Foremost among them is Asif Currimbhoy (1928-1994). He occupies a unique place in the realm of Indian English drama for his fecundity, versatility, and social commitment. He is a prolific dramatist who has thirty plays to his credit. It is the incorporation of documentary and cinematic technique that wins a unique place for his plays such as *The Doldrums* (1960), *The Dumb Dancer* (1961), *The Captives* (1963), *Goa* (1964), *The Hungry Ones* (1965), *An Experiment with Truth* (1969), *The Refugee* (1971). It is important to note that he is often viewed as India's first authentic voice in theatre. The fusion of elements of pantomime, dance and song to create powerful images augments the theatrical value of his plays.

Although known primarily as a poet, Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004), wrote altogether five plays and his collection *Three Plays* (1969), consists of *Nalini*, *Marriage Poem* and *The Sleep-walkers*. Ezekiel, in his plays, mostly explores the world and superficiality of urban middle class, and the issue of marriage. He uses satire, wit and irony to show the prejudices prevalent in his time.

The plays of Lakhan Deb and Gurcharan Das (1943-) energized and widened the scope of historical drama in Indian English literature. Lakhan Deb made significant contribution to the area of historical plays by writing two important plays – *Tiger's Claw* (1967) and *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* (1976). Gurcharan Das is another playwright who used Indian vernacular words to impart realism, freshness and immediacy to his plays. His celebrated play *Larins Sahib* (1970) is based on the events in Punjab during 1846-47. He also wrote *Mira* (1971) and *Jakhoo Villa*, the latter dealing with the theme of decadence of a Hindu family.

Gieve Patel's (1940-) play *Princes* (1970) is the first Parsi play, set in a semi-urban Parsi locality of South Gujarat. However, the play goes beyond the depiction of Parsi life and engages with an issue which is an essentially Indian one. Pratap Sharma (1939-2011) has carved out a place for himself for his bold handling of the theme of sex in *The Professor Has a War Cry* (1970) and a *Touch of Brightness* (1970). G.V. Desani's (1909-2000), *Hali* is a well-acclaimed play that deals with the quest for fulfilment that motivates all human beings.

In more recent times a few Indian English dramatists stand taller amongst their contemporaries for innovative acumen and technical virtuosity. Some of these playwrights are Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972), Badal Sircar (1925-2011), Girish Karnad (1938-2019), Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008), and Mahesh Dattani (1958-). What marks the plays of these dramatists is their fearless engagement with politics and dynamics of identity. A relentless crusader of human values, Mohan Rakesh dramatizes the plight of those falling prey to socio-economic discrimination and exploitation. Plays like *One Day in Ashadha* and *the Great Swans of the Waves* draws on Indian history and mythology to highlight contemporary problems.

Badal Sircar is another playwright to contribute significantly to the field. He is known as the "barefoot playwright". He externalizes on stage the inner existential conflict of modern man. He has changed the very means of theatre experience. Like most Western playwrights he diminishes the mental and physical boundaries that separate the characters of the play from the spectator. Some of his plays are *Solution X*, *Evam Inderjit*, *Pagla Ghoda*, *There is not End*, etc.

Vijay Tendulkar writes both in Marathi and English and his plays highlight contemporary social, economic and political problems. He has written twenty eight full length and twenty one one-act plays. Some of his translated plays are *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1968), *Ghasiram Kotwal* (1972), *Sukhrum Binder* (1972), *The Vultures* (1982), and *Kamala* (1982). These plays harp upon the theme of the individual and his confrontation with a hostile surrounding. Tendulkar effectively links the problem of individual identity to the theme of violence.

Girish Karnad brings the best expression of Kannada culture and theatre to Indian English drama. His plays are precise, flexible and dynamic in nature. He makes careful use of dramatic devices like parallelism, contrasts and suspense which gives his plays their logical development. Both the plot and characters are created in equilibrium and both help in the promotion and development of each other. He introduces tension and conflict in his plays and the actions of the characters intensify this conflict and elevate the effect of the climax until everything resolves on the onset of the denouement. The language of his plays is rich and apt. Karnad has authored plays like *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, *The Fire and the Rain* etc. The first three plays are based on legend, history and myth respectively. *Yayati* reinterprets a theme from the Mahabharata in the present context. Yayati is representative of the modern man who has lost all meaning of life. The playwright shows the theme of existentialism of the modern man who has lost all purpose and finds himself alone and worthless. The playwright uses the help of a legendary character and situates the modern man in a similar circumstance as the legendary character. In the play *Tughlaq* the protagonist Tughlaq is a visionary, idealist and a learned man. *Hayavadana* is based on folk tales. He uses folk materials, myths and history to show man's search for identity in a disillusioned world. He effectively does this by creating an atmosphere of absurdity in the very beginning of the play. His plots are based on a series of paradoxes.

Among the women playwrights mention may be made of Mahasweta Devi, Uma Parmeswaran and Manjula Padmanabhan. Mahasweta Devi's plays engage with the need for basic human existence. Human beings need mutual respect and love to exist. Her plays present themes of violation of social justice and basic human rights. Her sympathies are with the underdog sections of the society like the women, children and *dalits*. Her most acclaimed play *Water* is an outlet of the injustice based on the ground of gender difference, caste hierarchy and exploitation. Uma Parmeswaran started her career as a reporter in a newspaper. She brings into stage the glorious culture of India. Her celebrated plays include *Sons Must Die*, *Meera*, *Sita's Promise*, *My Sister*, *Rootless But Green are the Boulevard Tree*, and so on. Majula

Padmanabhan is an internationally recognized playwright whose play *Harvest* has won much critical acclaim.

Although the band of Rakesh, Sircar, Tendulkar and Karnad changed the face of Indian English theatre, it has shot into prominence with the advent of the new generation playwrights like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan. Dattani's plays take into account the invisible and contentious issues of Indian society. His characters and settings are taken from the urban middle class Indian society. He gives voice to the repressed desires that surround the life of modern Indian man and woman. His dramas are contemporary and through them he engages with issues of identity and its politics touching upon dimensions like religion dogmas, orthodox societal views and queer identity. His primary focus is human relationships which depend on dynamics of personal and moral choices. His distinctive place in Indian English drama lies in his innovative stage ideas, craft and his courage to portray sensitive issues like same sex love. As a playwright he draws his inspiration from Vijay Tendulkar and Tennessee Williams.

Dattani's characters are isolated beings. They are in constant search for identity which might lend some stability to their ever revolving lives. Therefore, they are dynamic and life-like. They dive deep into the audiences' hearts for they are lovable, enduring and restless for self-expression. They are caught in the threads of contemporary reality and look for solutions to their problems caused by discrimination, poverty and ignorance. As a playwright Dattani does not suggest solutions. His interest lies in the discussion of the human struggle of everyday life.

The beauty of Dattani's plays also rests in the use of his diction. The dialogues give a new dimension to the performance of his characters. The plot and the action of his plays are so designed to make the performance more compact. It is the performance that reveals the nature of the performers. The strong performances of his characters help the audience relate to unusual themes like homosexuality, bisexuality, etc. He uses vernacular words while writing in English to show the mingling of the Eastern and Western culture. His stage directions are elaborate as his plays are meant to be

staged and performed than merely read. At times the characters become the mouthpiece of the playwright to foreground the authorial message.

15.4 READING THE PLAY ON A MUGGY NIGHT IN MUMBAI

Mahesh Dattani engages with the concerns contemporary society in his plays from a humanistic perspective. He tries to render objective portrayals of human nature with its inherent weaknesses like hypocrisy, emotional disability, discrimination, etc. His chief interest lies in exposing the plight of the marginalized sections of the society. Unhesitatingly and with sheer conviction he gives voices to those sections that are considered invisibles in society. His plays deal with subjects like same-sex love, marriage and family where the characters are outcasts, they are forced to blend with the society and suffer an identity crisis. Unlike most playwrights who merely hint at the issue of homosexuality, Dattani delves deep into the physical needs and psychological insights of his characters and renders them convincingly.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai consists of a simple plot which appears easy to understand but in reality the play has layers of meanings. In the play Dattani shows that sexuality is an important category of differentiation but he refuses to accept any fixed categories. The play depicts the problems one faces by choosing homosexuality over the socially accepted norm of heterosexuality.

The setting of the play is an urban flat in the up market area of Mumbai. The stage is divided into three acting areas. The first is a small flat which is made up in an 'ethnic fashion'. It has a poster of the famous female actor Meena Kumari in the Hindi film *Pakeeza* on the white wall. The windows overlooking the Mumbai skyline acts as a window to the city with its glittering light. The second area appears non-realistic. It comprises three levels and is black and expansive. In this area characters confront their innermost thoughts as they are immediately suspended in a total 'shoonya'. The third area is a bedroom which is hidden from the audience's view. It is a space which is private and secret. The Mumbai skyline acts as the backdrop to these three acting

spaces, the created world of Kamlesh, the private space of the bedroom and the deeper space accommodating the innermost thoughts of the characters.

The play consists of three acts filled with thrill and mystery and it is only towards the end of the final act that the motives of the characters are revealed.

Act I begins in the apartment of Kamlesh who in his bedroom is seen with another male. Kamlesh is seen smoking a cigarette in his sleeping gown and the other male who is apparently the security guard of the apartment is on the process of wearing his dress. The eagerness with which Kamlesh watches the guard makes it clear that they share a very intimate relation. The relationship however seems to be based on monetary needs of one and the sexual passion of another. Kamlesh's wish to tie the untied shoelaces of the guard suggests that he is in need of companionship but the guard's reactions to his emotional advances are not encouraging. It shows that love between men is only pertained within closed doors. The guard belongs to that group of people who delight themselves with the tabooed practice of homosexuality but are unwilling to admit it due to societal fear.

After the guard leaves, the scene changes and a woman is seen in the darkened area of the stage nervously combing her hair. She is Kiran, the sister of Kamlesh. After a quick glance she puts the mirror and the comb back into her bag and composes herself to meet his fiancé Ed who soon enters the room. Ed is a man in his early forties and is wearing a conservative business shirt and looks assertive. He flaunts his love openly and is shown to be very caring about Kiran. From the conversation between them it appears that they are on their way to board a flight.

The scene fades and the focus returns to Kamlesh's flat in Mumbai where Sharad is seen turning on the music system. Some of the homosexuals in the play are shown to be anti-heterosexuals. The sight of the man and his wife in a distant building on the other side of the window disgusts Sharad. Kamlesh is in an agitated mood and announces that he has called for a gathering of his friends to discuss an important matter. Both Sharad and Kamlesh were lovers once upon a time. Although Sharad was truly devoted to the relationship, Kamlesh was torn between his love for his ex-

companion Prakash and his live-in relationship with Sharad. It is clear that Kamlesh had moved on but Sharad is still in love with him. Like heterosexual relationship that has the feeling of jealousy, pain and insecurity attached to it, love between same-sex persons faithfully preaches the same logos. Even though they are not together, Sharad is jealous of the fact that Kamlesh is still hung up on Prakash.

Sharad knows Kamlesh very well. He helped him design the house and all its decors. The poster of Meena Kumari that beautifies the dull white walls was a gift by Sharad and is a dim reminder of his past presence in the flat. The play makes it clear that Sharad is not only well aware of the physical surroundings but is also aware of Kamlesh's innermost feelings.

Deepali enters the scene. She is shown to be concerned about Kamlesh as he sounded low on the phone. She deliberately chooses to ignore Sharad. She too is aware of Kamlesh's past relation with Prakash. The guard re-enters the stage with a packet of refreshments that Kamlesh had previously ordered. Sharad notices the pink mark on his neck which is a mark of his guilt. He deliberately tries to embarrass the guard so that he reveals his relationship with Kamlesh. He says, "Hum log sab bohot besharm hain/ tum bhi besharm ho jao." Kamlesh and Sharad get involved in an argument soon after the guard exists. Deepali tries to pacify them. She is a lesbian and sarcastically remarks that "I am all for the gay men's cause. Men deserve only men." Through their conversations, Dattani tries to show that homosexuals are not very different from heterosexuals, apart from their sexual preferences. The differences between homosexual men and women are similar to their heterosexual counterparts. A man is a man and will act like one irrespective of his sexual preferences and this is also true in the case of a woman.

Ranjit and Bunny soon join in and choose to ignore Sharad in their initial encounter. Bunny is a television star and is recognized by the guests attending a wedding held in the compound of the building. Kamlesh discloses that at one point he wished that he was not gay. This change took place in him after he chose to visit a psychiatrist who is homophobic. Like most of the ignorant and insensitive people of society, the psychiatrist suggested him to practise the "aversion theory". Instead of

helping Kamlesh overcome his anxiety, he tried to force him to become something he is not. Kamlesh accepts that he is unable to forget Prakash and has resorted to relations with strangers in his desperateness to overcome his loneliness.

At this moment an argument arises among the friends as to how a homosexual must lead his life. Bunny suggests the technique of camouflage where one tries to blend in with his surroundings. He is gay in his private life but in the eyes of the world he is a normal, heterosexual figure who has a wife and is a television celebrity displaying manly attributes every Saturday night on the small screen. Ranjit is aware of the fact that homosexuality is reproved in the Indian society which is blinded by conservative curtains. In order to escape this repressive society he chooses to settle abroad with his English partner. It is only Deepali and Sharad who are comfortable with their sexuality. Sharad is overpowering and vocal while Deepali presents her choice in a matured manner.

Sharad takes out the photograph of Kamlesh and Prakash who are shown to hold each other in a tight embrace. He urges Kamlesh to tear up the photo and wipe Prakash out of his memories. As Kamlesh is about to tear up the photo, Kiran enters the flat. In a jiffy he throws the photo out of the window without tearing it. Kiran is Kamlesh's sister. It is by the end of Act I the audiences realize that Ed is none other than Prakash who goes by the name Edwin Prakash Matthew.

By the end of the first act the central problem of the play is established. It consists of the fact that Kiran is in the complete dark about the past relation between Kamlesh and Prakash and that Prakash is none but her fiancé Ed. Kamlesh is ensnared in a trap. He does not want to ruin his sister's dreams by disclosing the secret of Ed to her although he finds it impossible to live without him.

Act II opens at the second level of the dark room. Ed is seen sitting on a bench in a park and spots a person walking towards him. It enacts the first time Ed and Kamlesh met. Ed was contemplating suicide because he is not able to deal with his sexuality. Their identity as gay men is not acknowledged by the society. It is revealed in Kamlesh's words, "they can't see us at all, although we can see them. They must

be blind.” The gay are invisibles. Ed admits that he came to the park to find someone who would listen to his story and found that person in Kamlesh. Kamlesh has saved his life.

The scene then shifts to Kamlesh’s living room where Deepali and Sharad decide that Kamlesh should disclose Ed’s true identity to Kiran. Kamlesh finds himself in a very delicate position. He feels unable to hurt Kiran who has just survived an ugly divorce. According to him, religion and a psychiatrist has led Ed to believe that homosexuality is not a way of life and it is a temptation of the devil. Bunny feels that Ed has a right to live a double life. He can be gay and also have a wife and love her truly. He says that it is unfair to categorize individuals as everybody is entitled to freedom in life. Deepali feels that it is not shame that prevents one to live but the fear of rejection that forces one to take up disguise. In the meantime the photograph has blown away and the last hope of Kiran finding out the truth is lost. Kiran enters the scene and Sharad tries to tell her the truth but is stopped by Kamlesh. He barges out of the door and is followed by Kiran and Kamlesh.

There is again a moment of flashback where Kiran and Kamlesh are seen talking to each other in an open arena. Ed enters and requests Kiran for a dance. By the end of the dance Ed has chosen Kiran over Kamlesh and has succumbed to societal pressure.

Act III is the first time Ed is presented to the audience. He meets Deepali and Ranjit who seem bothered by the wedding downstairs. Ed finds the wedding very normal and has nothing against it. When Kiran, Kamlesh and Sharad enter the room, Ed greets only Kiran. He and Kamlesh act as if they have never met before which surprises Kiran.

Deepali conjures up an act to mimic Ed in order to make him realize his mistake. She makes up the story that Sharad and Kamlesh broke up because Sharad wants to be a heterosexual in order to gain the acceptance of society. Kiran finds the reason absurd and pleads Sharad to remain what he is in reality. Ed feels Sharad has made a sensible decision. Sharad says that by being a heterosexual man he can be a

“real man” and get everything. Sharad’s sarcasm makes Kamlesh fall in love with him again. This stirs a feeling of jealousy in Ed who reveals to Kamlesh in secret that his marriage to Kiran is a means for them to stay close together without sprouting any suspicion.

The guard enters the hall and takes out the missing photograph and informs that everybody in the wedding has seen it and is going to register a complaint against the owner of the flat. Kiran sees the photograph and begins to cry. Ed and Kamlesh come out of the bedroom. Ed tries to convince Kiran to leave with him immediately. Kiran refuses and feels she is let down by the two men she considered important in her life. Ed attempts to commit suicide by throwing himself out of the open window but is prevented by Kamlesh and his friends. He is supported by the guard who takes him out of the flat. Everybody leaves and Kiran and Kamlesh are seen standing and holding each other’s hands against the backdrop of the Mumbai skyline. The play ends with each character moving back into the world outside in search of his or her place and identity. Sharad’s last words give a hint of existentialism and is an important question asked by Dattani to his audiences, “I ask myself what I have got/ what I am and what I am not.”

15.5 SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL IDENTITY IN DATTANI’S PLAY

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai effectively foregrounds the identity crisis or alienation experienced by the gay or homosexuals in a society like that of India. It highlights the tension borne out of the clash between individual desires and social prescriptions as experienced by a homosexual person. The identity of a person is invariably wrapped around in his or her sexuality. In a society where heterosexuality is the norm, homosexuality is always tabooed as a deviance and perversion. This play is all about a group of such gay individuals who are left with no choice or freedom of sexual practice and hence are forced to endure socio-psychological identity crisis or alienation. Every character in the play is haunted by the compulsion to sacrifice his or her own desires and dreams, and thereby, to alienate himself or herself from their real selves. For instance, the protagonist of the play Kamlesh loves Ed alias Prakash. However, his brotherly love for his sister Kiran forces him to reconcile with the reality

of his separation from Prakash, although he does not initiate this break-up. In a way, Kamlesh is trapped between his own desires as a homosexual self and his role as a brother. He is emotionally insecure and is trying hard to overcome the loneliness caused by his separation from Prakash. This insecurity is bolstered by the fact that Prakash/ Ed is about to marry Kiran. In the first act of the play Kamlesh is seen having physical intimacy with the guard. This is better viewed less as an attempt to gratify physical desires and more as a desperate move to tide over his sense of insecurity. That his needs are far from being merely sexual is confirmed by the fact that he keeps on asking the guard whether he does it only for money. Later on, Kamlesh also admits to his friends that his act of sharing intimacy with people like the guard is driven by his desperation to connect and overcome loneliness. Ed/Prakash is caught in a similar trap in that his act of courting Kiran is more of a desperate move to hoodwink society and hide his gay identity. However, in his case, the compulsion is born out of societal fear. It is the fear of being socially ostracized and marginalized that haunts Ed/Prakash, with the consequence that he is forced to part with Kamlesh and marry Kiran solely to pretend heterosexuality. Like Kamlesh, he is also forced to alienate himself from his real self and pose to live as somebody he is not. In short, the fear of being socially marginalized compels him to live a fractured and hypocritical existence by constantly putting on a mask of heterosexuality. However, despite the best of efforts, he is unable to escape from the memory of Prakash and it explains the anguish that he expresses when Kamlesh does not reciprocate his proposal of reviving their relationship. The other two characters who put on the mask of heterosexuality to hide their original sexuality are Bunny and Ranjit. Bunny manages to hide his homosexuality behind the mask of family. Ranjit regularly goes out of India to meet his foreign gay partner. What is remarkable is that both of them are forced to disguise themselves as heterosexual in order to avoid social marginalization or stigma.

The play also highlights the way sexuality is closely intertwined with identity through the predicament of Sharad. Unlike the other characters in the play, Sharad is fascinated by the charm of heterosexuality. He articulates it on more than one occasion. The way he enjoys peeping into a scene of heterosexual sex-making in a nearby building also suggests this. He asserts his love for Kamlesh and tried for one

entire year to make him forget the memories of Prakash. But his efforts are frustrated when Kamlesh fails to forget Prakash. This triangle, not unlike any heterosexual love triangle, generates frustration, jealousy and pain. Sharad is possessive of Kamlesh and taunts out her jealousy at the slightest pretext. He desperately wants to be a heterosexual man, a real man because he is allured by the power associated with manliness. Sharad is unhappy with but his homosexual identity and he is desperate to get rid of it. He is an instance of complete self-denial or disowning of self.

To sum up, Dattani's *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* uncovers the socio-psychological identity crisis endured by the gay in social setups like that of India. Kamlesh, Prakash/Ed, Sharad, Ranjit, and Bunny, all are individuals who are punished for their homosexuality in a society where heterosexuality is the norm. Having been denied space and agency, they are forced either to embrace a fake identity, or to run away from this social set up. Either way, they are compelled to live an alienated life.

15.6 MAJOR THEMES

ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITY

The play explores the presence of homosexuality or alternative sexuality in Indian society dealing with the ways these individuals are viewed as deviants and are subjected to marginalization. The play is all about a set of gay people who are trying to negotiate the clash between individual freedom, wishes and societal restrictions. For these individuals, the socially defined and prescribed roles fail to accommodate their individual choice and freedom. Dattani aims to deal with those tricky questions where the individuals are trying to negotiate space for themselves. Sexuality is an important marker of identity. Dattani's plays mainly tend to dive deep into the problematic issue of sexuality and sexual identity. In fact, they tend to problematise long-standing notions of sexuality and expose the inadequacies of conventional definitions.

Dattani also efficiently brings to light the contradictions and variations in homosexuality. It is not free from contradictions and therefore cannot be reduced to

an unproblematic and essential definition. In fact, the characters in the play bring together the different gay positions and facilitate a dialogue. Kamlesh is weak and extremely insecure, Sharad is his exact opposite. Ed assumes a double identity.

CLASS AND SEXUALITY

The play also brings to the fore the link between class and sexuality. Dattani engages with the economic dimension of sexual labour. Whether the act of sexual intimacy is born from a genuinely felt need or one driven by sheer economic reasons is an important question raised by the play. In the first scene the behaviour of the guard remains open to multiple interpretations. When Kamlesh asks the guard whether he indulges in physical intimacy with Kamlesh only for money the guard refuses to give a straight reply, an act which is not devoid of ambiguity. This, in a way, effectively hints at the reality that the economically underprivileged class are often vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Later, Sharad also accuses Kamlesh of exploiting the guard as sex-object.

MARRIAGE

The play interrogates the institution of marriage at various levels. Marriage is premised on heterosexuality. But the myth of a wholesome heterosexuality is unsettled in more than one instance. The marriage between Kiran and Ed is based on the heterosexual identity of Ed, which is far from being the truth. This precariousness of the myth of a pure and unproblematic heterosexuality as an essential premise of marriage is exposed by Bunny's story as well. On another occasion Sharad offers to invalidate the relationship between Kamlesh and Prakash by refusing to grant it acceptance. According to Sharad and his friends the heterosexual world is run by rituals. They make a subversive use of the ritual of tearing the photo of Kamlesh and Prakash to annul the tie. Instead of fire as witness, they have the sea breeze. The suffering of Kiran at the hands of her first husband exposes the dark side of marriage and the compromises one is forced to commit therein.

15.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS

KAMLESH

Kamlesh is the brother of Kiran. He is emotionally insecure and is struggling desperately to cope with the loneliness caused by his separation from Prakash, with whom he had a love relationship. This insecurity grows further by the fact that Prakash, now assuming a new name Ed is about to marry Kiran. Kamlesh implores Prakash to recognize his gay self which he starts disowning. In the first act of the play Kamlesh is seen having physical intimacy with the guard. His behaviour in that scene can be seen as an attempt to cope up with his emotional insecurity. That his needs are far from being merely sexual is confirmed by his attempts to ensure from the guard that he does not do it only for money. As he reveals himself to his friends, his act is driven by a hope to connect and overcome loneliness. Kamlesh confesses his hypocrisy in loving Sharad only to get over his depression after being separated from Prakash. The guilt feeling which is born out of his realization that he made Sharad go through the same pain and suffering that he was trying to get over is strong enough and he asks for forgiveness.

His insecurity is caused by the fact that Prakash had left him not for another man but because he was ashamed of their relationship. In fact, it is the lack of courage or willingness on the part of the gay people to recognize their own love that grieves Kamlesh. This annoyance even compels him to wish that he was not a gay. Towards the end, the tie between him and Sharad is restored as he realizes that the man he was chasing is an illusion. The play finally unsettles the unproblematic and essential definition of a pure sexuality.

SHARAD

Unlike the other characters in the play Sharad is allured by the charm and power of heterosexuality. He articulates it on more than one occasion. In fact, he peeps into the bedroom of a neighbour. He asserts his love for Kamlesh and tried for one entire year to make him forget the memories of Prakash. But his efforts are frustrated

when Kamlesh fails to forget Prakash. This triangle, not unlike any heterosexual love triangle, generates frustration, jealousy and pain. Sharad is possessive of Kamlesh and taunts out her jealousy at the slightest pretext. He desperately wants to be a heterosexual man, a real man because he is allured by the power associated with manliness.

Sharad hates the fact that Kamlesh never recognizes their love, not even to their friends. He keeps on insulting Kamlesh with his taunts throughout and is desperate for recognition. In fact Sharad appears to be the most insecure of all and it is expressed by the demeaning epithets he uses for himself. He is concerned about Kiran and insists that she is told the truth.

THE GUARD

In the very first act the guard is involved in acts of sexual intimacy with Kamlesh. In the first scene the behaviour of the guard remains open to multiple interpretations. Whether the act of sexual intimacy is born from a genuinely felt need or one driven by sheer economic reasons is an important question. When asked by Kamlesh if he does it only for money the guard gives a reply which is not devoid of ambiguity. He carefully hides his gay affiliation under the pretext of economic needs. In a way, the character of the guard is another reminder of the way a heterosexist society compels gay people to embrace silence and concealment.

DEEPALI

Deepali is proud of her female identity. She cautions Sharad not to insult a female. Deepali's comments on men are full of sarcasm. Her celebration of womanhood is conveyed by the comment-"I thank God. Every time I menstruate. I thank God I am a woman." Deepali's gay reality is not presented explicitly. It is only from the affectionate and intimate tone of her conversation over phone one can make out her love relationship with Tina. Deepali and Kamlesh like each other very much.

Deepali tells him- “If you were a woman, we would be in love” to which Kamlesh responds with the same sentiment.

RANJIT

Ranjit is very assertive of his sexuality and abhors the idea of marriage. He very cleverly twists words and takes Jibes at Deepali for being jealous of his male sexuality. Ranjit is well aware of the price gays pay for living in India. This took him to England where he has been together with his English lover for twelve years. His friends use the term coconut for him for his brown skin and the choice of Europe as an escape from the orthodox Indian milieu. It is through him that Dattani conveys the torment of being both an Indian and gay.

BUNNY

He is a TV star and successfully poses as an ideal father and husband. The ease with which Bunny moves between the two worlds of homosexuals and heterosexuals is noticeable. It appears that he can easily cross over to the other side and adapt to it. He is married and advises Kamlesh to marry. According to him marriage offers that scope for camouflage where a gay can blend with the surrounding and enjoy social acceptance. It is interesting to note that in real life also he is involved in camouflaging as a heterosexual. As a bisexual he supports the wedding between Ed and Kiran as in Ed he sees his own replica. Through him the playwright articulates the idea that we should stop categorizing people as gay or straight or bisexual and allow them space to live. In the final act Bunny realizes that he was an in-between belonging to neither of the world of men and women and undoes the myth of a pure sexual identity.

PRAKASH

Ed Prakash Mathew is the gay lover of Kamlesh. He uses the love of Kamlesh to negotiate his anxiety but leaves him alone once convinced by the charm of heterosexual union to be facilitated through marriage. Like Bunny he is also a bisexual. He hides his gayness from Kiran as well as from the society and performs a

camouflage thereby. Both he and Bunny surrenders to the socially accepted ideology of heterosexuality. In fact he says it candidly that he is not happy with being who he is and wants to be like the rest. He dismisses the photograph as filthy stuff. It is noteworthy that Kiran admires him as a perfect male. The irony is that once he hears from Kamlesh that Kamlesh loves Sharad he starts asserting his love for Kamlesh again.

The photograph becomes the instrument through which the carefully guarded veil is shattered and truth revealed. It evades their grip like the truth of relationship between Kiran and Ed. Once his reality is exposed Ed admits that he did all these only to live. At the end he is heartbroken and seeks the support to live from the guard.

KIRAN

Kiran had a troubled first marriage and is a divorcee. She is almost set to get married to Ed without knowing that Ed and Prakash were lovers. She expresses the need of invisibility to Prakash and relates to him how as a divorcee woman she was a vulnerable target to society's gaze, "Don't let people know about you. You will spend your whole life defending you. If I had a choice, I would stay invisible too." The last thing she wants is a label by society. She knows well the pain to be unloved and breaks down in tears when coming in terms with the truth.

15.7 FORM AND STYLE OF THE PLAY

Dattani effectively uses a set of symbols to convey his ideas. The most interesting aspect of the play is its division of space which is very significant. Kamlesh's small flat is a place where the gay group can meet openly. The ambience inside the room is muggy and extremely hot. This mugginess connotes both the oppression the gay characters inside the rooms suffer as well as the suffocation they experience for the non-fulfilment of their desires. In fact the title of the play beautifully articulates this idea of mugginess. In contrast to the small space available to them there are signs of outside world which has a continuous imposing presence. There is

constant interaction and meeting between the worlds that lie on either sides of the room.

The play is very suggestive. For example, the act of physical intimacy between various characters is suggested in a manner which is very skilful and expressive.

Throughout the play, music resonates. It could be seen as being used as a veil from the world and society that lie outside the room. In fact, the fluctuations in the mood of dramatic scenes in the play are always reinforced by the music of the tape-recorder which plays throughout.

LANGUAGE

Innovativeness is a trademark of Dattani's plays. He makes liberal use of Hindi. For example in the first part the conversation between Kamlesh and the guard takes place through Hindi beautifully crafted by the playwright. It renders the episode more realistic.

The ambience of the room is marked by an extraordinary degree of candidness. Homosexuals in this space of their own articulate their love, affections and anxiety freely. Sharad conveys that to the guard in a frank manner- *Yahan kuch bhi bolne me ya karne mein sharam nahin rakhte...Hum log bahut besharam hain. Tum bhi besharam ban jao.* Again one can see the beautiful use of Hindi.

LET US STOP AND THINK



- The term 'sexuality' refers to the sexual orientation of an individual.
- Sexual orientations that do not conform to the dominant heterosexual norm are referred to as homosexuality or alternative sexuality.
- The term 'alternative sexuality' refers to the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) categories

- The term ‘homosexuality’ refers to a situation where a person feels sexual attraction towards another person belonging to the same sex.
- The term ‘homosexuality’ was coined by the Austrian-born Hungarian journalist Karl-Maria Kertbeny in 1868.

15.7 SUMMING UP

Dattani’s *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* candidly explores the issue of homosexuality and its non-acceptance by the Indian society. In fact, Dattani is the first Indian English playwright to engage with this issue with depth and continuity. All the characters in the play go through the pain of living as an outcast because his or her sexuality does not conform to what the majority views as normal sexuality. They are left with no choice, but either to live as an outcaste or to take up a fake identity. Dattani’s achievement in the play also lies in the fact that he successfully recreates the entire panorama of gay characters cutting across class and social status. There are characters like Bunny Singh, who belongs to a higher class, and enjoys a celebrity status. Similarly, Ranjit also represents the affluent section. At the same time, the Guard represents the underprivileged, and hence, a vulnerable sex-object. What is also important is the accomplished use of the stage-craft which includes the distribution of stage space, the use of effective dialogues and potent symbols. To sum up, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, by Dattani is a notable contribution to the field of Indian English drama.



15.8 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Mahesh Dattani’s handling of the issue of socio-psychological identity crisis in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*.
2. Discuss the issue of alternative sexuality as it is explored by Dattani in the play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*.

3. Examine *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* against the backdrop of contemporary Indian English drama with special reference to its relatively unconventional subject matter and innovative stagecraft.



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