INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

ELECTIVE COURSE: (ENG4 E14)

IV SEMESTER

MA ENGLISH

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INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

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KANTHAPURA

Raja Rao

About the author:

Raja Rao has long been recognised as "a major novelist of our age." His five earlier novels—Kanthapura (1932), The Serpent and the Rope (1960), The Cat and Shakespeare (1965), Comrade Kirillov (1976) and The Chessmaster and His Moves (1988)—and three collections of short stories—The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories (1947), The Policeman and the Rose (1978) and On the Ganga Ghat (1989)—won wide and exceptional international acclaim.

Born in Mysore in 1909, Raja Rao went to Europe at the age of nineteen, researching literature at the University of Montpellier and at the Sorbonne. He wrote and published his first stories in French and English. After living in France for a number of years, Raja Rao moved to the US where he taught at the University of Austin, Texas.

Raja Rao was awarded the 1988 Neustadt International Prize for Literature which is given every two years to outstanding world writers. Earlier, The Serpent and the Rope won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, India's highest literary honour. More recently, Raja Rao was elected a Fellow of the Sahitya Akademi.

An understanding of Raja Rao’s art is enhanced by a contextualization of his novels. Although Rao admitted to several Western influences, his work is best understood as a part of the Indian tradition. Rao regarded literature as Sadhana, or
spiritual discipline; for him, writing was a consequence of his metaphysical life. His novels, hence, essentially represent a quest for the Absolute. From Kanthapura to Comrade Kirillov, Rao’s protagonists grapple with the same concerns: What is Truth? How is one to find it? Their methods vary, as do their results, but they share the same preoccupation. The novels, thus, become chronicles of this archetypal search. Formally, all of his first four novels share certain features. Plot is de-emphasized; the narrative is generally subjective—even idiosyncratic—and episodic. The progression of the narrative is not linear but circular; in the Puranic manner of storytelling, which Rao adapts to the form of the Western novel, there are digressions, stories within stories, songs, philosophical disquisitions, debates, and essays. Characters are also frequently symbolic figures; often, the motivations for their actions might seem puzzling or insufficient. Finally, because the narration is subjective, the language of the narrator also tends to be unique, reflecting the narrator’s peculiarities—his or her social, regional, and philosophical makeup.

**Introduction:-**

Kanthapura, is the story of how a small, sleepy, South Indian village is caught in the whirlpool of the Indian freedom struggle and comes to be completely destroyed. In the foreword, Rao himself indicates that the novel is a kind of sthala-purana, or legendary history, which every village in India seems to have. These local sthala-puranas are modeled on the ancient Indian Puranas—those compendia of story, fable, myth, religion, philosophy, and politics—among which are the Upa Puranas, which describe holy places and the legends associated with them. Hence, several features of Kanthapura are in keeping with the tradition of sthala puranas. The detailed description of the village at the opening of the novel is written in the manner of a
sthala purana, wherein the divine origin or association of a place is established.

The village is presided over by Goddess Kenchamma, the Gramadevata (village deity), and the novel provides a legend explaining her presence there, recalling several similar legends found in the Puranas. Like the place-Gods of the Puranas, Kenchamma operates within her jurisdiction, where she is responsible for rains, harvests, and the well-being of the villagers. She cannot extend her protection to other villages or to outsiders. The village deity thus symbolizes local concerns such as famine, cholera, cattle diseases, and poor harvests, which may have little to do with the world outside the village. Like Kenchamma, the river Himavathy also has a special significance in the novel and recalls passages describing famous rivers in the Puranas, such as the description of the river Narmada in Matsya Purana and the Agni Purana.

Similarly, Kanthapura shares certain narrative techniques with the Puranas. The story is told rapidly, all in one breath, it would seem, and the style reflects the oral heritage also evident in the Puranas. Like the Puranas, which are digressive and episodic, Kanthapura contains digressions such as Pariah Siddiah’s exposition on serpent lore. The Puranas contain detailed, poetic descriptions of nature; similarly, Kanthapura has several descriptive passages that are so evocative and unified as to be prose poems in themselves. Examples are the coming of Kartik (autumn), daybreak over the Ghats, and the advent of the rains. Finally, the narration of Kanthapura has a simplicity and lack of self-consciousness reminiscent of the Puranas and quite different from the narrative sophistication of contemporary Western novelists such as Virginia Woolf or James Joyce.

Kanthapura is also imbued with a religious spirit akin to that of the Puranas. The epigraph of the novel, taken from the sacred
Hindu scripture the Bhagavad Gita (c. fifth century b.c.e.), is the famous explanation of the Hindu notion of incarnation: “Whenever there is misery and ignorance, I come.” The doctrine of incarnation is also central to the Puranas, most of which are descriptive accounts of the avatars of Vishnu. The avatar in Kanthapura is Gandhi, whose shadow looms over the whole book, although he is himself not a character. Incarnation, however, is not restricted to one Great Soul, Gandhi, but extends into Kanthapura itself, where Moorthy, who leads the revolt, is the local manifestation of Gandhi and, by implication, of Truth.

Although the form of Kanthapura is closely modeled on that of the sthala-purana, its style is uniquely experimental. Rao’s effort is to capture the flavor and nuance of South Indian rural dialogue in English. He succeeds in this through a variety of stylistic devices. The story is told by Achakka, an old Brahman widow, a garrulous, gossipy storyteller. The sentences are long, frequently running into paragraphs. Such long sentences consist of several short sentences joined by conjunctions (usually “and”) and commas; the effect is of breathless, rapid talking. The sentence structure is manipulated for syntactic and rhythmic effect, as in the first sentence of the novel: “Our village—I don’t think you have ever heard about it—Kanthapura is its name, and it is in the province of Kara.” Repetition is another favorite device used to enhance the colloquial flavor of the narrative. In addition to these techniques, translation from Kannada is repeatedly used. Nicknames such as “Waterfall Venkamma,” “Nose-scratching Nanjamma,” “Cornerhouse Moorthy” are translated; more important, Kannada idioms and expressions are rendered into English: “You are a traitor to your salt-givers”; “The Don’ttouch-the-Government Campaign”; “Nobody will believe such a crow and sparrow story”; and so on. The total effect is the transmutation into English of the total ethos of another
culture. Kanthapura, with its “Kannadized” English, anticipates the lofty “Sanskritized” style of The Serpent and the Rope, which, stylistically, is Rao’s highest achievement.

Kanthapura is really a novel about a village rather than about a single individual; nevertheless, Moorthy, the Brahman protagonist of the villagers’ struggle against the government, is a prototypal Rao hero. Moorthy is the leader of a political uprising, but for him, as for Gandhi, whom he follows, politics provides a way of life, indistinguishable from a spiritual quest. In fact, for Moorthy, Action is the way to the Absolute. In Gandhi, he finds what is Right Action. Thus, for him, becoming a Gandhi man is a deep spiritual experience that is appropriately characterized by the narrator as a “conversion.” At the culmination of this “conversion” is Sankaracharaya’s ecstatic chant, “Sivoham, Sivoham. I amSiva. I amSiva. Siva am I,” meaning that Moorthy experiences blissful union with the Absolute. Indeed, the chant, which epitomizes the ancient Indian philosophical school of Advaita or unqualified nondualism, is found in all Rao’s novels as a symbol of the spiritual goal of his protagonists. Moorthy, the man of action, thus practices Karma Yoga (the Path of Action), one of the ways of reaching the Absolute as enunciated in the Bhagavad Gita. In the novels after Kanthapura, Rao’s protagonists, like Moorthy, continue to seek the Absolute, although their methods change.

Summary:-

Kanthapura recounts the rise of a Gandhian nationalist movement in a small South Indian village of the same name. The story is narrated by Achakka, an elder brahmin woman with an encyclopedic knowledge about everyone in her village; she tells the story in the meandering, nonlinear style of a sthala-purana, a traditional “legendary history” of a village, its people, and its gods.
Achakka begins her tale by situating Kanthapura in its immediate landscape, the Western Ghats mountain range in southwest India that has recently become a center of the British colonial spice trade. The village’s patron deity is the goddess Kenchamma, who fought a demon on the Kenchamma Hill above Kanthapura ages ago and has protected the villagers ever since. Achakka introduces the village’s numerous residents of all caste. She introduces the educated and well-off brahmins, including the wealthy orphan Dorè, who proclaims to be a Gandhian after attending a term of university in the city, and the much more beloved Moorthy, who refuses to marry into one wealthy family after another. Then she introduces the potters and weavers, who are largely turning to agriculture, and finally the pariahs, who live in decrepit huts at the edge of town. But caste does not always translate to wealth. The loincloth-wearing brahmin Bhatta and the shrewd but honest patel and sudra Rangè Gowda are the village’s two most powerful figures.

One day, Moorthy finds a linga (small idol depicting the Lord Siva) in Ahakka’s backyard and the brahmins begins convening prayers for it; soon thereafter, Moorthy begins collecting money from everyone in the village to have a Harikatha-man named Jayaramachar perform his religious discourse about Mahatma Gandhi’s promise to save India from foreign domination. This creates a commotion, especially as Moorthy begins to convert other villagers to Gandhi’s cause and a Muslim policeman named Badè Khan moves into town. Patel Rangè Gowda will not give Khan a place to stay, so he goes to the nearby Skeffington Coffee Estate, where the presiding Sahib offers him a hut among the workers. Meanwhile, Moorthy convinces various villagers to start spinning their own wool and weaving their own khadi cloth, since Gandhi believes that foreign goods impoverish India and sees weaving as a form of spiritual practice.
But Bhatta despises Gandhism, for his business runs on high-interest loans to small farmers who sell their rice to city-people. He decries the modernization of India and the erosion of the caste system, so he proposes establishing a brahmin party to fight Moorthy’s spreading Gandhism and wins the support of many villagers, most notably the rambling Waterfall Venkamma, the priest Temple Rangappa and his wife Lakshamma, Moorthy’s own mother Narsamma, and his own wife Chinnamma. Moorthy, who has a vision of Gandhi giving a discourse and decides to dedicate his life to the Mahatma’s work, wins over the wealthy widow Rangamma, at whose large house he stockpiles spinning-wheels and books about nonviolent resistance. The powerful Swami in Mysore promises to excommunicate anyone who “pollutes” the traditional system by interacting with people from different castes, and when Narsamma finds out that her son Moorthy will likely be first, she is distraught and refuses to associate with him. But he does not budge and, when the Swami excommunicates his entire family after Moorthy is seen carrying a corpse, Narsamma dies on the banks of the nearby River Himavathy and Moorthy moves into Rangamma’s house.

The narrative cuts to the Skeffington Estate, where the maistri convinces coolie workers from impoverished villages around India to come do backbreaking work in horrible conditions at the estate. Their wages are low and the Sahib finds every available means to keep them indentured at the Estate for life, from beating them to raising the prices on daily goods to stealing their wages to, most insidiously, encouraging them to spend their money drinking at the nearby toddy stand. Nobody has managed to leave for ten years, even as a new Sahib has taken over who is kinder than the first (except to the women, Achakka notes, whom he systematically raped until he became embroiled in a legal battle for murdering a father who refused to give up his
But Moorthy’s Gandhians, with the help of the brahmin clerk Vasudev, begin teaching the coolies to read and write and recruiting them to join the protest movement. Badè Khan breaks up one of these lessons, which only strengthens Moorthy’s resolve, and soon a coolie named Rachanna moves off the estate and into Kanthapura. During the commotion some of the coolie women grabbed the Khan’s beard, and Moorthy takes personal responsibility for this attack, which runs counter to the Mahatma’s doctrine of nonviolence. He fasts for three days, meditating continuously in the village temple and receiving visions of Siva and Hari as Rangamma, the wise elder brahmin Ramakrishnayya, and the widowed pariah girl Ratna care for him. He grows stronger, responding to threats from Waterfall Venkamma and Bhatta with love and resolving to launch what he calls the “don’t-touch-the-Government campaign.”

Moorthy approaches Patel Rangè Gowda with his plan, and the powerful town representative and landowner quickly resolves to follow the Mahatma. Together, they convene a Village Congress, which promises to serve as a local branch of Gandhi’s Congress of All India. Moorthy visits the house of the former coolie Rachanna, who is now living as a pariah in the village, but finds himself anxious at the thought of going inside or drinking the milk Rachanna’s wife Rachi offers him, since he grew up as a brahmin and has never actually been so close to a pariah. He does so nonetheless and soon convinces a congregation of confused pariah women to spin cloth and join the movement. But when he returns home, Rangamma makes him enter through the back and drink Ganges water to purify himself.

Bhatta soon realizes that he can lead Venkamma to “set fire where we want” if he can find her daughter a husband, so he arranges a marriage with his favorite lawyer, the middle-aged
widow Advocate Seenappa. Shortly thereafter, during the holy festival of Kartik, the police come to Rangamma’s house and arrest Moorthy. Rachanna cries out, “Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!” (or, “Glory to Mahatma Gandhi!”), a battle cry that the Gandhians employ when the police attack them through the rest of the book. The police begin beating and arresting the rest of the villagers, taking 17 in total and releasing all but Moorthy.

In jail, Moorthy refuses the help of lawyers and spiritual leaders until Advocate Sankar, the Congress Committee Secretary in nearby Karwar city, tells him that the national movement needs him released. Moorthy falls at Sankar’s feet and the lawyer holds an enormous meeting for his benefit, although a nameless old man (whom the Swami has paid off) speaks in defense of the British government and the “Beloved Sovereign” Queen Victoria. The Police Inspector comes to the meeting and arrests another of its leaders, Advocate Ranganna, and news spreads fast in Kanthapura by means of a newspaper Rangamma has begun to publish. The villagers read it voraciously, with even the illiterate insisting that others read it to them, and they debate when and whether Moorthy will be released.

Rangamma and the Gandhian Nanjamma go to Karwar to visit Advocate Sankar, who is notorious for being an honest and socially-conscious man. Rangamma decides to stay for a while, and meanwhile the colonial government fires Rangè Gowda, installing another Patel for the village in his place. Moorthy is sentenced to three months’ imprisonment, and the wise elder Ramakrishnayya dies after stumbling into a pillar during heavy rains the following day. During his cremation, the Himavathy River overflows and swallows his ashes.

The villagers decide that the widowed girl Ratna should replace Ramakrishnayya to lead the village’s readings from Hindu scriptures, and after Rangamma’s return she begins to interpret
the texts Ratna reads as calls for the end of British rule in India. The women resolve to form their own Volunteer group, and Rangamma begins to lead them in group meditation and drills to practice nonviolent resistance to beatings from the police. On an auspicious day soon thereafter, the villagers perform a ceremony honoring the Goddess Kenchamma before planting their fields, and Venkamma decides to move her daughter’s wedding to the same day as Moorthy’s homecoming from prison so that villagers will be forced to choose their allegiance. On the day he is supposed to arrive, the villagers wait to receive him but he does not come, until they realize that the police have secretly escorted him back into Rangamma’s house and go there to greet him, shouting Gandhian slogans and nearly starting another clash with the police.

Moorthy again takes the helm of the village’s Gandhian movement, reminding the others about their obligation to speak Truth, reject caste hierarchy, and spin wool each morning. The villagers follow the news of Gandhi’s protest of the British salt tax, in which he marches to the sea and makes his own salt, and they bathe in the holy Himavathy River at the precise moment Gandhi reaches the ocean and the police start arresting his followers en masse. Moorthy and Rangamma continue to lead the others in practice drills, waiting for orders from the national Gandhian Congress, but soon discover that the Mahatma has been arrested and decide to officially launch the “don’t-touch-the-Government campaign” by protesting toddy stands, refusing to pay taxes or abide by the colonial government’s orders, and setting up a “parallel government” for their village that keeps Rangè Gowda as Patel.

Two days later, 139 Kanthapura villagers march to the toddy grove near the Skeffington Coffee Estate and Moorthy refuses to honor the Police Inspector’s orders to back down. The
Gandhians climb into the grove and begin tearing branches off the trees as the police beat them down with lathis and arrest three villagers: the pariah Rachanna and the potters Lingayya and Siddayya. They corral the rest of the protestors into trucks, which drive them off in different directions and drop them by the side of the road in various parts of the Western Ghats. The protestors march back toward Kanthapura, encountering cartmen who support Gandhi’s movement and offer to take them home for free as well as people in the nearby village of Santhapura who decide to join their Satyagraha movement.

The next week, the villagers repeat their protest, encountering various people from the region who proclaim their oppression under British rule and ask Moorthy to help them. When they reach the toddy grove, the Police Inspector marches the coolies off the Skeffington Estate to Boranna’s toddy stand, but the Gandhians convince the coolies to join the protest instead of drinking. The police are more violent this time, and they seriously injure Rangamma, Ratna, and Moorthy before dumping the rest on the side of the road, as before. But when they return to Kanthapura, the Gandhians discover that many of the coolies and Gandhi sympathizers from the region have decided to join them, and their movement continues to grow as they launch various other protests, get 24 toddy stands in the area to shut down, and closely follow the accelerating national protest movement.

Besides the few brahmins who still oppose the Gandhi movement, the villagers refuse to cooperate with the government, which infuriates the police and leads them to more and more aggressive tactics. The police barricade every exit out of town, secretly arrest numerous protesters (including the movement’s two main leaders, Moorthy and Rangamma) in the middle of the night, and begin assaulting female villagers. One
officer nearly rapes Ratna, but Achakka and some of the other women Volunteers find her just in time and decide that she will be the new leader of the protest movement. This group of women, whose perspective the narrative follows closely from this point onward, hide out in the temple and watch Bhatta’s house burn down. But a policeman sees them and locks them inside overnight, until the pariah Rachi lets them out.

Three days later, the villagers undertake their fourth and most consequential protest against the police. Rich Europeans come to Kanthapura as the government begins auctioning off the villagers’ land, and they bring coolies from the city to begin working the fields.

Gandhians from around the region, including Advocate Sankar, flood into the town to help the protest effort. Achakka and the other women begin questioning their loyalty to Gandhi, wondering whether nonviolent resistance will truly save their livelihoods, but soon the march is underway and the police are more vicious than ever before. One of the protestors raises the Gandhian revolutionary flag and the police begin firing against the protestors, massacring them even as they proclaim their commitment to nonviolence. The women hide out in sugarcane fields as they watch their neighbors and party-members get slaughtered, and as they begin to flee Kanthapura, Rachi decides to burn the village down.

Rachi makes a bonfire and sets the village alight before all the women continue marching as far as they can from Kanthapura, across the mountains and into the jungle, where people honor them as “pilgrims of the Mahatma” and offer them a new home in the village of Kashipura. In the year since Kanthapura’s destruction, Achakka explains, the villagers have scattered and moved on with their lives, and Moorthy has been released from prison, although he gave up on Gandhi, who started to
compromise with the British, and decided to join Jawaharlal Nehru’s movement for the equal distribution of wealth. Rangamma is still in jail, and the only person who has returned to Kanthapura is Rangè Gowda, who tells Achakka that the village has been sold away to city-people from Bombay.

Analysis:-

By narrating Kanthapura as a sthala-purana, Rao translates a traditional genre of oral history grounded in the peculiarities of local religion into the modern medium of the English-language novel. As a story of anticolonial resistance, it is worth noting that Rao is appropriating the colonialists’ language to tell this story. It suggests that it was important to him that the British and other westerners be able to read his words. Rao justifies his decision to tell Kanthapura's history in Achakka's distinctive style, which breaks most conventions of narrative voice by following a meandering stream of consciousness rather than a linear storyline. Thus, even though English is a colonial language, it still offers Indians a form of expression that subverts the colonial regime. Rao adapts a colonial tool to anticolonial purposes, writing in a style of English that is not the dry language of education and recordkeeping but rather the sort of vernacular language in which a sthala-purana would ordinarily be told.

Traditional, oral forms of knowledge form core of Kanthapura’s collective life, as the townspeople congregate and participate collectively in politics through storytelling and religious discourse. At the beginning of the story, the village’s communal life is structured around the shared myth of the village’s goddess, Kenchamma, who supposedly fought a battle to protect it ages ago and left a hill near the city stained in blood. Religious discourses, including bhajan songs and elaborate theatrical performances called Harikathas, are the main motivations for the
village to congregate as a community. And one of these Harikathas, by the famous visiting performer Jayaramchar, first introduces Gandhism in the book. During Jayaramchar’s story, the elderly Venkatalakshamma complains that he is talking “city-nonsense” rather than telling about traditional Hindu gods—she weeps because she sees new myths overtaking traditional ones. But oral discourse is actually Gandhism’s modus operandi: Moorthy becomes a Gandhian after his vision of the Mahatma giving a discourse. In this vision, Moorthy declares himself Gandhi’s slave—the Mahatma orders him to seek Truth and spread his message orally “among the dumb millions” in the villages (who presumably cannot read his writings). Throughout the rest of the novel’s first half, Moorthy persuades the townspeople to join his movement through bhajans and speeches about love, nonviolence, and independence.

In contrast to the oral traditions Moorthy uses to spread his message, written language is associated with Western imperial and economic power—it carries the force of the law from afar. Many of Kanthapura’s villagers are illiterate, so they cannot access the knowledge and power that written documents hold—instead, the wealthy and powerful manipulate such documents to oppress the villagers. Bhatta, the village’s moneylender and landowner, conducts most of his business through papers, including contracts that his borrowers must sign but which few of them can read. (This allows him to arbitrarily change the contracts later in the book, charging peasants extra interest because they support Gandhi.) He takes advantage of the fact that the villagers cannot understand written contracts—while he frequently makes informal agreements with farmers early on in the book, once he realizes that they are fighting against the government that protects him, he starts enforcing the written contracts and calling in debts. Later, the government justifies
suppressing the village’s rebellion by presenting their written orders from the British Crown. Whereas oral traditions represent the village’s internal source of power, through which they assert their own identity and politics, written orders and contracts represent an external power, originating in cities and the colonial government, that oppresses the villagers in part because they cannot read the laws to which that government holds them.

But the power of writing also works for the villagers at times, and Moorthy expertly harnesses it to spread nonviolent rebellion. He is “always piling books and books” about Gandhi’s message in the Village Congress’s headquarters, and he later starts a newspaper that convinces many members of the literate brahmin caste to join his cause. One of his main political activities is teaching reading and writing to the illiterate pariahs (Hindus considered beneath the caste system) and coolies (indentured laborers at the Skeffington Coffee Estate). He also holds public readings, which unite written and oral traditions by offering illiterate villagers the revolutionary ideas that his books hold.

Rao’s novel also tries to unite both traditions in this way, overcoming the opposition between the oral traditions that hold the villagers’ identity and the written language that transmits information across geographical space but remains inaccessible to the illiterate. His novel is not a linear narrative in conventional literary prose but rather a meandering, colloquially-written story told by the elder Brahmin woman Achakka, who speaks for the village as a whole in the collective “we.” In the foreword, Rao argues that the novel is itself a legendary history, or sthala-purana, of the village—in fact, it not only textualizes the history of Kanthapura but also of the innumerable small-scale struggles for independence that took place in villages across India from the 1920s through the 1940s. By writing down a fictional oral
tradition, Rao’s book memorializes a history of resistance that has been erased from India’s landscape—both in the imaginary village of Kanthapura, which is ultimately bought out by wealthy landowners after its inhabitants burn it down, and in other sites of anticolonial resistance across the Indian subcontinent.

The conflict between the traditional caste hierarchy and the Gandhian ideal of equality lies at the heart of the first half of Kanthapura. Many of Kanthapura’s residents initially fear Moorthy’s campaign of Gandhian nonviolent resistance, believing that he is “polluting” the village by overturning holy caste divisions, but most ultimately join the rebellion when they see that it promises to liberate them from the hierarchies of colonial governance and caste. By the end of the book, the vast majority of Kanthapura’s people have abandoned their traditional beliefs in the caste system and the town’s local goddess Kenchamma; instead, they begin worshipping Gandhi and Moorthy. This radical shift demonstrates how shared religious beliefs can determine and perpetuate social hierarchies, but also how a movement for equality and democracy can use the same tactic to strike back at hierarchy.

At the beginning of the book, traditional caste divisions permeate Kanthapura, determining every aspect of life: caste dictates who may associate with whom, who does certain work, and who may live in and enter certain places. The caste system oppresses the majority of the village’s population, working to the advantage of those in power. It benefits the brahmins, the religious leaders who stand at the top of the caste hierarchy, as well as the colonial government that benefits from people’s strong trust in the brahmins: the government collaborates with brahmins like the landowner Bhatta and the Swami in Mysore (an important religious teacher), in order to convince the
Gandhi’s belief in equality threatens to do away with the caste system entirely. His first demand of the villagers is that all of them, no matter their caste, do the same work—spinning yarn and making cloth—which violates the village’s traditional division of labor along caste lines. The powerful brahmins are especially opposed to Moorthy’s Gandhian campaign, which they see as “polluting” the village. By threatening to excommunicate Moorthy and convert him into a pariah, the Swami prevents other villagers from joining him at first. Even Moorthy’s own mother, Narsamma, is so distraught over her son’s conversion to Gandhi’s movement—which means he will not marry and pass down the family bloodline—that she refuses to speak with him. In particular, many of Kanthapura’s inhabitants are horrified at Moorthy’s willingness to fraternize with the pariahs, which they consider a form of pollution. Even Achakka, the narrator, initially agrees, arguing that “we shall be dead before the world is polluted.” In fact, even Moorthy has considerable difficulty looking past caste, which demonstrates how powerful its hold can be. When he visits the pariah Rachanna’s house, Moorthy “stands trembling and undecided” in the doorway because he has never entered a pariah’s home, suspects that he smells animal carcasses (which pariahs, but no other Hindus, are allowed to touch), and is terrified to drink their milk. Later, his closest confidant Rangamma makes him enter through the rear door, shower, and drink water from the holy river Ganges because he has been inside a pariah’s home.

Moorthy overcomes the Swami’s injunction and convinces the villagers to join his resistance movement by offering them not only the promise of equality among castes but also an alternate belief system: he first appeals to their self-interest and second offers Gandhi as a religious figure to worship in place of the
brahmins and local goddess. Moorthy’s first appeal to people of all castes is the promise of free spinning-wheels. Even though many refuse to believe, at first, that the wheels are truly free, they soon realize that they have the opportunity to produce something for themselves and that this will offer them an opportunity for spiritual practice (most are low-caste and do not perform rituals like the brahmins, but Gandhi argued that weaving was an important form of prayer), at which point many immediately accept. Once they begin spinning, Moorthy brings them to discourses and performances where he explains the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolent resistance and turns the language of “pollution” against the caste system. He argues that “everything foreign makes us poor and pollutes us,” encouraging his followers to reject the caste system for the ways in which it props up Western imperialism. Soon, hierarchy and government become the “polluters” and Gandhi becomes the savior who could purify the village through his promise of equality. Eventually, the villagers start worshipping and acting in the name of the Mahatma, who they consider an incarnation of the nationally-worshipped god Siva, rather than their local goddess Kenchamma.

While the introduction of Gandhism into Kanthapura does not entirely do away with the brahmin caste’s power, it does displace caste as a system of belief, replacing the villagers’ worship of Kenchamma and respect for social hierarchy with reverence for the Mahatma and belief that everyone is equal before God. At the end of the book, the village women’s decision to burn down Kanthapura symbolically marks their rejection of the caste system that vested both political and religious authority in the brahmin caste; instead, they claim political power for themselves and reject social hierarchy. Moorthy was able to successfully transform the village forever by making an alternative system of worship accessible to and
viable for Kanthapura’s poor, but their new politics is a form of worship nonetheless. Rao seems to be suggesting that, while democracy and equality are in oppressed people’s best interests, achieving them often requires using the same organizing tactics that the powerful use to sustain the status quo.

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Essay questions:-

1. Consider *Kanthapura* as a story of anticolonial resistance.

2. “Kanthapura is really a novel about a village rather than about a single individual”- comment.

3. Discuss how *Kanthapura* turns out to be a critique on the caste system in India.

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About the author:-

Mulk Raj Anand was born in 1905 in Peshawar in present-day Pakistan. A pioneer of Indian writing in English, he gained an international following early in his life. His novels Coolie and Untouchable set an entire generation of educated Indians thinking about India's social evils that were perpetuated in the name of religion and tradition. These and other early novels and short stories brought into sharp focus the dehumanizing contradictions within colonized Indian society. Through his writings he revealed that in addition to the foreign colonialism of Britain there existed layers of colonialism within Indian society. This internal colonialism stood in the way of India's transition to a modern civil society. While exposing the overarching divide between the British and a colonized India, he reveals an Indian society creating its own layers of colonizers and colonized thereby rendering the fledgling Indian nationalism an extremely problematic concept.

Mulk Raj Anand was a founding member of Progressive Writers Association, a national level organization that wielded considerable influence during India's freedom struggle and beyond. An incredibly prolific writer, Mulk Raj Anand's creative career spanning a period of more than seventy-five years has been inextricably intertwined with the search for a just, equitable, and forward-looking India. He has written extensively in areas as variegated and diverse as art and sculpture, politics, Indian literature and history of ideas. He kept
in constant touch with literary giants from across the globe, among them E.M. Forster who wrote a foreword to his novel, "Untouchable". Mulk Raj Anand received the International Peace Prize from the World Peace Council. Sahitya Akademi Award, "Padma Bhushan" and Leverhulme Fellowship are some of the awards and accolades during his long literary career. The Library of Congress has more than one hundred and fifty publications by and on him in its collection.

The son of a coppersmith, Anand graduated with honours in 1924 from Punjab University in Lahore and pursued additional studies at the University of Cambridge and at University College in London. While in Europe, he became politically active in India’s struggle for independence and shortly thereafter wrote a series of diverse books on aspects of South Asian culture, including Persian Painting (1930), Curries and Other Indian Dishes (1932), The Hindu View of Art (1933), The Indian Theatre (1950), and Seven Little-Known Birds of the Inner Eye (1978).

A prolific writer, Anand first gained wide recognition for his novels Untouchable (1935) and Coolie (1936), both of which examined the problems of poverty in Indian society. In 1945 he returned to Bombay (now Mumbai) to campaign for national reforms. Among his other major works are The Village (1939), The Sword and the Sickle (1942), and The Big Heart (1945; rev. ed. 1980). Anand wrote other novels and short-story collections and also edited numerous magazines and journals, including MARG, an art quarterly that he founded in 1946. He also intermittently worked on a projected seven-volume autobiographical novel entitled Seven Ages of Man, completing four volumes: Seven Summers (1951), Morning Face (1968), Confession of a Lover (1976), and The Bubble (1984).
Summary:-

Coolie, by Mulk Raj Anand, was first published in 1936 and helped to establish Anand as one of the foremost Anglophone Indian writers of his day. Like much of his other work, this novel is concerned with the consequences of British Rule in India and with the rigid caste system that structured Indian society. “Coolie” is a term for an unskilled laborer, though it can also be used as a pejorative. Anand’s novel tells the story of Munoo, a young boy from the Kangra Hills in Bilaspur. He is an orphan who lives with his aunt and uncle; however, early in the novel they reveal they can no longer support Munoo and insist that he get a job. This is the beginning of a journey that will take Munoo to Bombay and beyond, but it also marks the end of his childhood.

With his Uncle, Munoo travels to a nearby town where he finds a job as a servant to a bank clerk, Babu Nathoo Ram. Munoo is mistreated by his master’s wife but he admires his master’s younger brother, Prem Chand, who is a doctor. Babu Nathoo Ram himself is something of a caricature; a typical example of a Middle Class Anglophile who has internalized the values of the colonizer and firmly believes in the supremacy of white people. A great fuss is made when the aptly named Mr. English visits the bank where Babu Nathoo Ram works, but Anand uses this episode to undercut the apparent superiority of the English. When Prem Chand enquires about the best place in Britain to further his medical training, it is revealed that Mr. English is uneducated and doesn’t know.

After accidentally injuring Sheila, Babu Nathoo Ram’s daughter, Munoo is beaten and decides to run away. He makes it as far as Daultapur, where he is taken in by Prabha, who runs a pickle factory. Prabha and his wife are kind to Munoo, although the work is hard. Throughout the novel, Anand points
to the way the lower classes are exploited by those above them, with Munoo being the ultimate example of this exploitation. Here, he shows how Prabha must appease his neighbor, the Public Prosecutor Sir Todar Mal, with free pickles and jam to prevent him having the factory shut down because the smoke irritates him. Ultimately, however, it is Prabha’s own business partner, Ganpat, who cheats him and leaves him bankrupt, suggesting a lack of class consciousness or solidarity.

When Prabha loses the factory, Munoo is left to fend for himself once again. He meets an elephant driver who is travelling to Bombay with a circus and decides to join them. At first, Munoo is delighted with Bombay, but he soon realizes that, even here, “coolies” must sleep on the streets. He finds work at Sir George White’s cotton mill where he meets Ratan, a man he comes to idolize. Ratan is a wrestler and a member of the worker’s union, a man who has chosen to fight his masters and reject the exploitative conditions in which he labors. The optimistic possibility symbolized by Ratan is short lived for Munoo, however, as a riot breaks out during a workers’ strike and he becomes lost. While wandering the streets, he is run over by Mrs. Mainwaring’s car. As compensation, she hires him as a servant and takes him to Simla. Mrs. Mainwaring offers insight into another dimension of Indian society. She has English, as well as Indian, ancestry, and longs to be accepted by English society. As a result she travelled to England and married a young English soldier. Her desire to be recognized as English can also be read as a desire to be recognized as white, with all of the privileges that accompany whiteness in colonial India, privileges that Munoo will never enjoy. Despite the kindness that Mrs. Mainwaring shows him, Munoo contracts tuberculosis and dies, aged just fifteen.
Coolie is a devastating account of the poverty and exploitation faced, not just by Munoo, but thousands like him. Anand shows how the racial and class hierarchies imposed by British colonialism have intersected, or overlaid, the existing caste system to make life impossible for “coolies”. Munoo has no real control over his life; over the work he does or where he lives or how he is treated. As he moves from one place to another in search of a job or a home, he moves from one tragedy to another. In his travels and through the various people he meets and is employed by, he is exposed to the multiplicity of life in India which is made vivid by Anand’s prose. If the novel’s portrait of Munoo’s life raises difficult questions about Indian society, Munoo’s death raises the question of whether there can be any future for a “coolie” if nothing changes.

**Analysis:-**

Coolie marks a greater self-assurance in the art of Anand and an additional deepening description of marginal living. It comprehends greater variety and deeper levels of degradation than does Untouchable. The Plot of the novel is certainly as won't readily yield to a plain summary of facts. This is actually the story of the hill boy, Munoo, Who moves from the village to the city, from the city to the town, and then up to the mountains. He traverses an experience, and it is finally swept away to his doom. He explores the limits of existence before he goes under.

Munoo's life is tragic to the extreme. The poor orphan is cast away by his aunt and uncle who have no love for him. He gets employment as a domestic servant in the house of your bank clerk at Sham Nagar. He imagines that he'll henceforth reside in peace and comfort but is soon disillusioned.

Munoo thought of the times of his childhood in the hills and recalled how often he had played across the cart roads with the distended-bellied Bishan, the lean Bishambar and this superior
little Jay Singh. However the purple hills of Kangra were too close in and there was no railway there to view. "It had been as well, in spite of the pain I have suffered, " he said to himself, 'TO have come from that world. ' I am now going to Bombay, and there has to be wonderful things there; many more wonderful things than there have been in my village or Sham Nagar or Daulatpur. (Coolie 174)

He was clever, too. The way he could browse the messages of people's hearts and tell what diseases they were suffering from, by means of this machine with rubber tubes. The finish which he put on his ears and whose mouth he rested on the chest of the person. He previously had other machines in velvet boxes. How he would prefer to handle them, Munoo thought. How he'd like to be the Chola Babu, medicine man! He'd not mind being like the burra Babu, an official in the bank, whom all the towns' people saluted. (Coolie 47)

Although Sheila, the teen-aged daughter of the master of the home, is kind to him, her mother treats him shabbily: he finally realizes his position in the world. He is to be a slave, a servant who must do the tasks, all the odd jobs, for him to definitely be abused, even beaten, though up to now it hadn't come to that. He feels sad, lonely.

The ambivalence that torments Bakha in Untouchable torments Munoo as well. He resolves henceforth to be a perfect servant, however the way to perfection is not easy. He's squarely blamed for fiasco, which occurs through the visit of a senior bank official to the radiance of his master. Later, when he picks the right with the neighbour's servant, he is severely injured. During his convalescence, he experiences the birth trauma of desire for Sheila, as he sees her coming out of the bath, a silhouette of pale bronze. At the same time, he is aware of the vast gulf that exists between him and Sheila. He stifles his passion, but no sooner does he go back to health than his wanton irrepressible desire asserts itself.
In the feudal town of Daulatpur, he incurs Prabha, somebody in a pickle factory and is instantly hired as a coolie in the warehouse. Prabha's wife soon grows keen on him and gives him motherly warmth. But life in the factory proves as unrelenting as ever. To increase his discomfiture, Prabha is ruined financially and returns to his native village. Munoo is left alone on the planet without art or craft to earn his living. He becomes a self-employed porter, carrying loads on the streets.

Munoo feels the surge of waters in the top metropolis. But he never makes the great withdrawal from life. He finds kindred hearts in Hari and Laxmi, with whom he shares his lodgings. They, however, are much too advanced in the scales of suffering, Munoo's hero, however, is Ratan. The wrestler, who faces life with calm confidence. He wants to emulate Ratan and be like him: "I want to live, I wish to work, to work this machine. I will grow up to always be a man, a solid man like the wrestler"(Coolie 83). Ratan takes him one night to the house of your prostitute, who excited his pent-up desire. Back in the lodgings he's baptized in the life span of flesh by Laxmi.

Soon, crisis overtakes the town, and normal life is paralyzed. Munoo finds himself amid the labour strike, accompanied by an outbreak of communal violence. He's both an actor and a spectator who drifts with the crowd. He senses the futility of rhetoric as also the higher futility of disorganized action. What of poet Sauda -"there are two kinds of people on the planet: the rich and the indigent"(Coolie 52) echo in his ears, but soon the anarchy of the ocean drowns him in sleep. Even as of this hour, he is aware that "the town, the bay, the sea at his feet, had and unearthly beauty"(Coolie 259). Now the feeling of pain appears to tinge everything. He is stepped on by Mrs. Mainwairing's car and is taken up to Shimla as her page and rickshaw puller. She takes a fancy to him wants that can be played the seductress, but Munoo is already broken. The strain of pulling the rickshaw
sucks his life blood, and he contracts tuberculosis and dies. The peasant lad sprung up from the hills returns home to his origin. The coolie touches the pathetic and the sublime regions of human experience. Here, Anand explores the limits of pain central to the existence of the downtrodden. He places Munoo towards a debasing and debased society- a frail, defenseless figure in a predominantly hostile world. Society is the great destroyer that fells Munoo and his like. The tragedy of Munoo is an indictment of the evils of capitalism on the minor segment of society. However the purpose of the novelist is never to present a gloomy picture of life. On the contrary, he wishes to arouse the conscience of humanity contrary to the ruthless exploitation of the weak. He handles in this prose epic the realities of the human situation as he sees and understands them.

The characterization of Munoo is vivid, dramatic, and powerful. Munoo is cast in the mode of the archetypal, ironic, and perfect victim or scapegoat under the sentence of death. But the ironic focus is not sharp enough to be convincing. That is so because Anand attempts a naturalistic reproduction of the vast human landscape and develops an epic mood and scale. Like Balzac and Tolstoy, he draws vast spaces and creates memorable characters. He's not sufficiently detached to maintain the esthetic distance which, properly speaking, yields the ironic stance. Munoo is conceived as a romantic hero, and as such there is absolutely no incongruity in the delineation, which is basic to the ironic portrayal. He's first and last, a victim rather than a rebel and, therefore, is with the capacity of rising to a tragic stature.

Structurally, Coolie is less closely knit than Untouchable. It has a different kind of unity, Comparable to a symphony V. S. Pritchett sees in it the glimpse of a Picaresque novel and the
emergence of a fresh type of hero. If Untouchable is a microcosm, Coolie is a microcosm that is Indian society is the estimation of K. S. Iyengar. Its loose, panoramic structure, with an immense variety of characters and incidents, represents a thorough picture of life itself. The novelist sees in the formless flux a cycle of recurrence and provides it a meaningful expression. The power of the novel derives from its fidelity to truth, from its capacity to probe beneath the sordid and the banal, and from its ability to touch the tragic, the sublime and the beautiful.

The setting of Coolie merits special attention. The scene of action shifts in space in orderly sequence. So does the centre of gravity. However, the shift in scene of action is by no means arbitrary; it is conditioned by the certain principle of organization to point to the macrocosmic character of the theme. The action commences in the village of Bilaspur and may be taken as time of pain at birth. In sham Nagar, the hero finds himself in virtual serfdom. In Daulatpur, he loses his job and it is trashed on the streets. In cosmopolitan Bombay, He gets the taste of the slum and the fifth; finally, in Simla, his cup of misery full, he goes under. Simla, it could be said, prepares the stage for his crucifixion.

Coolie is hardly less poetical than Untouchable. A deep undercurrent of pathos runs through both; "We participate in suffering! We participate in suffering! My love!" (Coolie 207). Sometimes Anand lifts the veil of the world of appearance, lapsing entirely into a kind of poetic trance, freeing language from the confines of plain prose. For the most part, however, the battle to forge a fresh indo-English idiom continues, especially when Anand handles matter- of fact situations and events or hastens the pace of the narrative. As a whole, Coolie is a landmark in indo-Anglian fiction.
The novelist has shown the adventures of Munoo because he moves from the North to the South, and then comes back to the North. It describes his adventures or misadventures in Shyamnagar, in Daulatpur, in Bombay and in the end, in Simla where he breathes his last.

Firstly, he is appointed as domestic servant in Babu Nathoo Ram’s house in Shyamnagar and he is ill-treated there and then runs away from Shyamnagar. He then reaches Daulatpur and works as a boy servant in a pickle factory and then he serves as a coolie in the grain market.

Next, the turn of fortune’s wheel brings him to Bombay where he works in a textile mill and experiences the worst conditions of the coolies. Lastly he comes to Simla and is appointed as a domestic servant-cum-rickshaw puller of Mrs. Mainworning and dies of consumption. It has been called the Odyssey of Munoo.

Coolie is not a novel of character like a picaresque novel, but it is a novel of movement and action. The adventures and happenings which take place in his life. Anand never speaks of Munoo’s inner and spiritual developments. In fact, he does not act but he is acted upon by the society. Munoo spends his life visiting one place to another and within the two years, he passes away.

Thus, in the life of Munoo, a great number of characters appear, but soon they are replaced by others. In course of time, when Munoo ends his Shyamnagar sojourn his uncle, Daya Ram, his master Nathoo Ram, and his wife Bibiji, his brother Doctor Prem Babu, his daughter, Shella and her friends and others are not heard of. Their place is taken by Prabha Dayal, the pickle factory owner, his wife, Parbati and the co-partner of the factory, Ganpat Toder Mals, and others.

When Munoo leaves Daulatpur for Bombay, these characters
are left behind. While living in Bombay he comes across Hari Har, his wife, Lakshmi, Ratan Junmile Thomas, the foreman of the factory and many others. When he is knocked by Mrs. Mainwarning he is reached on Simla. There he comes across Mohan, the young rickshaw puller, Ralph, Mars, Mainwarning’s second child. There is not a single character save Munoo who is present from beginning to the end in the novel.

The misery of Munoo is the misery of millions of Munoo’s of India. The life history of Munoo is full of miseries. He finds nowhere any silver lining in the dark cloud. He is beaten from pillar to post, is overworked and humiliated, and treated merely as a beast of burden till he dies in the bloom of life due to hunger, suffering and disease. Munoo is a universal figure, larger than life character, and he represents the suffering and starving millions of the country. The novelist stresses the universality of Munno, therefore, be called his novel “Coolie” not “The Coolie”. Thus the tale of Munoo’s misery is the story of the Indian masses. So, it can be called “epic of misery”

Anand through his great art Coolie discusses various kinds of human relationships and he wants to see the man, the whole man free from all prejudices. He has deeply studied human nature and concludes that there are two classes – the oppressor and oppressed in the society. However, they are bound by human relationships. Anand wants equal justice in the society. Therefore, the major theme of his novel is correctly based on human centrality of human relationships.

Essay questions:-

1. Consider Munoo as a representative figure of the downtrodden in India.
2. Explain the tragic life of Munoo.
Khushwant Singh, one of the best-known Indian writers of all times, was born in 1915 in Hadali (now in Pakistan). He was educated at the Government College, Lahore and at King's College, Cambridge University, and the Inner Temple in London. He practiced law at the Lahore High Court for several years before joining the Indian Ministry of External Affairs in 1947. He began a distinguished career as a journalist with the All India Radio in 1951. His Saturday column "With Malice Towards One and All" in the Hindustan times is by far one of the most popular columns of the day.

Khushwant Singh's name is bound to go down in Indian literary history as one of the finest historians and novelists, a forthright political commentator, and an outstanding observer and social critic. In July 2000, he was conferred the "Honest Man of the Year Award" by the Sulabh International Social Service Organization for his courage and honesty in his "brilliant incisive writing." At the award ceremony, the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh described him as a "humorous writer and incorrigible believer in human goodness with a devil-may-care attitude and a courageous mind." The Indian external affairs minister said that the secret of Khushwant Singh's success lay in his learning and discipline behind the "veneer of superficiality." An important postcolonial novelist writing in English, Singh is best known for his trenchant secularism, his
humor, and an abiding love of poetry. His comparisons of social and behavioral characteristics of Westerners and Indians are laced with acid wit.

Among the several works he published are a classic two-volume history of the Sikhs, several novels (the best known of which are Delhi, Train to Pakistan, and The company of women), and a number of translations and non-fiction books on Delhi, nature and current affairs. The Library of Congress has ninety-nine works on and by Khushwant Singh.

Khushwant Singh was a member of the Rajya Sabha (upper house of the Indian Parliament) from 1980 to 1986. Among other honors, he was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1974 by the President of India (he returned the decoration in 1984 in protest against the Union Government's siege of the Golden Temple in Amritsar).

Summary:-

In the summer of 1947, ten million Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs flee from their homes on each side of the new border between Pakistan and India. Northern India is in turmoil, though the isolated village of Mano Majra remains, for now, at peace. A tiny place with only three brick buildings—a gurdwara, where Meet Singh presides as its resident bhai; a mosque led by the mullah and weaver Imam Baksh; and the home of the Hindu moneylender, Lala Ram Lal—Mano Majra becomes the site of a notorious dacoity, which results in Ram Lal’s murder. While fleeing Ram Lal’s house, the robbers pass by the home of former robber Juggut Singh, known as the most dangerous man in Mano Majra and often called “Jugga.” One of the robbers throws stolen bangles into Jugga’s courtyard to implicate him in the crime. Jugga, meanwhile, is having a tryst with Nooran when they hear the shots fired during the dacoity.
While the couple lay in the dark, they saw the five robbers pass on their way to the river. Jugga recognizes one as Malli—the gang’s leader.

Hukum Chand, the magistrate and deputy commissioner, arrives at Mano Majra the morning before the dacoity. He asks the sub inspector of police if there has been any trouble between the religious groups and the latter assures him that there have not been any “convoys of dead Sikhs” as there have been in a nearby town. Mano Majrans may not even know that the British have left or that India has been partitioned. Some know who Mahatma Gandhi is, but the sub inspector doubts that anyone knows of Mohammed Ali Jinnah. When Chand then asks if there are any bad characters in the area, the sub inspector mentions Jugga, but says that Nooran keeps him out of trouble. Chand asks if arrangements have been made for him to have a prostitute that evening, and the sub inspector assures Chand that he will have his entertainment before returning to the police station. That evening, an old woman and a young girl wearing a black, studded sari arrive at the rest house. The girl’s name is Haseena. While Chand is alone with her, he hears one of the gunshots from the dacoity.

The next morning, the railway station is crowded. When the train from Delhi to Lahore arrives, twelve armed policemen and the sub inspector disembark. From the other end of the train, a young man steps out. The police party scrutinized him. His manners suggest that he does not belong in the village.

The young man goes to the gurdwara and asks Meet Singh if he can stay for a few days. The priest obliges and asks the young man for his name, which is Iqbal. Meet Singh assumes that Iqbal is a Sikh and identifies him as “Iqbal Singh.” Meet Singh learns that the police have sent for Jugga to be arrested for dacoity, and says that they have found some of the
stolen money and the broken bangles in Jugga’s courtyard. Jugga has run away, he says, which makes it obvious that the budmash has committed the crime. The priest is perturbed not by the murder, but by Jugga robbing his own village.

Later at the gurdwara, Iqbal meets Banta Singh (the village lambardar) and a Muslim man (implied to be Imam Baksh). The visitors talk favorably about the British and ask why they have left India, which annoys Iqbal, who resents the British and asks the men if they want to be free. Imam Baksh says that freedom is for the educated. The peasants will merely go from being the slaves of the English to the slaves of educated Indians or Pakistanis.

After the men leave, Iqbal is skeptical that he can do much in a land in which people’s heads seem full of “cobwebs.” He doubts himself as a leader and thinks that he should make a grand gesture—going on a hunger strike or getting himself arrested—to prove himself. The next morning, he is arrested. Ten constables also arrest Jugga, surrounding his house with rifles.

Jugga and Iqbal are led away. The policemen, however, suspect that the men are innocent. The sub inspector asks the head constable about Iqbal, recognizing him as the same man who got off the train with them the day before. The sub inspector then goes to see Hukum Chand and tells him about the arrests. Later, he has Iqbal stripped and sees that Iqbal is circumcised, a sign of being Muslim. This leads him to conclude that Iqbal is a member of the Muslim League. Chand instructs the officers to file Iqbal on the arrest warrant as “Mohammed Iqbal.” He then directs the subinspector to get the names of the dacoits out of Jugga and raises no objections to the subinspector’s suggestion of torture.
In early September, the train schedule goes awry. A train from Pakistan arrives one morning, but no one gets off. It is a ghost train, it seems. Officers then ask the villagers for all of the wood and kerosene they can spare in exchange for money, and they oblige. Around sunset, a breeze blows in, carrying the smell of burning kerosene, wood, and charred flesh. Hukum Chand spends the day watching the corpses of men, women, and children get dragged out of the train and burned. He tries not to think about them. He asks his servant for whisky and invites the same entertainers back to the rest house. Chand keeps Haseena overnight for comfort, but they do not have sex.

The next morning, the sub inspector visits the rest house. He tells Chand that forty or fifty Sikhs have entered town. Chand asks about the investigation into Ram Lal’s murder. Jugga has identified members of his former gang, including Malli, but was not with them. Chand asks if Malli and his companions are Sikh or Muslim. They are Sikh, but Chand wishes they were Muslim. This, along with the belief that Iqbal is a Muslim Leaguer, would persuade the village’s Sikhs to send away their Muslims. Chand orders the subinspector to free Malli and his gang, and then to ask the Muslim refugee camp commander for trucks to evacuate the Mano Majra Muslims.

After a week alone in jail, Iqbal shares his cell with Jugga, whose own cell is now occupied by Malli and his gang. Iqbal asks Jugga if he killed Ram Lal and Jugga says that he did not; the banian gave him money to pay lawyers when his father, Alam Singh, was in jail. Iqbal thinks that the police will free Jugga, but Jugga knows that the police do what they please.

By mid-morning, the sub inspector drives to the police station at Chundunnugger. He tells the head constable that he wants him to release Malli’s men in front of the villagers. The
sub inspector then asks if anyone has seen Sultana and his gang. The head constable says that they are in Pakistan and that everyone knows this. The sub inspector tells the head constable to pretend not to know. Next, he directs the head constable to ask the villagers if anyone knows what “the Muslim Leaguer Iqbal” was doing in Mano Majra. The head constable is confused and says that Iqbal is a Sikh who cut his hair in England. The subinspector strongly suggests that the head constable go with the story of Iqbal being a Muslim Leaguer named “Mohammed Iqbal.”

Following orders, the head constable takes Malli and his men back to Mano Majra, releases them, and questions the crowd as the sub inspector instructed. The villagers are surprised by the implication of Iqbal; “an urban babu ” has no reason to commit a dacoity. The ruse works, however, in arousing suspicion; Muslims no longer trust Sikhs, and Sikhs no longer trust Muslims. That night, a group of Sikhs gathers at Banta Singh’s house. The lambardar suggests that the Muslims go to the refugee camp until things settle down. The village will protect the Muslims’ belongings while they are gone.

Imam Baksh goes home and tells Nooran that they must leave. She does not want to go to Pakistan, but, if they do not leave willingly, they will be thrown out. Nooran goes to Jugga’s house and waits for Juggut’s mother. The old woman is annoyed to see Nooran, until Nooran mentions that she is two-months pregnant. Juggut’s mother says that, when Jugga gets out of jail, she will ensure that he reunites with Nooran. Nooran is grateful and returns home.

Early in the morning, a convoy of trucks bound for Pakistan arrives. A Muslim officer orders the Muslims to leave their houses and board the trucks, taking only what they can carry. The Muslim officer hurries everyone into the trucks
while a Sikh officer appoints Malli as custodian of the property the Muslims’ must leave behind. Malli, along with his gang and the Sikh refugees, ransack the Muslims’ houses.

Meanwhile, the Sutlej River is rising. Banta Singh and some villagers see the corpses of men, women, and children float by, marked by stab wounds. They realize that these are the victims of a massacre. That evening, the villagers go to the gurdwara for evening prayers. Sikh soldiers enter. One is a boy leader in his teens who encourages the Sikh men to kill Muslims, baiting them by saying that their manliness depends on it. The Sikhs then conspire to massacre the Muslim refugees, who will leave on the train after sunset. The Sikhs will stretch a rope across the first span of the railway bridge. When the train passes, everyone who is sitting on the roof will get swept off. Banta Singh alerts the police to the plan.

At the police station, Hukum Chand has grown exasperated with the growing pile of bodies. The sub inspector tells him that all of Chundunnugger’s Muslims have been evacuated and will be on the train to Pakistan, causing Chand to think of Haseena. When Chand angrily asks why the sub inspector did not warn the refugee camp commander about the train plan, the sub inspector says that, if the train does not leave, all of the camp’s refugees could be killed regardless. Chand arranges for Jugga and Iqbal’s release and, in the official papers, writes Iqbal’s name as “Iqbal Singh,” explaining that no political party would send an educated Muslim to a Sikh village to preach peace.

Upon his release, Jugga learns that all the Muslims have gone, that Malli is the custodian of their property, and that Malli’s gang has grown along with the thirst for Muslim blood. Iqbal, meanwhile, thinks about going back to Delhi and reporting his arrest in the context of an “Anglo-American
capitalist conspiracy.” He imagines looking like a hero and wonders if he should say anything to the murderous mob. He decides that Indians are unworthy of the potential risk to his life. Instead, he drinks whisky and goes to sleep.

That night, Jugga goes to the gurdwara, where he asks Meet Singh to recite a prayer. On his way out, Jugga sees Iqbal sleeping and calls to him. He asks Meet Singh to say “Sat Sri Akal” to Iqbal on his behalf when Iqbal wakes up.

Hukum Chand agonizes over having allowed Haseena to return to Chundunnugger. If she were with him, he would not care what happened. He is less secure in his role as magistrate, and feels wretched upon thinking about all the colleagues he has lost to violence. He hears the train rumbling in the distance and prays.

A little after 11:00 p.m., men spread themselves out on both sides of the train tracks. They hear the train coming. “A big man” climbs the steel span of the bridge; it is Jugga, though no one recognizes him. The train gets closer and the leader yells for Jugga to come down.

Jugga pulls out a small kirpan and slashes at the rope. Realizing what he is doing, the leader raises his rifle and shoots. The rope is in shreds, but a tough strand remains. Jugga snaps it with his teeth. A volley of shots then rings out, sending Jugga to the ground. The rope snaps and falls with him. The train goes over his body, toward Pakistan.

Themes:-

Rather than take a macro lens perspective of the conflict, Singh analyzes it with a micro lens, from the view of a small village that is eventually torn apart by the partition. The novel is set in Mano Majra, a fictional village located in India.
but on the border of Pakistan, where the population is mostly Sikh and Muslim. At the beginning of the novel most of the village’s inhabitants are unaware of the religious and nationalistic violence happening in India and Pakistan, and live in peace across religious lines. This quickly changes when a train from Pakistan full of murdered Sikhs arrives in Mano Majra.

In addition to providing a deeply human and poignant portrayal of a key moment in the histories of modern-day India and Pakistan, Train to Pakistan is a critical piece of the literary canon. The novel was written in the aftermath of World War II when countries such as England, Germany, and France were losing power gained via imperialism and colonialism. During this period, postcolonial literature that used the language of the colonizer to critique and denounce colonization was prevalent.

- Morality

The characters of Train to Pakistan grapple with questions of morality throughout the novel. Early in the novel, Meet Singh argues that because Europeans don’t care much for religion, they have no morals. Clearly, he sees a direct link between religion and morality, but ironically he would have no qualms lying on Jugga’s behalf if Jugga murdered someone from another village. This is just one example of morality’s shaky status in the novel. In Mano Majra, being moral means being loyal “to one’s salt, to one’s friends, and fellow villagers” (Singh 63). This takes precedence over truth, honor, and financial integrity. Though this code of morals is baffling to outsiders like Iqbal, it makes perfect sense to villagers like Meet Singh and Jugga. This code is one of the reasons why it’s Jugga, not Iqbal, who sacrifices himself to save Mano Majra’s Muslims, even though Iqbal seems morally superior to Jugga for most of the novel.
Hukum Chand is another key character when considering morality in Train to Pakistan. At every turn, he seems to wrestle internally with the decisions he makes. For example, after Haseena spends the night at his house, he wakes up and feels “old and unclean” (Singh 133). He compares her to his daughter, and feels remorseful about his actions, but realizes once he drinks again his remorse will fade away. When Chand releases Jugga and Iqbal, hoping that they will save the train of Muslims from the mob, the morality of his decision haunts him again. He is effectively sending two civilian men of questionable intentions to save a group of refugees from certain death, and it’s a mission that should have been his responsibility as magistrate of Mano Majra. Chand knows this and feels uneasy about his choice, but does nothing to fix it. Instead he sits, cries, and prays, turning to religion in his hour of moral ineptitude.

● Religious Persecution

Religious persecution is one of the driving forces in Train to Pakistan, and in the Partition of India as a whole. The Partition of India was the division of Muslim Pakistan from Sikh India. With this division, approximately 10 million people were suddenly in the “wrong” country, and people who had lived together for generations in the same villages became enemies overnight. Muslims fleeing India met rape, pillaging, and death, and Sikhs fleeing Pakistan faced the same adversities. Though the differences between the religions are mentioned briefly in the novel, most of the strife between the two groups stems from acts of violence, both past and present, each side commits against the other.

Singh never discusses in the novel what caused the political climate and violence between Sikhs and Muslims, or even what precipitated a need for the partition in the first place.
All we know are the various prejudices various characters harbor against members of the opposite religion. For example, a young Sikh man from Mano Majra accuses Mano Majra’s Muslims of “stealing their salt” for generations. These words suggest that some Sikhs view Muslims as intruders and as freeloaders. Meanwhile, some Muslims view Sikhs as “barbarous infidels with ill intent” because of their long hair, beards, and kirpans. Here, we can see that the basis of the religious animosity isn’t the religions themselves but the characteristics of the people who practice each religion. Though Sikhs and Muslims have been able to bear these characteristics for generations, by the start of the Train to Pakistan this is no longer true.

Mob Rule

During the Partition of India a power vacuum occurred as the newly created Indian and Pakistani governments struggled to establish and maintain control. In this vacuum Sikh and Muslim villages are pillaged and looted, and people from both religions are attacked, raped, and murdered. As a result, a type of vigilante justice is established whereby an “eye for an eye” is the primary mantra. For example, in retaliation for a train of dead Sikhs being sent from Pakistan, the leader of a Sikh mob devises a plot to send a train of dead Muslims back. Though the Sikhs of Mano Majra love their Muslim neighbors, the mob leader’s propaganda compels them to abandon their own morals and join the murderous plot. According to the mob leader, the purpose of pillaging and killing Muslims is to “teach” the other side and stop the violence altogether. Clearly, he doesn’t believe in the government’s ability to regain control and establish peace, and thinks the people must take matters into their own hands. This is just one example of the instances of mob rule that gripped India and Pakistan during the partition.
Corruption

For a portion of Train to Pakistan, corrupt government officials and policemen are the main villains of the story. Iqbal is the first one to mention corrupt police, when he discusses with Meet Singh “the police system which, instead of safeguarding the citizen, maltreats him and lives on corruption and bribery” (Singh 58). Iqbal’s harsh review of India’s police seems to foreshadow his own future dealings with them. For it’s the next day that the head constable arrests him for Lala Ram Lal’s murder, although he knows it’s impossible for Iqbal to have committed the crime. Once the sub-inspector and Hukum Chand find out about Iqbal’s erroneous arrest, they keep him imprisoned for their own nefarious plans, rather than freeing the innocent man. Even Jugga, who is also a victim of police corruption, acknowledges they will let him off or keep him imprisoned based on their own whim. The police use a combination of intimidation, falsified documents, and torture to keep Iqbal and Jugga under their thumb.

The corruption continues when the major villain of the novel shifts to the mob who wants to kill the train of Muslims en route to Pakistan. Hukum Chand and the sub-inspector know of the plot, and as government officials it’s their responsibility to stop it. However, their own fear of the mob of violent Sikhs prevents them from intervening. Instead, they turn to Jugga and Iqbal, the two men they kept falsely imprisoned for the murder of a Muslim man, to save the train full of Muslim men and women. Furthermore, they speculate that if Jugga and Iqbal fail, they can simply burn or bury the dead Muslims like they did the train of dead Sikhs from Lahore, effectively burying the truth. In the face of such corruption, the disillusion of the Indian people with their government becomes easier to understand.
● National Identity

At the heart of the 1947 Partition of India are questions of national identity. What does it mean to be Indian, and what does it mean to be Pakistani? For many Muslims, forced to leave India for Pakistan because of their religion, these questions are particularly pressing. As Imam Baksh points out, Muslims have lived in India for generations, setting roots and building lives. Their religion may be Pakistani, but their culture until now has been Indian. Not only are they being forced to relocate to a country they know nothing about, but they are experiencing violence and death along the way.

● Community

From the opening movements of Train to Pakistan to its last turn, community plays a central role in the novel’s plot. When Jugga is framed for Lala Ram Lal’s murder, there is disbelief, not because Jugga is a model citizen, but because the idea he would perform a dacoity in his own village is shocking. Mano Majra, like many other Indian towns, has a strict code of ethics when it comes to community and one’s neighbors. The problem with the notion that Jugga murdered Lala Ram Lal isn’t the act of the murder itself, but the person Jugga supposedly murdered. Had Jugga murdered someone from another village, the priest of Mano Majra himself would have gladly sworn on the Sikh holy book that Jugga had been praying in the gurdwara at the time of the murder. But because Lal was a member of the community, Jugga is condemned.

But it is Jugga who proves his sense of community and devotion to his neighbors at the novel’s denouement. At first, it seems all members of Mano Majra live by their community creed. When the head constable announces that the Mano Majra’s Muslims need to leave, the Sikh villagers protest, saying “we could never say anything like that to our tenants,
any more than we could tell our sons to get out of our homes” (Singh 174). Though there are religious differences, loyalty to a fellow villager is supposed to take precedence. However, despite this early posturing of Mano Majra’s Sikhs, when their Muslim neighbors are targeted by a violent mob, it is only Jugga who gives his life to save them.

**Displacement**

Central to the Partition of India is the displacement of 10 million Indians and Pakistanis in the year 1947. Singh paints a grim picture of this movement and subsequent displacement in the opening pages of Train to Pakistan. He describes the situation throughout the four corners of India and Pakistan, but then asserts that Mano Majra was one of the few remaining “oases of peace” (Singh 11). Immediately, the reader wonders for how much longer Mano Majra will be safe from the chaos rampant in the rest of the country. Even the government officials wonder about Mano Majra’s fate, and how much longer its villagers will remain ignorant of the events in the outside world. The answer is not long, when a train of dead Sikhs, murdered as they tried to escape from Pakistan, rolls into town. Tragically, as the train and the stories of mass rape, looting, and violence can attest, the displacement of Sikhs and Muslims during the partition was far from peaceful.

Essay questions:-

1. Explain how national identity becomes a theme in *Train to Pakistan*.
2. Consider *Train to Pakistan* as a close examination of India’s political history.
3. Comment on the portrayal of the fictional village Mano Majra in *Train to Pakistan*. 
A FINE BALANCE

Rohinton Mistry

About the author:-

Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India in 1952. He graduated with a degree in Mathematics from the University of Bombay in 1974, and emigrated to Canada with his wife the following year, settling in Toronto, where he worked as a bank clerk, studying English and Philosophy part-time at the University of Toronto and completing his second degree in 1982. Mistry wrote his first short story, 'One Sunday', in 1983, winning First Prize in the Canadian Hart House Literary Contest (an award he also won the following year for his short story 'Auspicious Occasion'). It was followed in 1985 by the Annual Contributors' Award from the Canadian Fiction Magazine, and afterwards, with the aid of a Canada Council grant, he left his job to become a full-time writer.

His early stories were published in a number of Canadian magazines, and his short-story collection, Tales from Firozsha Baag, was first published in Canada in 1987 (later published in the UK in 1992). He is the author of three novels: Such a Long Journey (1991), the story of a Bombay bank clerk who unwittingly becomes involved in a fraud committed by the government, which won the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Overall Winner, Best Book), A Fine Balance (1996), set during the State of Emergency in India in the 1970s, and Family Matters (2002), which tells the story of an elderly Parsi widower living in Bombay with his step-children. Such a Long
*Journey* and *A Fine Balance* were both shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction, and *Family Matters* was shortlisted for the 2002 Man Booker Prize for Fiction.

His latest book is a story, *The Scream*, illustrated by Tony Urquhart (2008). In 2011, he was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize and in 2012 won the Neustadt International Prize for Literature.

Mistry’s writings are markedly nostalgic. They deal with the streets of Bombay, the Parsi way of life, the people of the city and even the politics of India. They depict the diverse facets of Indian socio-economic life and culture as well as the life, customs, and religion of the Parsis. They start with a family and gradually widen into the social, cultural, and political backdrop. The characters change and develop subtly. They have a remarkable capacity to survive. The details of their experience are chronicled with a painter's sensibility. Their interweaving narratives are totally engrossing. A Parsi himself, Mistry for the most part has set his fiction in India, and has focused on the aspirations, heroism, weaknesses, and marginality of the Parsi community with sympathy, humour, and love. Critics have praised Mistry's ability to present a fresh perspective on his native land.

**Summary:-**

The book exposes the changes in Indian society from independence in 1947 to the Emergency called by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Mistry was generally critical of Indira Gandhi in the book. She, however, is never referred to by name by any of the characters, and is instead called simply "the Prime Minister". The characters, from diverse backgrounds, are brought together by economic forces changing India.
Prologue: Ishvar and Om's story

Ishvar and Omprakash's family is part of the Chamar caste, who traditionally cured leather and were considered untouchable. In an attempt to break away from the restrictive caste system, Ishvar's father apprentices his sons Ishvar and Narayan to a Muslim tailor, Ashraf Chacha, in a nearby town, and so they became tailors. As a result of their skills, which are also passed on to Narayan's son Omprakash (Om), Ishvar and Om move to Bombay to get work, by then unavailable in the town near their village because a pre-made clothing shop has opened.

A powerful upper-caste village thug, Thakur Dharamsi, later has his henchmen murder Narayan and his family for having the temerity to ask for a ballot.

Ishvar and Omprakash are the only two who escape the killing as they lodged with Ashraf in the nearby town.

At the beginning of the book, the two tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, are on their way to the flat of widow Dina Dalal via a train. While on the train, they meet a college student named Maneck Kohlah, who coincidentally is also on his way to the flat of Dina Dalal to be a boarder. Maneck, from a small mountain village in northern India, moves to the city to acquire a college certificate "as a back-up" in case his father's soft drink business is no longer able to compete after the building of a highway near their village. Maneck and the two tailors become friends and go to Dina's flat together. Dina hires Ishvar and Om for piecework, and is happy to let Maneck stay with her.

Dina, from a traditionally wealthy Parsi family, maintains tenuous independence from her brother by living in the flat of her deceased husband, who was a chemist.
Dina's Story

Dina grew up in a wealthy family. Her father was a medical doctor who died when she was twelve. Her mother was withdrawn and unable to take care of Dina after her father's death, so the job fell to Nusswan, Dina's elder brother. Nusswan was rather abusive to Dina, forcing her to do all the cooking, cleaning, and drop out of school, and hitting her when she went against his wishes. Dina rebelled against Nusswan and his prospective suitors for her when she came of age, and found her own husband, Rustom Dalal, a chemist, at a concert hall. Nusswan and his wife Ruby were happy to let her marry Rustom and move to his flat.

Dina and Rustom lived happily for three years until Rustom died on their third wedding anniversary, after being hit by a car while on his bicycle. Dina became a tailor under the guidance of Rustom's surrogate parents to avoid having to move in with Nusswan. After twenty years her eyesight gave out from complicated embroidery and she was once again jobless. She eventually met a lady from a company called Au Revoir Exports - Mrs Gupta - who would buy ready-made dresses in patterns. She agrees to let Dina sew the patterns. But since Dina has very poor eyesight, she decides to hire tailors. She also decides to have a paying guest to generate more income for her rent.

The tailors rent their own sewing machines, and come to Dina's flat each day for nearly two weeks before the first round of dresses is completed. The three get along fairly well, but Dina and Omprakash do not see eye to eye all the time. Omprakash is angry that Dina is a middle-person; he wants to sew for Au Revoir directly.
Maneck's story

Maneck was born in a mountain town in the Kashmir Valley to loving parents, Mr and Mrs Kohlah. Maneck is drawn to the natural scenery of his homeland, straddled between the Himalayas. His father owned a grocery store that had been in the family for generations. The store sold household necessities and manufactured the locally popular soda, Kohlah Cola. Maneck spent his days going to school, helping at the store, and going on walks with his father. When he was in the fourth standard, Maneck was sent to boarding school to help his education, much to his dismay. After this, his relationship with his parents deteriorates because he does not wish to be separated from them and feels betrayed. His parents send him to a college and choose his major, refrigeration and air-conditioning.

Maneck goes to college and stays at the student hostel. Maneck becomes friends with his neighbor, Avinash, who is also the student president and who teaches him how to get rid of vermin in his room. Avinash also teaches Maneck chess and they play together often. Avinash later becomes involved in political events, for which Maneck has little interest, and their friendship is no longer a priority for Avinash. They start seeing each other quite infrequently. But when the Emergency was declared in India, political activists had to go into hiding in order to be safe, Avinash included. Maneck, after a humiliating ragging session by fellow hostel students, has his mother arrange a different living situation for him, and he moves in with Dina Dalal.

Effects of the Emergency

Dina and the tailors' business runs fairly smoothly for almost a year, but effects of the Emergency bother them often. The shantytown where the tailors live is knocked down in a
government "beautification" program, and the residents are uncompensated and forced to move into the streets. Later Ishvar and Om are rounded up by a police beggar raid and are sold to a labor camp. After two months in the camp, they bribe their way out with the help of the Beggarmaster, a kind of pimp for beggars. Ishvar and Om are lucky and Dina decides to let them stay with her. The tailors and Dina find trouble from the landlord, because she is not supposed to be running a business from her flat. She pretends that Ishvar is her husband and Om their son and also gets protection from the Beggarmaster.

Ishvar and Om return to their village to find a wife for Omprakash, who is now eighteen. Maneck returns home, finished with his first year in college (he has received a certificate but not a degree), but has stiff relations with his family and finds that his father's business is failing due to the invasion of cheap commercial sodas. He takes a lucrative job in Middle Eastern Dubai to escape the conditions.

Dina being alone now, and her protector the Beggarmaster having been murdered, has no protection from the landlord who wants to break her apartment's rent control and charge more rent, so she is evicted. Dina is forced to move back to her brother Nusswan's house.

Omprakash and Ishvar return to their old town to find that Ashraf Chacha is an elderly man whose wife died and daughters were all married off. He gives them a place to stay while they search for marriage prospects for Om. While they walk around the village, they run into the upper-caste Thakur Dharamsi. Omprakash recognizes him and spits in his direction. Thakur in turn recognizes Om, and decides to somehow pay Om back for his disrespect of an upper caste member. When Ashraf Chacha, Ishvar, and Om are in the village, they run into
herders from the Family Planning Centre. As the Centre in this city did not fill its quota, they took random people from the street and forced them into a truck that drove them to the Family Planning Centre. All three are beaten into the truck and since Ashraf Chacha is so old, he is gravely injured and later dies on the street. Ishvar and Omprakash beg to escape the forced sterilization, but the vasectomy takes place. As they lie in an outside tent recovering, Thakur Dharamsi comes by and coerces the doctor to give Om a castration. Ishvar's legs become infected due to the use of unsterilized surgical equipment used for the vasectomy and must be amputated. However, Ishvar and Om have nowhere to go now that Ashraf Chacha has died. His son-in-law sells his house and they are forced to leave town.

**Epilogue: 1984**

Eight years later, Maneck returns home for the second time from Dubai for his father's funeral. Maneck is repulsed by the violence that follows after the Prime Minister's assassination, for which Sikhs are killed. He returns home and attends the funeral, but cannot bring himself to truly miss his father, only the father of his young childhood.

While at home he reads old newspapers and learns that Avinash's three sisters have hanged themselves, unable to bear their parents' humiliation at not being able to provide dowries for their marriages. Shocked and shaken, he decides to visit Dina in Bombay for better news. He learns from Dina the horrific lives that Ishvar and Om – one disabled and the other castrated – have led as beggars after their village visit. As Maneck leaves, he encounters Om and Ishvar on the street. The two former tailors are nearly unrecognizable because of their filth, and don't appear to recall him. They say "Salaam" to him, but he doesn't know what to say and walks on.
Maneck goes to the train station, his world shattered. He walks out on the tracks as an express train approaches the station and commits suicide by letting the train run over him.

It turns out that Om and Ishvar were on their way to visit Dina. They are still friends, and she gives them meals and money when the house is empty. Dina and the beggars discuss their lives and how Maneck has changed from a pleasant and friendly college student to a distant refrigeration specialist. Om and Ishvar leave, promising to visit after the weekend. Dina washes up their plates, and returns the plates to the cupboard, where they are to be used later by Nusswan and Ruby.

**Analysis:-**

With a compassionate realism and narrative sweep that recalls the work of Charles Dickens, this magnificent novel captures all the cruelty and corruption, dignity and heroism of India. The time is 1975. The place is an unnamed city by the sea. The government has just declared a State of Emergency, in whose upheavals four strangers—a spirited widow, a young student uprooted from his idyllic hill station, and two tailors who have fled the caste violence of their native village—will be thrust together, forced to share one cramped apartment and an uncertain future. As the characters move from distrust to friendship and from friendship to love, *A Fine Balance* creates an enduring panorama of the human spirit in an inhuman state.

*A Fine Balance* is set in 1970s India and follows four characters who come to interact with each other over a period of around 15 years. There is Dina, the struggling landlady whose husband was run over and killed whilst cycling to buy ice cream for a family gathering; Ishvar and Omprakash, tailors
whose families had been brutalised by the destructive legacy of the caste system; and Maneck, a refrigeration and air conditioning student whose best friend is tortured and killed by the government.

Central to the plotline is The Emergency of 1975-1977, in which the Prime Minister was given the power to rule by decree, creating an effective dictatorship in response to threats of ‘internal disturbance’. This Emergency, under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, proved to be one of the most intensely controversial moments of independent India’s history. Forced mass-sterilisation, censorship of the press, mass political arrests, and a ‘national beautification’ program in which thousands of slums were destroyed, created an atmosphere of political and social upheaval which the four characters are forced to navigate (and experience first-hand) throughout the course of the novel.

To try to explain the characters’ individual stories in one short paragraph is an injustice to the unimaginable picture of pain and suffering that Mistry paints. However, the curious beauty of the book is that in a story so saturated with pain, fear, torture, death and castration, there emerges unmistakable moments of joy. Mistry makes it abundantly clear that even the darkest horrors cannot suffocate the fundamental faculty of the human condition – to laugh in the face of adversity. This in itself, however, is by no means part of a neat and contrived narrative in which good trumps evil, and to settle with that would be a disservice to Mistry’s far more nuanced depiction of life and hardship.

In fact, by the end of the book, one begins to question the title. The overwhelming impression is that there seems to be no ‘Fine Balance’ whatsoever, and it would be understandable to conclude that all the joy and desire of the
characters in the novel, all their intermittent yet powerful glimmers of hope, are quashed with a disturbing, catastrophic finality in its closing pages. It is certainly a sobering narrative. Without giving anything away, a future reader should not expect a happy ending. However, as The Atlantic puts it:

*What makes the final pages of A Fine Balance heart-breaking is not that we see the protagonists’ lives so hideously diminished but that in spite of it all they are still laughing.*

This sums up what seems the most important aspect of the book. It becomes clear that Mistry’s ‘Fine Balance’ is not the balancing of justice and injustice, of good and evil, or of love and hatred. It does not attempt to portray life as an equitable state in which these opposites weigh against each other into a precarious but enduring ‘Balance’. We learn instead that this balance is a state of mind, of measuring positivity and optimism against despair. If joy can manifest itself in the most abhorrent of circumstances, then personal suffering can always be balanced against acceptance – and eventually defiance – of one’s own condition.

Fine Balance is a great piece of Indian Literature (well, not as much as *A Suitable Boy*, but still) that manoeuvres through several broad themes.

1. Set in the backdrop of the National Emergency and its ramifications spanning two years between 1975 and 1977, that takes up a sizeable chunk of the plot. We see the downtrodden forced to enter unhygienic sterilisation camps and exhibitionist rallies, evicted from their abodes as a part of slum demolition program (for the elite - Beautification Program), and being incessantly bullied by the police and ministers. So, the socio-political climate comprises 75% of the commentary.

2. Second theme tackles the sensitive issue of caste and
untouchability by way of Ishvar and Om’s backstory. We learn that they both come from the Chamaar caste who are a sect of untouchables predominantly setup in the leather business and tanning animal hides. Ishvar’s father, Dukhi, goes great lengths to discontinue this family tradition starting with his two sons, but faces several challenges en route. He also loses himself and all of his family to this, save for Ishvar and his nephew Om. We see the upper-caste supremacists carry out atrocities one after the other on the untouchables and their families.

3. The third large theme encompasses ragging - in boarding school and college via Maneck’s life story. We see how he is bullied by his peers and seniors, first in boarding school, to which he is sent after grade five, and subsequently in college in Mumbai, where they freeze him naked in the cafeteria freezer mercilessly.

4. A fourth theme deals with human trafficking for beggary - what a grandeur and tight-knit system this is! Much later in the story, Ishvar and Om encounter an incapacitated beggar on the railway platform, Shankar a.k.a. Worm who has no limbs but merely a torso that he wheels around on a mini-gaadi (a slab of wood with wheels) to procure alms from sympathisers. A large share of the alms go to a higher authority called Beggarmaster, who runs a business in this domain. He recruits disabled beggars who can get him good money, takes care of them, and in return, snips off a portion of their alms for himself.

Essay questions:-

1. Discuss how A Fine Balance reflects on the political history of India.

About the author:-

Aravind Adiga was born in India in 1974, and educated in India and Australia. He studied English Literature at Columbia University, New York, and gained an M.Phil. at Magdalen College, Oxford. Since 2000, he has worked as a journalist, first as a financial correspondent in New York, then returning to India in 2003 to work as a correspondent for TIME magazine.

His articles on politics, business and the arts have appeared in many publications. His debut novel, The White Tiger, was published in 2008 and won the 2008 Man Booker Prize for Fiction. It takes the form of a series of unsent letters to the Chinese premier from Balram Halwai, a murderer who left his village to work as a chauffeur in Delhi.

His second novel is Between the Assassinations (2009), which charts the lives of the residents of an Indian town over a seven-year period between the assassinations of Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv. It was shortlisted for the 2009 John Llewellyn-Rhys Memorial Prize.

Summary:-

The entire novel is narrated through letters by Balram Halwai to the Premier of China, who will soon be visiting India. Balram is an Indian man from an impoverished background, born in the village of Laxmangarh. Early on, he describes his basic story: he transcended his humble beginnings to become a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore, largely through the
murder Mr. Ashok, who had been his employer. Balram also makes clear that because of the murder, it is likely that his own family has been massacred in retribution.

In Laxmangarh, Balram was raised in a large, poor family from the Halwai caste, a caste that indicates sweet-makers. The village is dominated and oppressed by the “Four Animals,” four landlords known as the Wild Boar, the Stork, the Buffalo, and the Raven. Balram's father is a struggling rickshaw driver, and his mother died when he was young. The alpha figure of his family was his pushy grandmother, Kusum.

Balram was initially referred to simply as “Munna,” meaning “boy,” since his family had not bothered to name him. He did not have another name until his schoolteacher dubbed him Balram. The boy proved himself intelligent and talented, and was praised one day as a rare “White Tiger” by a visiting school inspector. Unfortunately, Balram was removed from school after only a few years, to work in a tea shop with his brother, Kishan. There, he furthered his education by eavesdropping on the conversations of shop customers.

Balram feels that there are two Indias: the impoverished “Darkness” of the rural inner continent, and the “Light” of urban coastal India. A mechanism that he dubs the “Rooster Coop” traps the Indian underclass in a perpetual state of servitude. It involves both deliberate methods used by the upper class and a mentality enforced by the underclass on itself.

Balram’s father died from tuberculosis in a decrepit village hospital, where no doctors were present due to abundant corruption within all the government institutions in the Darkness. After his father’s death, Kishan got married and moved with Balram to the city of Dhanbad to work. There, Balram decided to become a chauffeur, and raised money to take driving lessons from a taxi driver.
Once trained, Balram was hired by the Stork - whom he crossed path with coincidentally - as a chauffeur for his sons, Mushek Sir (known as the Mongoose) and Mr. Ashok. Officially, Balram was the “second driver,” driving the Maruti Suzuki, while another servant, Ram Persad, drove the more desirable Honda City.

As a driver in the Stork’s household, Balram lived a stable and satisfactory life. He wore a uniform and slept in a covered room which he shared with Ram Persad. When Ashok and his wife, Pinky Madam, decided to visit Laxmangarh one day, Balram drove them there, and thus had a chance to visit his family. They were proud of his accomplishments, but Kusum pressured him to get married, which angered him since that would cede what he saw as his upward mobility. He stormed out of the house and climbed to the Black Fort above the village, spitting from there down upon the view of Laxmangarh far below.

Balram describes at length the corrupt nature of politics in the Darkness. A politician known as the Great Socialist controls the Darkness through election fraud. The Stork’s family, involved in shady business dealings in the coal industry, must regularly bribe the Great Socialist to ensure their success.

As part of these political maneuverings, Ashok and Pinky Madam made plans to go to Delhi for three months. When Balram learned that only one driver would be brought with them, he spied on Ram Persad to discover that the man was secretly a Muslim who had lied about his identity to gain employment. Once his secret was out, Ram Persad left, and Balram was brought to Delhi as the driver of the Honda City.

Balram considers Delhi to be a crazy city, rife with traffic jams and pollution, and with illogically numbered houses and circuitous streets that are difficult to navigate. Ashok and Pinky
Madam rented an apartment in Gurgaon, the most American part of the city, since Pinky Madam hated India and missed New York. Balram lived in the servant’s quarters in the basement of the building. Teased and ostracized by the other servants, he nevertheless found a mentor in a fellow driver he refers to as Vitiligo-Lips, since the pigment of the man's lips is affected by the skin condition vitiligo. To escape the teasing, Balram chose to live in a tiny, decrepit room swarming with cockroaches. After a while, the Mongoose returned to Dhanbad, leaving Ashok as Balram’s sole master in Delhi. One night, a drunk Pinky Madam insisted on driving the car, and she accidentally killed a child in a hit-and-run. The next morning, the Mongoose arrived and announced that Balram would confess to the crime, and serve jail time on Pinky Madam’s behalf. Balram was terrified by the prospect of going to jail, but was relieved when the Stork arrived and casually mentioned that they had gotten out of the incident through their police connections.

During this time, Balram's political consciousness grows more intense, and his resentment towards the upper class more violent. Much of the novel traces his growth from a meek peasant to an inflamed individual capable of murder in pursuit of his own success.

A few days later, Pinky Madam found Balram and asked him to drive her to the airport. With this abrupt departure, she ended her marriage to Ashok. When Ashok discovered that Balram took her to the airport without informing him, he furiously attacked the driver, who defended himself by kicking Ashok in the chest.

Dealing with the divorce, Ashok began to live a debauched lifestyle, frequently getting drunk and going out to clubs, while
Balram cared for him like a wife. Ashok rekindled a relationship with his former lover, Ms. Uma. Their relationship grew more serious, but he remained anxious about telling his family about her. Meanwhile, on his family's behalf, Ashok frequently collected large sums of money in a red bag, using it to bribe government ministers.

Balram’s family sent a young male relative, Dharam, for Balram to care for. Dharam is a sweet and obedient companion. One day, Balram took Dharam to the zoo, where Balram observed a white tiger in a cage.

Finally deciding to break free of the Rooster Coop, Balram fashioned a weapon from a broken whiskey bottle, and lured Ashok from the car. He rammed the bottle into Ashok’s skull, and then stabbed him in the neck, killing him. He stole the red bag, filled with 700,000 rupees, and escaped with Dharam to Bangalore. In revenge for his actions, the Stork’s family likely murdered all of Balram’s family, though Balram remains unsure of their exact fate. Nevertheless, he chose to commit the murder knowing this was a likely outcome.

In Bangalore, Balram found great success. He launched a taxi service for call center workers, which he calls White Tiger Technology Drivers. By bribing the police, Balram was able to gain influence and make his business successful. Demonstrating how far he has come, he is able to cover up a fatal accident through his connection to the authorities. He considers himself to be a quintessential entrepreneurial success story that represents the future of India, and presents himself as such to the Premier.
Major Characters:-

● **Balram**

Balram Halwai, the story's narrator, protagonist, and anti-hero, tells of his rise from village peasant to successful entrepreneur. He has a significant faith in his exceptionalism, thinking of himself as a "White Tiger" not tied to conventional morality or social expectations. It is through this alternate system that he is able to rearrange his life and identity. Balram's dark humor, cynicism, and perceptiveness form the lifeblood of *The White Tiger*.

Balram was born in the village of Laxmangarh, into a life he considered miserable. Despite his intelligence, he was forced to leave school early to work. Nevertheless, he continued educating himself by eavesdropping on conversations. As he progressed through the echelons of the underclass, eventually being hired as a driver for Mr. Ashok and the Stork, he developed a severe resentment against the upper classes, which eventually prompted him to murder Mr. Ashok. His other aliases include Munna, the White Tiger, and Ashok Sharma.

● **Mr. Ashok**

Ashok is Balram's principal master, the Stork's son, and the Mongoose's brother. Exceedingly handsome, Ashok is also generally kind and gentle to those around him. Unlike the other members of his family, he trusts Balram immensely, and the latter senses a strange, profound connection between them. Ashok is childlike, with a short attention span, and generally dislikes his family's business dealings. Ultimately, his strange connection to Balram is not enough to save his life when Balram decides to murder him.
Pinky Madam

Pinky Madam is Ashok's wife, and just as good-looking as her husband. Because of her background, she is never fully accepted by Ashok's family. She is demanding, capricious, and deeply unsatisfied with life in India, constantly hoping to return to America, and is generally cruel to Balram. She eventually leaves Ashok to return to New York, and shows a deep grief over the hit-and-run that proved the last nail in the coffin of their relationship.

Essay questions:-

1. Analyse the character of Balram Halwai as an anti-hero.
2. Discuss the significance of the title The White Tiger
3. “In The White Tiger Aravind Adiga presents another side of India which lacks moral and ethical codes” - comment.
About the author:-


His work has been included in the exhibitions After Belonging: A Triennale in Residence, On Residence and the Ways We Stay in Transit, Oslo Architecture Triennale (2016) and 1497, Green Art Gallery, Dubai (2016). He also co-curated the poetry and song performance Hekayah: The Story, New York University Abu Dhabi Arts Center, Abu Dhabi (2017).

His work Temporary People won The Hindu Prize, Chennai (2017) and the inaugural Restless Books Prize for New Immigrant Writing, New York (2016), and he was also the recipient of the Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Award, Chicago (2014). His work was longlisted for The Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, New York (2017), and he was runner-up for the DNA/Out of Print Short Story Contest, Mumbai (2014).
He is currently a lecturer in the Writing Program at New York University Abu Dhabi and was a visiting lecturer at Campus Art Dubai 4.0 (2016).

He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Communication and a Master of Arts in Corporate and Organizational Communication from Fairleigh Dickinson University, Teaneck -Hackensack Campus, US (2003 and 2006, respectively) and a Master of Fine Arts in Writing, School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2013).

Analysis:-

Deepak Unnikrishnan’s *Temporary People* is a riveting debut collection of twenty-eight short stories written in a mélange of stylistic registers. Fiction, Unnikrishnan writes, has “barely addressed the so-called guest workers of the (Arabian) Gulf.” Divided into three parts—“Limbs,” “Tongue,” and “Home”—*Temporary People* addresses this absence and explores how “temporary status affects psyches, families, memories, fables, and language(s).” Critical here is the fleeting, groundless, and ephemeral quality of the temporary; its propensity to efface or render ghostly the stories of individual lives. As Muthassi in “Sarama” says: “Everybody . . . has a past that ought to be heard. The present is paralyzed without a past.”

The poignancy of *Temporary People* is accentuated by the fact that such pasts are often not heard. When the stories find auditors, they assume ghoulish, grotesque shapes. The tone is set by the statement of an anonymous person that serves as an epigraph for “Limbs”: “There exists this city built by labor, mostly men, who disappear after their respective buildings are made. Once the last brick is laid . . . the laborers . . . begin to fade, before disappearing completely. Some believe the men become ghosts, haunting the façades they helped build. When visiting, take note. If outside, and there are buildings nearby,
ghosts may already be falling.” Temporary People is thus an attempt to “take note,” to provide narrative and figurative shape to pasts, bodies, tongues, and homes that conditions of temporariness dismember and render spectral.

The horrid quality of the tales is, however, counterbalanced by unexpected and sometimes magical correspondences between people, animals, and things. A recurring narrative technique relevant here enacts metamorphoses between human and animal. Metamorphoses plot histories of loss and absence and illustrate how connections emerge contingently and unexpectedly among “pravasis” (immigrants). Anna Varghese, one such pravasi, “tapes” the broken bodies of laborers who fall from buildings in “Birds.” During one night shift, she encounters the paralyzed and dying Iqbal, who narrates stories from his past and articulates his desire to fly uninhibitedly like a bird. Listening to Iqbal enables Anna to eventually take flight from her paralyzing present. “Dog” closes with the cutting down of a pepper tree, below which lies the grave of a loyal family dog. The leveling of the ground that destroys the “dog which became part of a tree” is a resonant image mournfully conveying the effacement of a form of life, a haunting strain that repeatedly reverberates in Temporary People.

Deepak Unnikrishnan’s Temporary People falls into that category. It is a book about the fractured lives of migrant labourers who move from the coastal Indian state of Kerala to eke out a precarious, high-risk, high-reward existence in the oil monarchies of the Gulf. The geographical and cultural links between the west coast of India and the regions of the Gulf are old ones, sustained for many centuries along oceanic trading routes; and one of their more modern manifestations are the “Gulf Malayalees” (“Malayalees” is the anglicized pronunciation used to refer to the inhabitants of Kerala),
temporary migrants, driven forth by stagnating economic prospects in the homeland, and looking to take advantage of better pay and opportunities to improve the lives of their families back home. (In fact, so enduring has this trope become in Indian social and political life, that critics of Kerala’s welfare-state developmental model make serious arguments about how the only thing sustaining it is remittances from the Gulf.)

The twenty-eight short stories of *Temporary People* present the world as might be seen through a smoky, concave mirror: recognizable, but with its outlines blurred, and twisted out of joint just enough to appear simultaneously familiar and strangely eerie. A man escapes from the labour camp along with his two comrades, who have turned themselves into a suitcase and a passport. A woman walks the streets at night, patching together the broken limbs of construction workers who have fallen from incomplete buildings, but who are physically unable to die. A formula is invented to create farm-grown Malayalees with a ten-year lifespan, so that there is an unending supply of labour—but something goes terrifyingly wrong. A house of cockroaches learns the human language to combat the attempts of the building’s human family to gas them out of existence. The theft of a new bicycle engulfs a set of cricket-playing Malayalee boys and their Arab neighbours into a circle of violence. And back home in Kerala, an old woman recounts the story of the Indian epic, *The Ramayana*, from the perspective of one of its most despised characters.

These disparate—often disconnected—stories are punctuated by shorter pieces that variously take the form of epistles, dramatic narrative, or sometimes nothing more than pure wordplay. Like Anna Verghese patching up the broken bodies of workmen “with duct tape or some good glue,” these
interludes stitch together the gulf migrant labour experience, which refuses to lend itself to any coherent or integrated treatment, but rather allows itself to be understood only through a disjointed set of perspectives that hang together in a clumsy, and painfully obvious fashion. The whole—to borrow the language of Edward Said, describing Elias Khoury’s novel, *Little Mountain* (1977), is a “combinatorial amalgam of different elements, principally autobiography, story, fable, pastiche, and self-parody, the whole highlighted by an insistent and eerie nostalgia.”

We can see two themes emerging— the first is the homeland as both nostalgia and mirage, and the reciprocal mix of yearning and loss that those left behind have for the departed. In one of the stories, there is a “fone” that allows men to teleport back home when they call their wives, observing them while remaining unseen, with predictably disastrous consequences. In another, a Malayalee gulf widow writes a serialized novel that predicts and anticipates a failed rebellion in the Emirates, drawing intelligence agents to her house, by the end of which—in true Borgesian fashion—the line between fiction and reality has dissolved out of all recognition. Both these stories transition between the homeland and the Gulf through devices that simultaneously conceal and accentuate the unbridgeable gap between them, a gap that, once created, takes on a life of its own.

This gap comes to be characterised by language, the second unifying theme underneath the patchwork: wrenched out of context, having lost its ability to frame the world, stripped to its elemental purpose of functional communication. One of the interludes in *Temporary People*—in the tradition of both Gogol’s *The Nose* and Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*—imagines the tongue of an Abu Dhabi immigrant detaching
itself from his mouth, running away, and promptly getting hit by traffic:

“Verbs, adjectives, and adverbs died at the scene, but the surviving nouns, tadpole-sized, see-through, fell like hail. Some accurately … [but] there were also mistakes. Because the nouns had been expelled so violently, many ended up mangled, some unrecognizable. These damaged nouns, like Wifebeater and Veed and Secret Police, were everywhere, unclaimed, hanging off rafters, store signs, pedestrians.”

Elsewhere, cockroaches pick up language from a building’s tenants, “bits of Arabic from the Palestinians and the Sudanese, Tagalog from the Filipinos, modern variations of Dravidian languages,” and craft a “custom-made patois.” Here, language is necessary, a survival instinct, and of course constitutive of that “third space,” where “words [are] collected and taken out, poured into heads, practiced in secret but out loud, words selected then changed, pronounced and mispronounced, combined to form new sounds, to conjure old ones, to produce meaning, to obfuscate secrets, or express joy.”

Temporary People is not the first work that attempts to fashion literature out of the highly specific experience of Malayali labourers in the Gulf. In 2008, the Malayalee writer Benyamin (who, at the time, was based in Bahrain) wrote Goat Days, an award-winning novel that also swiftly became a cult classic in its homeland (it has been through seventy reprints since publication, and translated into both English and Arabic). It is easy to say that Temporary People has been written in the shadow of Goat Days; more than that, however, Temporary People is in dialogue with, and almost interrogates, its predecessor. The earlier novel—which tells the story of a Malayalee labour-immigrant to Saudi Arabia, who, in a case of
mistaken identity, finds himself trapped in a horrific life, tending goats in the middle of the desert for a brutal master—is written in a grimly realistic style, highlighting privation, suffering, and ultimately the possibility of salvation. With its (mostly) linear plotline, uncrowded stage, and minimalist language, *Goat Days* tells the complete story of a single human experience, from beginning to end. In *Temporary People*, privation and suffering are never far from the foreground; but by contrast, the later novel denies the possibility that a “full” story can ever be told. There can only be many stories, each partial and incomplete, with the parts fitting together as uneasily as broken glass.

Few contemporary global issues are as politically charged as immigration. The American media raises the subject on a nearly daily basis in the context of debates about assimilation, national identity, crime, and terrorism. The success of anti-immigration politicians in both the United States and in Europe has raised the stakes for those who see immigrant communities as integral to the American experiment and part of the very fabric of the American experience. The contours of American literature, for instance, would be unrecognizable without the contributions of Jewish, Irish, Italian, and Asian immigrant writers, or, depending on how one chooses to look at it, without the contributions of the ancestors of European settlers and forcefully transplanted African slaves. Yet does the experience of migrancy, or of permanent itinerancy, without the possibility of citizenship and/or cultural assimilation, demand a different affective vocabulary than immigrant writing? Does it demand a different aesthetic approach — one that emphasizes temporariness as both a mood and a mode?

Deepak Unnikrishnan’s debut novel *Temporary People* takes as its subject the migrant communities of the United Arab
Emirates. It both fits neatly into the category of Global Literature and shares much with a tradition of immigrant American writing that grapples with institutional racism and individual alienation. Ultimately, though, *Temporary People* is about a set of experiences that is unique to the Gulf and to its system of migrant labor. The UAE, a country with roughly the population of New Jersey, has the fifth largest stock of international migrants in the world. Foreign nationals make up 80 percent of the resident population in the UAE and 90 percent of the workforce. These foreign nationals do not have the protection of citizenship, have no political representation, and are subject to the often arbitrary and abusive dictates of a sponsorship system.

The UAE is a case study in hegemony. In a series of “Chapters,” *Temporary People* delves into the lives, imaginaries, myths, and vocabularies of the Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Filipinos who make up UAE’s subaltern class. Unnikrishnan, writing from the perspective of the proletariat, creates a vivid bottom-up vernacular history of the modern Gulf oil state. Yet his book also poses poignant questions about migrant identity more generally.

The promotional material for *Temporary People* compares the novel to the works of Salman Rushdie and George Saunders, but reading *Temporary People* had me thinking about a different work of writing that explored migration through interlinked experimental vignettes, Jean Toomer’s *Cane*. Alternating between prose, poetry, spirituals, and dramatic dialogue, *Cane* examined the lives, aspirations, and origins of the African-American community at a time when much of that community was relocating from the rural South to the urban North. *Cane* was published in 1923 and has come to be critically regarded as a classic of both High Modernism and the Harlem
Renaissance. Of course, *Temporary People* is about a different community in different circumstances and would be more properly categorized as postmodernist than as modernist, but both books share a formal restlessness and an interest in turning that restlessness into aesthetic explorations of how a marginalized cultural community navigates its relationship to a dominant, and often racist, national culture.

Unnikrishnan emphasizes the relationship of language to status throughout *Temporary People*. In the coming-of-age story “Monseepalty,” a group of Indian migrants plays soccer together in empty parking lots — parking lots that have been turned into makeshift playgrounds claimed by boys of different nationalities. “For a few hours we were all temporary inhabitants of Moonseepalty,” the narrator explains, “an ephemeral football-mad province of many complex cultural parts powered by nationality or race.” This “ephemeral” vision of community, however, is eventually shattered as the fault lines of belonging become evident once the police arrive to break up the games. While the Indian migrants scatter and hide, a shirtless boy from a group of Arab players walks “boldly towards the waiting patrol car, like his father owned the world.” The kid and the police shake hands, share a joke, and then the Arab boys return to playing soccer: “Bug-eyed, we cursed him, his fucking language and all his fucking ancestors.”

Language and masculinity are intimately connected for the Indian migrant boys; the “Arabee” boys, the narrator explains, have the “balls” that the Indian boys lack. The Arab boys not only have cultural status, but also, their command of Arabic signifies their permanence and belonging in the community. They are afforded the protections of the state, because they count, whereas the Indian boys do not. The vision of “Moonseepalty” is a chimera, or more properly, the community
to which the Indian boys belong offers only a bastardized version of municipal belonging. After one of the Indian boys, “Tits,” has his bike stolen and is then harassed by the police for reporting it, the migrant soccer crew feels disrespected and is looking for some kind of revenge. They happen upon a lone Arab boy and begin timidly throwing stones at him, but when the Arab boy turns and challenges them, the status difference between the two groups is definitively announced through language:

“You crazy?” He spoke English now. He then held his index finger up to his temple and drew circles in the air. With Arabic, he tightened our dicks, with English he lopped them off.

Figurative emasculation becomes literal: Tits, egged on by the narrator calling him a “pussy,” physically attacks the Arab boy. When the Arab boy’s friends come to his aid, none of the Indians help Tits. As a result of the beating, Tits is permanently mutilated. The story ends with Tits’s revenge — not on the Arab boys who crushed his balls, but rather on the narrator who abandoned him. Inter-communal violence resolves itself in forms of intra-community violence that challenge the very notion of community.

With one notable exception, characters do not reappear from one “chapter” to the next. Each chapter is a stand-alone experiment in conveying the experience of temporariness, and therefore the structure of the novel itself embodies the fragmentation of the community bonds that Temporary People tracks. The voices in the novel are rich and varied but held together only by the common thematics of impermanence and abjection. In this impermanent world of fragile bonds, friends betray friends, brothers betray brothers, mothers abandon children, and children leave parents behind — it is the world of
the “pravasi,” the foreigner, outsider, immigrant who forsakes his own culture for another and thus can never be trusted. “Ever since Hari could crawl, I knew he would be a wanderer, destined to be a pravasi,” one mother laments: “As soon as he started to walk, he walked his skinny ass all the way to Dubai.” “Only for a short time, my mother promised when she left,” a son complains “but the shortness has grown longer, many years, almost twelve, and now I am grown.” There are no success stories, per se, in *Temporary People* — no stories of integration into the host culture or triumphant return to the land of ancestors.

*Temporary People* probes the cultural landscape of the pravasi, but out of the same new cultural forms emerge — hybrid myths of origin and self that are born from the vernaculars of migrancy. The character “Gulf Mukundun” is named such because of his “Gulf-party connections, Gulf-party money and Gulf-party status,” but despite Mukundun’s seeming integration into Gulf society, he is forced to return to India under a cloud of shame after he is caught “shagging a man.” When his son questions him about what happened, why he was sent to jail, Mukundan answers by telling the boy a story about how, while in the Gulf, he learned to “become a building.”

He began moonlighting as a mid-sized hotel, admitted Mukundun, charging patrons even more, eventually getting caught because these things don’t stay secret for long. Angry officials lugged him off to jail, then to court, where he was made to promise he wouldn’t turn into a building or a hotel without a permit ever again.

No matter his status, Gulf Mukundun is still a migrant stuck in a kind of permanent adolescence, in which he requires permission from the authorities for his activities.
Mukundun is finally released only after he has given part of himself to the Gulf, a part he leaves behind. “The jailers turned that part — ‘what I gave!’ — into paste,” Mukundun explains, “smeared most of it on the walls […] diluted the rest of it in water and mopped the floors. It was how they would keep him there, leave that part of him there.”

The stories circulating on the pages of *Temporary People* work to render an invisible community visible. These stories push back against narratives of collective impermanence through the creation of mythologies that connect home and away, as well as past and future. Yet the novel simultaneously details the profoundly debilitating effect “temporary” status has on cultural, as well as familial, bonds. Mukundun disappears one day to the relief of most of his family. His brother burns him in effigy to signal his death, even though he is not dead, just missing. The only objection comes from his son, who has taken to rubbing himself with bricks in an attempt to learn how to become a building himself. The boy’s mother reacts by asking him if he, like his father, “thinks about boys.”

Unnikrishnan’s “chabters” are attempts, through acts of storytelling, to preserve what has been left behind by migrants, as well as to document what they have created. These stories introduce readers to Malayalee laborers grown from seed who eventually rebel against their masters, to elevators that molest children, and to a crew of mobile caregivers who tape injured workers back together after they have fallen off of the buildings on which they are working. The novel also immerses the reader in family origin stories derived from the *Bhagavad Gita*. Surreal science fiction fantasies sit comfortably next to the folk lineages.
Though *Temporary People* marks a similar movement, away from rural villages and folk traditions, its characters express no nostalgia for the world left behind. Instead, they look relentlessly to the future, thinking of the past only incidentally and then often only in terms of vengeance or loss. The borders between here/there, then/now, home/away are not permanent, but they are not permeable either. The mother who complains about her son who left for Dubai explains that “by the time you have done the math in your head, everything you’ve missed, what’s been gained, you’ll come to realize what the word pravasi really means. Absence.”

Rather than engage in nostalgia, Unnikrishnan traces how various forms of absence mutate his subjects. His characters are like the neologisms that they use — neither of this world nor of that, but something new. Without the consolations of citizenship or status, Unnikrishnan’s migrants become global vagrants, circulating in a kind of interstitial no man’s land where they morph from one identity to another, but never find home.

**Essay questions:-**

1. Comment on the portrayal of characters in *Temporary People* as representatives of immigrants.

2. “*Temporary People* is an examination of how temporary status affects psyches, families, memories, fables and languages”- elucidate.

3. Consider the effectiveness of *Temporary People* in depicting the trauma of displacement experienced by the immigrants.
THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

About the author:-

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Kolkata, India, and came to the United States to pursue graduate work, earning an MA at Wright State University and a PhD at the University of California-Berkeley. The author of numerous works of poetry and prose, Divakaruni is known for her careful exploration of the immigrant experience, particularly that of South Asian women. Her collections of poetry include *Black Candle: Poems about Women from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh* (1991) and *Leaving Yuba City* (1997), which won the Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize and the Gerbode Foundation Award.

Divakaruni’s many honors and awards include a C.Y. Lee Creative Writing Award, PEN Syndicated Fiction Awards, multiple Pushcart Prizes, the South Asian Literary Association’s Distinguished Author Award, International House Alumna of the Year from the University of California-Berkeley, the Cultural Jewel Award from the Indian Culture Center in Houston, and the Light of India Award from the Times of India. Divakaruni is the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

Analysis:-

Through the tumultuous life of Panchaali, daughter of King Drupad and wife to five husbands who seek to reclaim their birthright, bestselling novelist Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives voice to a bold and sensuous retelling of captivating stories from the Mahabharata. Woven into the fabric of traditional tales from the ancient Indian epic, Panchaali’s destiny is a thread as golden and as fragile as the lotus she discovers. As she endures a fierce civil war, domestic power struggles, and the perils of attraction to elusive men, Panchaali brings a feminine sensibility to her male-dominated world. From the story of her magical birth in fire to her final moments as she brings an end to the Third Age of Man, Panchaali bears witness to her fate with insightful observations and a powerful heart. With devotion to Panchaali’s tale, Divakaruni also presents a stirring account of the interplay of warriors, gods, and the inscrutable laws of destiny, offering wisdom for today’s war-torn world.

Set in a mythic age, “when the lives of men and gods still intersected,” this new novel from feminist writer Divakaruni retells the story of the Indian epic Mahabharat from an original point of view, that of Panchaali, the wife of the five brothers of
the epic tale, an extraordinary princess born out of Fire and destined to “change the course of history.”

*The Palace of Illusions* starts fascinatingly. Using a metafiction device, the author has Panchaali and her twin brother Dhri interrupt the flow of a story—the story of their unusual birth. They add to it, they go back in time, or another character, their nurse Dhai Ma, mixes what actually happened with things that should have happened. Unfortunately, the fun is quickly spoiled. As soon as Panchaali marries the five Pandava brothers, the promise of the novel begins to fade. There are gender-changing, celestial astras (weapons), gods in disguise, epiphanies and many other marvelous events, but there is also no suspense or tension. Dreams and foretold destinies are fulfilled with disheartening alacrity. The arresting power and tragedy of the Vedic doctrine of karma that illustrates the grand ancient epic ultimately crushes this novel.

*The Palace of Illusions*, is a retelling of the ancient Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*. The novel is narrated from the point of view of Panchaali, a princess who is born from fire. Her brother, Dhri, was born this way as well. They inhabit a world where divine beings and magic are commonplace. Panchaali grows up in the palace of her father, King Drupad, who wants to seek revenge on his nemesis, Drona. When Panchaali was young, the sage Vyasa foretold that Panchaali would become a great and powerful queen married to five husbands. However, Vyasa also claims that Panchaali will be the cause of great destruction in her kingdom. Throughout Panchaali’s life, the god Krishna acts as a guide and confidant to Panchaali.

When Panchaali is old enough to be married, King Drupad hosts a contest to find her a husband. Karna, a great warrior, is initially the only one who passes the contest’s archery test,
but Panchaali humiliates him by asking who his parents are. Though he cannot answer her question, she harbors romantic feelings for him. Karna walks away humiliated. Arjun, one of the Pandava princes, steps in and wins the tournament. Panchaali travels home to Arjun’s family. His mother, Kunti, insists that Panchaali marry the remaining four Pandava brothers. The Pandavas went into hiding after their cousin, Duryodhan, tried to kill them in a fire.

After Panchaali marries the Pandava brothers, King Bheeshma divides their kingdom between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, the latter of whom are led by Duryodhan. The Pandavas build up the prosperous city of Indra Prastha and take up residence in the Palace of Illusioss, a magical structure that Panchaali grows to love. During a visit, Duryodhan falls into a pool, and Panchaali’s attendants laugh at him, causing him humiliation. The next time the Pandavas visit Duryodhan, Yudhisthir, the oldest Pandava, bets away the Pandavas’ palace and freedom in a game of dice. As a result, Duryodhan takes possession of the Palace of Illusions while Panchaali and her husbands are exiled to the woods for 12 years. During her exile, Panchaali’s sole focus is revenge.

After living in exile for 12 years, the Pandavas go into hiding in a neighboring palace. While disguised as a maid, Panchaali scorns the advances of Prince Keechak, who threatens to rape her. Panchaali and her husband, Bheem, murder Keechak. As a result of this violence, the Great War breaks out between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Many people who are close to Panchaali, including Drupad, Dhri, and Karna, are killed in the war. After hearing of Krishna’s death soon after the war, Panchaali’s husbands decide that it is time for them to die and transition to the afterlife. Panchaali is united with Karna in heaven.
This, dubbed ‘Panchaali’s Mahabharat’ on the cover, is a critical shift and impacts the retelling kaleidoscopically. Even though Draupadi is at the core of the story, her individual role in the original is almost incidental. In this version, she is the key protagonist, and it is her voice that takes us through her birth from fire, her Swayamvar, her marriage to the Pandavas, her humiliation in the Kaurava court, her years of exile, the actual war and finally the ascent into Mount Meru towards Swarga.

Her relationship with Kunti is interesting because you now see her as Draupadi’s mother-in-law and not primarily as the mother of the Pandavas; so is her equation with Bheeshma, the Granduncle of the Kauravas and Pandavas. The most arresting of course is her relationship with the two men she loved most but could never quite fathom – Karna and Krishna. Both sub-plots run through the book.

Her evolution as a woman too is a familiar story – she is quite a firebrand as a young girl, fighting for her right to study along with her brother and wanting to learn all the secrets of statesmanship. As a young woman, and then as a wife, she starts to learn the art of picking her battles, not hesitating to use an odd bit of manipulation to keep husbands, mother-in-law, kings and competing wives in check. As she begins to age, her love and loyalty to her clan grows concrete and unshakable; while her introspection on the suffering caused by people in the name of honour is something each one of us hardened by the travails of daily life is familiar with. Her unassailable belief in herself and her power as a woman – even though shaken many times in the story – are re-enforcing for each one of us today.
Almost everything in the book, as in the original itself, is a metaphor. It is up to the reader to make the most of them, and interpret them in ways that fit in to their framework.

Wife to five accomplished husbands, born out of fire and daughter of a king, and yet Draupadi’s character in Mahabharata faced the ultimate insult of almost being undressed in a room full of men. In Palace of Illusions, Draupadi gets a voice and a strong one at that. From her lonely childhood to her marriage to the Pandava brothers, her ultimate insult and desire for vengeance – the book takes readers along Draupadi’s tumultuous journey. Whether you see Draupadi as the victim or are one who holds her responsible for the chain of events that unfolded in the epic Mahabharata, the treatment of the story is delightful.

Divakaruni presents the entire book in the form of Draupadi’s first hand experiences and a series of her dreams. A fictional account of her feelings is the central theme of the book. The writing is lucid and Divakuruni does not spend too much time on any one stage of Draupadi’s life – instead the story flows seamlessly as Draupadi’s character ages. From a young lonely girl in her father King Drupad’s palace to the woman compelled to take five husbands, a fiery queen, a woman seeking vengeance and eventually a mother who gains wisdom after losing everything that she held dear.

Divakaruni’s Draupadi is a woman who knows her mind and refuses to cow down despite living in a man’s world. Draupadi’s life is presented as a series of choices she makes. She is arrogant, beautiful, flawed and refuses to forget or forgive. Did she make a mistake when she refused to let Karna be a part of her swayamvar? Should she stand up to her stern and controlling mother-in-law or should she follow orders? Does Arjun, the one who won her at swayamwar, love her?
These are some of the thoughts that occupy Draupadi’s mind. She questions why she cannot do more to change the course of her life and why saying no or following her heart’s desire is out of question even for a royal like her.

While she is a devoted wife, she is also a woman who finds it hard to forget her insult and knows how to manipulate her five husbands. Divakaruni’s account of the epic tries to create a realistic portrait of Draupadi’s character while remaining true to the basic story of Mahabharata.

With strong feminist undertones, Divakaruni presents Draupadi as a passionate woman who struggles to come to terms with her unique situation of being married to five men. Yet she sticks with them throughout their years in exile. Her only friend, Krishna, gives her advice that more often than not, appears as riddles she cannot comprehend. The book’s other strong character is Daupadi’s mother-in-law and mother to the Pandavas, Kunti. The two women are always at loggerheads and while they constantly struggle for one-upmanship, they are united in their love and concern for the Pandavas.

Divakaruni raises several questions as she narrates the story. Could Draupadi have avoided the war that ultimately led to the destruction of an entire empire? Who did she love the most? Then there is the secret attraction to the mysterious man who despite all her yearning remains out of bounds for her.

*Palace of Illusions* is also the story of needing to let the past rest and to move ahead in life, something all the characters either will not do or are not able to. While the opinionated and strong queen Draupadi always spoke her mind and did not shy away from her duty to the Pandavas, why is it that she is not a role model for the Indian women? There is so much to Draupadi’s character than just being the woman whose honour Krishna protected, and *Palace of Illusions* is an attempt to bring
forth those aspects of her life.

Like the epic Mahabharata, The Palace of Illusions, tells the story of the rivalry between the Pandavas and the Kauravas and the great war at Kurukshetra. A story about upholding dharma and righteousness. Unlike the Mahabharata, The Palace of Illusions is a personal story. Panchaali narrates her-story, beginning with her magical birth in fire and being married to five husbands. We see her grow and change through the course of the book. From a young girl who is in awe of the prophecy at her birth “for she will change the course of history” to a young bride eager to please her husband(s) and her mother-in-law to a woman who seeks revenge for her humiliation and the wrongs done to her.

Despite being faithful to the epic, this Draupadi-centric interpretation has several variations from the original. Like Draupadi’s relationship with Krishna and Karna. In the book, Draupadi is also given the ‘special vision’ of seeing the important parts of the great war. She also shows that husbands even though heroic aren’t godlike. She gives us an insight into each of her five husbands and some of their flaws. Arjun’s ‘warrior ego’, Sahdev’s pride, Nakul’s vanity, Bheem’s anger and Yudhistir’s righteousness, which leads him ‘to the ultimate loneliness: to be the only human in the court of the gods.’

Draupadi hasn’t been regarded highly in the Indian society. Unlike Sita, the archetypical ideal Indian woman, Panchaali is a ‘Kritya’ a woman whose birth spells doom of her clan. She is born from the fire of revenge (raging outside and within her father Drupad). She is raised in hatred with no mother and a father who keeps his distance from her. She is a dutiful wife to her husbands, being with them through the palaces and the forests. Despite this she is a lonely woman. Her husbands take other wives, her sons are looked after by her brother Dhri and
Krishna. Even in death Draupadi is lonely, cause ‘when she slips and falls down the slopes of the Himalayas; not one of her five husbands come to her rescue as her first husband, Yudhishtira, feels that having renounced the world they have to let go of all bondage’ Draupadi in The Palace of Illusions is shown as a ‘powerful, strong and independent woman’. From the very beginning she asserts herself, rejecting the name her father gave and choosing to call herself Panchaali. She tries to learn the ‘nyaya shastra’ along with the education meant for girls only. There are several instances in Divakaruni’s book where Draupadi asserts herself – the swayamvar, the disrobing incident in the Kuru palace and even in her desire for Karna. And Draupadi isn’t alone.

There are other strong women we know through Draupadi. Kunti, Pandu’s wife and mother to Pandavas, is a strong woman who brings up her children on her own and ensures they get their rightful place at the throne. Gandhari, who blindfolds herself for her blind husband Dhritarashtra. She berates her sons for their wrongdoing against the Pandavas. Even though she is angry and heartbroken at her sons’ deaths, she knows they ‘brought their own downfall.’ Draupadi also refers to Hidimba, Bheem’s other wife, who rules her subjects alone and with a firm hand. A story so powerful that it has transcended thousands of years, the Mahabharata is a timeless epic. Relevant and revered, every Indian is as familiar with its broad construct as the western world is with the Bible. It takes courage to mess around with something this sacred and Chitra Banerjee has done a pretty good job at doing just this.

She doesn’t change the story, nor does she provide an alternative ending, but instead she offers a fresh new perspective. Imagine seeing it through Draupadi’s eyes — the woman who started it all. For those unfamiliar with the epic, Draupadi was the wife of the five Pandava brothers, the rulers
of Hastinapur (believed to be erstwhile Delhi). She joins the central cast of characters in Mahabharata, when Arjun, the dashing Pandava prince, wins her as his bride in a Swayamvara, a modern-day The Bachelorette if you will.

Marrying into a royal family already in exile and then being asked to bed Arjun’s four brothers is not exactly the marriage most princesses dream of. Banerjee’s attempts to tell readers hidden stories behind these events and to give voices to the women of Mahabharata.

The narrative starts from her birth in King Drupad’s home and moves between flashbacks and present time, digging out stories of the past and building out characters. Banerjee’s princess is a young rebel, a tomboy craving for her father, Drupad’s, attention. She is determined to leave a mark on this world. Always in conflict with her elders on her expected role as a princess and a woman, she finds comfort and solace with her confidante and friend, Krishna, King of Dwarka.

Draupadi’s tries hard to fight the social structures around her. But from very early on in her life, she has to bow down to higher values — like protecting one’s family honor and choosing for the greater good of the kingdom.

It starts with her Swayamvar, where she compromises on her heart’s desire and picks Arjun over Karna. Next, when her mother-in-law, Queen Kunti, asks her to wed all her five sons, she acquiesces. We see her evolution from a young, rebellious girl to a queen of the times. Banerjee provides interesting glimpses of the dynamics of certain relationships. By forcing Draupadi to wed all her sons, Kunti does not endear herself to her new daughter-in-law. What’s interesting is how Draupadi creates a position for herself in the household and gains importance in the eyes of her husband.
Banerjee also explores the relationship between Draupadi and Arjun, often rumored to be her favorite husband. Arjun fits the bill as the perfect prince charming, but their relationship collapses soon after her marriage to his brothers. In the end, Draupadi is left pining for her secret love for Karna, the half-brother of the Pandavas.

It’s interesting to note that there is no real romance between Draupadi and Karna in the actual Mahabharata. In fact, Karna’s identity as the sixth Pandava is revealed very late in the story. Banerjee builds on popular folklore and explores Draupadi’s secret love as a critical plot point in the novel.

Banerjee expertly weaves the original stories from Mahabharata, while adding her own spin to events. The name of the novel comes from the architectural marvel that housed the Pandavas when they ruled Hastinapur. The Palace of Illusions was full of optical tricks. When their cousins, the Kauravas came to visit, they found themselves befuddled and lost. Draupadi, in her arrogance, mocked their confusion and set fold the events that led to the great war between the two families.

Essay questions:-
1. “The Palace of Illusions is an attempt to subvert the prevailing patriarchal norms” - comment.
2. Consider how Divakaruni transforms the character of Draupadi to suit the politics of the novel.
3. Discuss on the craftsmanship of Divakaruni in attempting a retelling of Indian epic from a different perspective.
Jhumpa Lahiri was born to Bengali parents from Calcutta (now Kolkata)—her father a university librarian and her mother a schoolteacher—who moved to London and then to the United States, settling in South Kingstown, Rhode Island, when she was young. Her parents nevertheless remained committed to their East Indian culture and determined to rear their children with experience of and pride in their cultural heritage. Lahiri was encouraged by her grade-school teachers to retain her family nickname, Jhumpa, at school. Although she wrote prolifically during her pre college school years, she did not embrace a writer’s life until after she graduated (1989) with a B.A. in English literature from Barnard College and obtained three master’s degrees (in English, creative writing, and comparative literature and arts) and a doctorate (in Renaissance studies) from Boston University in the 1990s.

While in graduate school and shortly thereafter, Lahiri published a number of short stories in such magazines as The New Yorker, Harvard Review, and Story Quarterly. She collected some of those stories in her debut collection, Interpreter of Maladies (1999). The nine stories, some set in Calcutta and others on the U.S. East Coast, examine such subjects as the practice of arranged marriage, alienation, dislocation, and loss of culture and provide insight into the experiences of Indian immigrants as well as the lives of
Calcuttans. Among the awards garnered by *Interpreter of Maladies* were the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the 2000 PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Fiction.

Lahiri next tried her hand at a novel, producing *The Namesake* (2003; film 2006), a story that examines themes of personal identity and the conflicts produced by immigration by following the internal dynamics of a Bengali family in the United States. She returned to short fiction in *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), a collection that likewise takes as its subject the experience of immigration as well as that of assimilation into American culture. Her novel *The Lowland* (2013) chronicles the divergent paths of two Bengali brothers. The tale was nominated for both the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award and earned Lahiri the 2015 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, a prize established in 2010 by infrastructure developers DSC Limited to honour the achievements of South Asian writers and “to raise awareness of South Asian culture around the world.”

Lahiri was presented a 2014 National Humanities Medal by U.S. Pres. Barack Obama in 2015. That same year she published her first book written in Italian, *In altre parole (In Other Words)*, a meditation on her immersion in another culture and language. Lahiri continued writing in Italian, and in 2018 she released the novel *Dove mi trovo* (“Where I Find Myself”).

Lahiri's writing is characterized by her "plain" language and her characters, often Indian immigrants to America who must navigate between the cultural values of their homeland and their adopted home.[25][13] Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. Lahiri
examines her characters' struggles, anxieties, and biases to chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behavior.

Until *Unaccustomed Earth*, she focused mostly on first-generation Indian American immigrants and their struggle to raise a family in a country very different from theirs. Her stories describe their efforts to keep their children acquainted with Indian culture and traditions and to keep them close even after they have grown up in order to hang onto the Indian tradition of a joint family, in which the parents, their children and the children's families live under the same roof.

*Unaccustomed Earth* departs from this earlier original ethos, as Lahiri's characters embark on new stages of development. These stories scrutinize the fate of the second and third generations. As succeeding generations become increasingly assimilated into American culture and are comfortable in constructing perspectives outside of their country of origin, Lahiri's fiction shifts to the needs of the individual. She shows how later generations depart from the constraints of their immigrant parents, who are often devoted to their community and their responsibility to other immigrants.

**Summary:-**

The novel begins in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1968. Ashima Ganguli, expecting a child, makes a snack for herself in the kitchen of her apartment, which she shares with her husband, Ashoke. The two met in Calcutta, where their marriage was arranged by their parents. Ashoke is a graduate student in electrical engineering at MIT. Though Ashima was afraid to move across the world with a man she barely knew, she dutifully did so, satisfying her family’s wishes. She gives birth to a boy in the hospital in Cambridge. Ashoke, nearly
killed in a train accident as a young man in India, decides that the boy’s nickname, or pet name, should be Gogol, after Nikolai Gogol, the Russian writer. Ashima and Ashoke agree to register the boy’s legal name as “Gogol.” Gogol is Ashoke’s favorite author, in part because Ashoke was reading Gogol during the train accident. A dropped page of that book caused the authorities to recognize Ashoke in the wreckage, and they saved his life.

The Gangulis wait for an “official” name for Gogol to come in the mail, from Calcutta. But Ashima’s grandmother, who has the ceremonial honor of naming the boy, suffers a stroke, and her letter with Gogol’s official name is lost in the mail. The family settles into life in Cambridge, with Ashima learning to take Gogol around on her errands. As the family prepares for its first trip back to Calcutta, Ashoke and Ashima learn that Ashima’s father has died suddenly. Their trip is shrouded in mourning. Ashima, especially, misses her parents and her home in Calcutta, despite the family’s growing network of Bengali friends in the Boston area.

The Gangulis move to a Boston suburb, a university town where Ashoke has found a job teaching electrical engineering. Gogol begins preschool, then kindergarten, and Ashima misses spending time with him, and walking around the neighborhood. Gogol begins school, and although his parents have settled on an official name, Nikhil, for him to use there, Gogol insists on being called “Gogol,” and so the name sticks.

Ashima and Ashoke have another child, a girl named Sonia. Years pass, and the family settles into the modest house in the suburbs, on Pemberton Road. In high school, Gogol grows resentful of his name, which he finds strange, not “really” Indian. He learns about the life of Nikolai Gogol in a literature
class, and is horrified by that man’s bizarre, unhappy existence. Ashoke gives Gogol a copy of Gogol’s stories for his fourteenth birthday, and almost tells him the story of his train accident, but holds back. Gogol hides the book in a closet and forgets about it.

Gogol officially changes his name to Nikhil before going to Yale. He meets a girl there named Ruth, and they fall in love, dating for over a year. After waiting hurriedly for Gogol’s delayed Amtrak train, one holiday weekend, Ashoke tells his son about the train-wreck that nearly killed him, and that gave Gogol his name. Gogol was unaware of the story until this point. Nikhil develops a love for architecture, and after graduating from Yale, he attends design school at Columbia, then lives uptown and works for a firm in Manhattan. He meets a young woman in New York named Maxine, who leads a cosmopolitan life with her parents downtown. Nikhil essentially moves into Maxine’s home, and the two date seriously. Gogol introduces Maxine to his parents one summer, then spends two weeks in New Hampshire with Maxine’s family, the Ratliffs, believing that their life, as opposed to his parents’, is paradise.

Ashoke takes a visiting professorship outside Cleveland and moves there for the academic year. He comes home every three weeks to see Ashima and take care of household chores. Ashoke calls Ashima one night and tells her he has been admitted to the hospital for a minor stomach ailment. When Ashima calls back, she finds out that Ashoke has died of a heart attack. The family is stunned. Gogol flies to Cleveland and cleans out his father’s apartment. The family observes traditional Bengali mourning practices, from which Maxine feels excluded. Soon after this period is over, Maxine and Gogol break up.
Gogol continues his life in New York, though he visits his mother and sister in Boston more frequently. Ashima sets Gogol up with Moushumi, a family friend from Pemberton Road, who now studies for a French-literature PhD in New York. Gogol and Moushumi initially resist this blind date, but find that they like and understand one another. They continue dating and soon fall in love. After about a year, they marry in a large Bengali ceremony in New Jersey, near where Moushumi’s parents now live. They rent an apartment together downtown.

Time passes. The couple takes a trip to Paris, where Moushumi delivers a paper at a conference. The marriage strains. Moushumi likes spending time with her artistic, Brooklyn friends, whereas Gogol finds them frustrating and selfish. Gogol also resents the specter of Graham, Moushumi’s banker ex-fiancé, who was good friends with the artistic crew Moushumi still adores. Moushumi, feeling confined in the marriage, begins an affair with an old friend, an aimless academic named Dimitri Desjardins. She keeps the affair from Gogol for several months, but eventually Nikhil catches her in a lie, and she admits all to him. They divorce.

Gogol returns to Pemberton Road for a final Christmas party. His sister Sonia is marrying a man named Ben and staying in the Boston area. Ashima will spend half her time in Boston and half in Calcutta, close to relatives. Gogol will continue working as an architect in New York, but for a smaller firm where he has more creative input. Nikhil goes up to his room and finds the copy of Gogol’s stories his father gave him, realizing how much the author meant to his father. Gogol, feeling close to Ashoke’s memory, begins reading the Gogol as the novel ends.
Themes:-

● The Indian Immigrant Experience

The experiences of the Ganguli family in America—a country that for some of them is an intensely foreign environment—offer a glimpse of life as an Indian immigrant to the United States.

What is familiar for most readers in America is deeply unfamiliar to Ashoke and Ashima, who therefore provide a unique perspective on seemingly everyday things within American society. Husband and wife have differing reactions to the barrage of new customs that greets them in America, and together they embody two sides of the immigrant experience. Ashoke is often amused and fascinated by the world around him in America, and prospers first as a student and then as a professor. Although he remains attached to the family’s Bengali traditions, he has always been inclined to travel, and is not actively homesick. Ashima, on the other hand, misses her life in India intensely, and often finds life in Massachusetts to be cold and lonely. She finds it difficult to understand the customs of those around her, and clings to her correspondence with her family in India, as well as the family she has in America: her husband and children. Ashima in many ways anchors the narrative, providing an emotional center and working most actively to hold her family together and maintain their Bengali traditions. The intense isolation she often feels demonstrates the difficulty that can be involved in fitting into an entirely new culture while struggling to retain one’s own cultural heritage.

Gogol, Sonia, and later Moushumi then represent the next generation of immigrants, the first American-born generation, for whom assimilation—the process of adapting to American
culture—comes much more naturally. The Ganguli children grow up speaking English natively, unlike their parents, and are much more interested in American food and pop culture, since they have attended American schools their whole lives. For them, it is India that seems foreign. On their visits to family, they are homesick for American food and confused by common Indian rituals. However, their divided loyalties often lead to an internal struggle for a unified identity.

This shift, within one generation, is a common theme in immigrant fiction, and raises questions about the gradual disappearance of the home culture. Is assimilation the best option? The tension between retaining past traditions and moving into an “American” future is one that underlies much of The Namesake. Although they are born American, the members of the second generation (Gogol and Sonia) remain in the category of “outsider” or “other” to the majority of Americans, who focus on the foreign background to which Gogol and Sonia themselves may or may not feel any connection at all. Gogol encounters this feeling most acutely when a guest at a dinner party in New Hampshire assumes that he was born in India. If they are, by force of circumstance, outsiders in both of the cultures to which they owe allegiance, where, if anywhere, can the members of this generation find their home? The quest for a home—like the quest for a true name—is at the core of the decisions made by Gogol, and then by Moushumi later in the story.

● Family, Tradition, and Ritual

The importance of family in The Namesake cannot be overstated. The novel is centered around the Ganguli family, and the ways in which two very different generations interact with one another.
For **Ashoke** and **Ashima**, the concept of a family life is inherited directly from their background in India, where entire families share the same home for generations, are deeply invested in one another’s lives, and reinforce their connection to one another through a whole range of traditions and rituals. These include naming, marriage, death, and the numerous holidays in between. Although in America Ashoke and Ashima are largely cut off from their true relatives in India, the extended “family” of fellow Bengali immigrants helps to maintain these traditions, celebrating Indian holidays with the appropriate ceremony and cooking authentic Indian food as best they can with the ingredients available to them.

For the parents in the novel, then, family is a constant force, something to be relied on, and that which naturally defines one’s identity. For **Gogol** and **Sonia**, however, who grow up outside of India, family becomes a symbol of those things that are foreign to their normal lives in America, something that pulls their identity away from what they are learning in school and from American society. The traditions and rituals of the Bengali community seem like empty ceremonies to the children, who are growing up in a culture that views these traditions as alien. They are more interested in Christmas than the rituals of an Indian coming-of-age ceremony.

Family is always a defining force, however, even if it is one that both siblings seem to want to escape sometimes. Ashima and Ashoke provide the solid foundation that both siblings can rely on and inevitably return to, even if they spend increasing periods of time apart. When this foundation is shaken by the death of Ashoke, it is in the family that the siblings find their comfort, returning to the traditions of their past. As Gogol reflects in the last chapter, among all of the accidents that have shaped their lives, the only constant has been a connection to one another.
Independence, Rebellion, and Growing Up

Gogol’s struggle for independence from the family that he sometimes finds embarrassing is a major feature of the novel. *The Namesake* fits some definitions of a *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age novel, with Gogol as the protagonist who grows up over the course of the story.

Although our view into the life of Ashoke and Ashima makes them central to the novel, it is Gogol who becomes the main protagonist, and whose development we follow most closely. As in many books in the *Bildungsroman* category, *The Namesake* tracks Gogol’s growth from a baby into a young man, examining his education and the various events that form him along the way.

Gogol is an independent thinker, and he actively rebels against certain things in his life that link him to a place (India) he feels less connected to than his parents do. His choice to legally change his name, which he does on his own before leaving for Yale, demonstrates this independence and spirit of rebellion. The people he meets from that point in the novel forward will know him only as Nikhil—and he is annoyed and embarrassed when his parents, visiting his college, forget the change and call him Gogol. After leaving for college, Nikhil/Gogol visits home less frequently. He starts carving out an independent life for himself in New York, one that involves a rebellious (since his parents would not approve of it) romantic attachment to Maxine. It is only after the death of his father that family again becomes a central facet of Nikhil/Gogol’s life, so that when his mother, Ashima, is packing up their family home and preparing to leave for India, he wonders how he will be able to cope with being so far from her.
By tracking the episodes in Gogol’s life, from his departure from the family home to his professional development, his major romantic connections, and the death of his father, Lahiri provides a perspective that gives the reader a chance to imagine the motivations behind each of Gogol’s choices, and to observe the ways in which he reacts to the challenges he faces. As one example, we see his love of architecture being triggered by an early visit to the Taj Mahal, and then watch this inspire his drawing of his family home, which first connects him to Ruth, his first love, and then to his later life as an architect. This guessing-game of cause and effect is one in which the reader has the power to interpret Gogol’s decisions in more than one way, and Lahiri provides us with lots of material for discussion.

● **Identity and Naming**

As its title suggests, at its core *The Namesake* tackles the question of forming one’s own identity, and explores the power that a name can carry.

**Gogol’s** decision to change his name to Nikhil before leaving home for college demonstrates his desire to take control over his own identity. The name Gogol, which “Nikhil” finds so distasteful, is a direct result of the literal identity confusion at his birth, when the letter sent from India that contained his “true name” was lost in the mail. “Gogol” is also a name that holds deep meaning for Ashoke, since it was a book of short stories by Gogol, the Russian author, that saved his life during a fateful train crash—but this meaning is not conveyed to Gogol/Nikhil during his childhood.

As the other theme outlines make clear, the main tension that drives Gogol/Nikhil’s identity confusion is the divide between his family’s Indian heritage and his own desire for an independent, modern American lifestyle.
The episodes in Gogol/Nikhil’s development on display in the novel reveal a constant striving for a clear identity, a struggle which is made difficult by the divided world in which he grows up. Many of the choices that he makes seem motivated by a desire to live life as a “normal” American, and to escape the influence of his family. Gogol’s relationship to Maxine, for example, an upper class New Yorker who lives at home with her stylish and modern parents, evolves to the point of offering Gogol an alternative home. He vacations with Maxine’s family instead of returning home to visit his own, and embeds himself in their rituals. The identity that she and her family represent is clearly a very seductive one.

However, there are also moments—like after the death of his father, or when he decides to marry Moushumi—that Gogol seems to be reaching back toward his roots. Although his marriage to Moushumi ends in divorce, the book’s conclusion, as Gogol sits down to finally read the book of his namesake’s short stories that his father had given him long ago, suggests a new acceptance of his past, and a willingness to allow his background to become a part of his identity.

Naming, and nicknames, are also a symbol of the bonds shared by different characters throughout the novel, and they carry weight as markers of those bonds. When Ashoke and Ashima return to Calcutta on family vacations, they become “Mithu” and “Monu,” and are transformed into more confident versions of themselves. Sonia calls Gogol “Goggles,” Maxine is “Max” to Gogol—whom she knows as Nikhil—and to Dimitri, Moushumi is known as “Mouse.” This abundance of names is also a sign of the various worlds that the main characters of Lahiri’s novel inhabit simultaneously—often in a way that causes internal division, but which can also provide a form of comfort.
Love and Marriage

The novel examines the nature of love and marriage by providing an intimate view into a series of Gogol’s romantic relationships, which are seen alongside the enduring, arranged marriage of his parents.

Gogol’s story is grounded in the marriage of his parents, Ashoke and Ashima, whose conception of love is founded in their shared past in India. Characterized by clearly defined gender roles and less openly displayed affection, but also a deep sense of loyalty and companionship, this relationship can be contrasted with Gogol’s romantic experiences. While Gogol has intense, influential, and openly sexual relationships with three different women over the course of the novel—outside of, and then, briefly, within a marriage—Ashima and Ashoke are one another’s sole romantic partners in life, as evidenced by the first meeting between them, which was arranged by Ashima’s family.

This reflects a difference between the two generations about the concept of married life. Gogol uses love as another means of rebelling against his past and trying to form his own identity, and the women he is drawn to at different points in the novel match his attitude toward that past. For him, love is something to be found independently. For Ashima and Ashoke, marriage was not an exercise in independence or forming identity, but was instead another step in the traditional Indian path in life, and one that led toward companionship and the growth of a family.

Although there is a traditional separation between Ashima and Ashoke that may appear as distance to an American reader—as in the moment of Gogol’s birth, when Ashoke waits outside the room while Ashima delivers his son—the intimacy
between the two of them is clear from the respect and care they take with one another. By contrast, the relationship between Moushumi and Gogol is driven by Moushumi’s desire—which is greater even than Gogol’s own—to conform to a certain image of a modern American. She and Gogol never seem to relax into the idea that they might find their identity in one another, and dinner parties with her friends in Brooklyn, where Gogol feels awkward and out of place, signal a divide between them. Moushomi’s dissatisfaction with the marriage eventually leads to infidelity, and the two are divorced. Their need for independence is greater than their sense of loyalty or commitment to a family identity.

Ultimately, Lahiri seems to support a balance of these two drives when it comes to love and marriage. It is important that one feel capable of defining one’s identity independently, because love pursued as a means of finding stability or escape seems to fail, but it is equally important, and requires a different kind of courage, to attach oneself to a world created in collaboration with another person.

Essay Questions:-

1. Elucidate how The Namesake turns out to be a sincere reflection on the Indian immigrant experience.

2. Jhumpa Lahiri explores the inevitable tussle between cultural transition and cultural identity in The Namesake—explain.
INHERITANCE OF LOSS

Kiran Desai

About the author:-

Kiran Desai—daughter of the novelist Anita Desai—lived in India until age 15, after which her family moved to England and then to the United States. She graduated from Bennington College in 1993 and later received two M.F.A.’s—one from Hollins University, in Roanoke, Virginia, and the other from Columbia University, in New York City.

Desai left Columbia for several years to write her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), about a young man in provincial India who abandons an easy post office job and begins living in a guava tree, where he makes oracular pronouncements to locals. Unaware that he knows of their lives from having read their mail, they hail him as a prophet. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* drew wide critical praise and received a 1998 Betty Trask Prize from the British Society of Authors.

While working on what would become her second novel, Desai lived a peripatetic life that took her from New York to Mexico and India. After more than seven years of work, she published *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Set in India in the mid-1980s, the novel has at its centre a Cambridge-educated Indian judge living out his retirement in Kalimpong, near the Himalayas, with his granddaughter until their lives are disrupted by Nepalese insurgents. The novel also interweaves the story of the
judge’s cook’s son as he struggles to survive as an illegal immigrant in the United States. *The Inheritance of Loss* was hailed by critics as a keen, richly descriptive analysis of globalization, terrorism, and immigration. When she received the Booker Prize for the novel in 2007, Desai became the youngest female writer to win the award.

Her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998), is a pacy, fresh look at life in the sleepy provincial town of Shahkot in India. The central character of the novel, Sampath Chawla, failed postal clerk and pathological dreamer, escapes from his work and his oppressive family to live in a guava tree. Here he spends his life snoozing, musing and eating the ever-more exotic meals cooked for him by his sociopathic mother. He begins to amaze his fellow townspeople by revealing intimate details about them gleaned from a bit of lazy letter-opening whilst still working at the post office and by spouting a series of truisms worthy of a Shakespearian fool, or Forrest Gump. Before long he becomes known as a local guru and attracts such a strong flow of visitors that opening hours have to be established in the orchard to allow him to rest.

Soon, commercialism, a recurrent theme in Desai’s work, takes over: Sampath’s fast-thinking, entrepreneurial father Mr Chawla, who at first despaired at his son’s inanity, now sees his chance to make the family’s fortune. He sets up his picturesque family in a compound around the guava tree that is soon lined with colourful advertisements for tailors, fizzy drinks, talcum powder and insect repellent. Visitors bring gifts that Mr Chawla can sell, the family bank account begins to grow and he looks at investment plans. All goes well until the arrival in the orchard of a group of langur monkeys who have developed a taste for alcohol and begin to terrorise the town. The tale continues, with a growing sense of impending doom, as the
family and the various officials of the town try to resolve the monkey problem.

Like many important works of literature, the book can be read on several levels – as an inventive, fast-moving, delicious tale full of rich descriptions and marvellous comic cartoon-like personalities, but also as a deeper study of the pathos of familial misunderstanding, the ridiculousness of hero-worship, the unpredictability of commercialism and the ineptness of officialdom.

Many of these themes are explored further in Desai’s next novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). The story revolves around the inhabitants of a town in the north-eastern Himalayas, an embittered old judge, his granddaughter Sai, his cook and their rich array of relatives, friends and acquaintances and the effects on the lives of these people brought about by a Nepalese uprising. Running parallel with the story set in India we also follow the vicissitudes of the cook’s son Biju as he struggles to realise the American Dream as an immigrant in New York.

Like its predecessor, this book abounds in rich, sensual descriptions. These can be sublimely beautiful, such as in the images of the flourishing of nature at the local convent in spring: 'Huge, spread-open Easter lilies were sticky with spilling antlers; insects chased each other madly through the sky, zip zip; and amorous butterflies, cucumber green, tumbled past the jeep windows into the deep marine valleys.' They can also be horrific, such as in descriptions of the protest march: 'One jawan was knifed to death, the arms of another were chopped off, a third was stabbed, and the heads of policemen came up on stakes before the station across from the bench under the plum tree, where the townspeople had rested.
themselves in more peaceful times and the cook sometimes read his letters. A beheaded body ran briefly down the street, blood fountaining from the neck...'

*The Inheritance of Loss* is much more ambitious than *Hullabaloo* in its spatial and emotional depth. It takes on huge subjects such as morality and justice, globalisation, racial, social and economic inequality, fundamentalism and alienation. It takes its reader on a see-saw of negative emotions. There is pathos - which often goes hand in hand with revulsion – for example in the description of the judge's adoration of his dog Mutt, the disappearance of which rocks his whole existence, set against his cruelty to his young wife. There is frequent outrage at the deprivation and poverty in which many of the characters live, including the cook’s son in America; and there is humiliation, for example in the treatment of Sai by her lover-turned-rebel, or Lola, who tries to stand up to the Nepalese bullies.

**Summary:-**

The novel opens on the judge and his granddaughter Sai sitting on the veranda of their home, Cho Oyu, while their cook makes tea and the judge’s dog, Mutt, sleeps on the porch. A set of boys from the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) arrive and demand that the judge hand over his guns, threatening them with a rifle and stealing anything of value they can find in the house. The judge then sends the cook to the police station. The police return home and accuse the cook of having a hand in the robbery. They tear apart his meager hut and read letters from his son, Biju.

Biju works at Gray’s Papaya in the heart of Manhattan, but is asked to leave when the manager of the restaurant is instructed to do a green card check. Biju then cycles through a series of
restaurants, but the situation is often the same. Biju is fired from a French restaurant when customers complain about the smell of the food.

The narrative jumps back to Sai’s arrival at the judge’s home nine years earlier, at age eight. She had left St. Augustine’s convent, where she had grown up with English customs, because her mother and father had recently been hit by a bus. The nuns then found the address of her grandfather and returned her to him. When Sai arrived, she and the judge exchanged a few words, but the judge was pleased that they seemed to be accustomed to similar cultures.

The judge remembers when he had left his own home at age twenty. He had been accepted at Cambridge to study for the Indian Civil Service. He had also just been married to a fourteen-year-old wife, Nimi. At Cambridge, he was treated like an outcast and a second-class citizen, and barely spoke to people. He began to find his own skin color odd, and his own accent strange. He spent most of his time studying.

The morning after Sai arrives, the cook takes her to meet her new tutor: Noni, who lives with her sister Lola. They pass the houses of Uncle Potty, Father Booty, the Afghan princesses, and Mrs. Sen—all of whom are upper-class and well-educated.

Biju’s second year in America begins at an Italian restaurant, where he is once again fired because the owners believe he smells bad. He then takes a job at a Chinese restaurant, delivering food on a bicycle. In the winter, it is freezing, and he is fired because the food he delivers becomes too cold by the time he arrives. Biju returns to a basement in Harlem, where he lives with other undocumented immigrants in destitute conditions. He then gets another job at the Queen of Tarts Bakery.
Over the years the cook had become ashamed of the judge’s poor treatment of him, and he began to lie to other servants and Sai to exaggerate the judge’s wealth and social standing. In reality the judge had been born to a family of the peasant caste, but his father saved up money to send him to the mission school. He had studied hard and risen to the top of his class. He attended Cambridge, passed his exams and was admitted to the Indian Civil Service. He was placed in a district far from his home and toured around India, even though his knowledge of regional Indian languages was minimal.

When Sai turns sixteen, Noni realizes that she will need another tutor for math and science, because her own knowledge has been exceeded. The judge asks the principal of the local college if he can recommend a teacher or graduate for her. Twenty-year-old Gyan, a recent graduate who has not yet been able to find a job, is hired. He and Sai quickly become entranced by one another.

At the Queen of Tarts Bakery, Biju meets a Muslim man from Zanzibar named Saeed Saeed, He admires Saeed because of the way he seems to stay afloat in the underground system of being an illegal immigrant rather than drowning in it, the way Biju feels. Biju begins to question his prejudice against people from Pakistan, and then questions his prejudice against people of many other ethnicities, as they had never done anything harmful to him or to India, unlike white people.

Back in Kalimpong, Sai asks the cook about the judge’s wife. At first the cook lies and says they loved each other, but he then remembers that the judge hated his wife. Sai then questions the judge about her grandmother. He rebuffs her questions, but begins to remember her for himself.
Before the judge had left for England, his family didn’t have enough money for his travel expenses and so they looked for a wife for him in order to gain a dowry. One local man named Bomanbhai Patel was extremely wealthy, and was very interested in the judge because he planned to enter the ICS. Patel offered up his most beautiful daughter, who was fourteen years old at the time. The two married shortly after, and she was renamed Nimi by the judge’s family. The night of the wedding, he had tried to consummate the marriage, but she was terrified, and so they did not. Before he left for England, the two shared one gentle moment in which he took her on an exhilarating bicycle ride.

The cook sends letters to Biju asking him to help others get to America. Biju feels overwhelmed by these requests, and Saeed empathizes with him because he is experiencing the exact same thing. More than anything, the two aim to get their green cards. One day, they are swindled by men in a van who say that they can get them green cards, but in reality simply steal their money. Shortly after this incident, the Queen of Tarts Bakery closes.

Gyan and Sai’s romance begins to bloom when he is stuck at the house due to a monsoon. They flirt and play games, measuring each other’s hands, feet, and limbs. One day, Gyan asks her to kiss him, and she does. They begin to sightsee together, going to cultural institutions, the zoo, and a monastery. Gyan tells her a little of his family history, about how they had been taken advantage of serving in the British Army.

Meanwhile, Lola and Noni discuss the growing political rumblings of the Nepalis living in India, who are demanding a separate state, more job opportunities, and schools that teach
Nepali. Noni is more understanding of their cause than Lola, but Lola begins to see her own prejudice when her neighbor, Mrs. Sen, starts speaking about Pakistanis with the same kind of bias.

Biju now works at a restaurant called Brigitte’s, but is unhappy because they serve steak. He realizes that it’s important to him to retain his values, and so he quits and goes to work in the Ghandi Café, which is run by a man named Harish-Harry. Harish-Harry invites the staff to live in the basement below the kitchen, but then pays them a quarter of minimum wage.

Sai celebrates Christmas with Lola, Noni, Uncle Potty, and Father Booty. After New Years, Gyan is in the market when he sees a procession of young men from the GNLF. He is quickly caught up in the procession and relates to their demands and complaints, which echo many of his own as a young Nepali man. The next day, Gyan arrives at Cho Oyu and yells at Sai, frustrated by her complicity in English cultural elitism.

The judge remembers how his and Nimi’s relationship had turned sour. When he had returned from England, she had taken his powder puff. As he looked for it, his family ridiculed him for using it. By the time he discovered that Nimi had taken it, he was furious, and he raped her. In the following days, he insisted that she speak English and follow English customs, which she refused to do. He took off her bangles, threw away her hair oil, and pushed her face into the toilet when he discovered her squatting on it. He then left her at their home while he went away on tour.

The day after Gyan’s eruption at Sai, he tries to apologize, but they only return to their fight about English customs, and Sai accuses him of being a hypocrite for enjoying Western things like cheese toast with her but making fun of them with his
friends. He leaves, and tells his friends in the GNLF about the judge’s guns, giving them a description of Cho Oyu and telling them that there is no telephone.

The cook thinks about his attempts to send Biju abroad. For his first attempt, Biju had interviewed and been accepted at a cruise ship line. They had paid eight thousand rupees for the processing fee and the cost of training before realizing that it was a scam. His second attempt involved applying for a tourist visa. Despite the fact that it was difficult for poorer people to be approved for a visa, Biju was allowed to go to America.

At the Ghandi Café, three years after that visa was approved, Biju slips on rotten spinach. He demands Harish-Harry pay for a doctor for him, but Harish-Harry refuses and calls Biju ungrateful. He suggests that Biju return to India for medical care.

Father Booty, Uncle Potty, Noni, Lola, and Sai go to exchange their library books before the GNLF closes more roads and shops. When they start to walk back to their car, they spot a procession of GNLF, and Sai sees Gyan there. He ignores her. On the way back, Father Booty takes a picture of a butterfly at a checkpoint and is stopped by the police. It is discovered that he is in India illegally, and he is quickly deported.

The narration skips ahead, after the incident in which the boys from the GNLF steal the judge’s guns. A few days later, the police pick up a drunk and accuse him of the crime, beating him brutally. Meanwhile, in America, Biju becomes informed about the Nepalis’ strikes. He tries to call the cook, and they have a very disjointed conversation. Biju feels even more empty than before. The strikes in Kalimpong continue, and the Nepalis put up tents in front of Lola and Noni’s property. The sisters begin to feel that the wealth that always protected them now makes them vulnerable.
Sai goes to find Gyan at his home and sees how poor he actually is. Gyan becomes angry at her pity, and the two argue before he throws her in a bush and beats her. Sai returns home and sees the wife of the drunk who had been beaten by the police begging the judge for money and mercy. They turn her away. Meanwhile, Gyan’s sister informs his family of what he’s been doing, and they forbid him from going to the GNLF protest the following day.

The next day, the cook attends the protest because the GNLF is forcing each family to send a male representative. Rocks start flying from nowhere, and the protesters and police, in equal confusion, begin to throw rocks at each other. The police then begin to open fire on the crowd. Many young boys are killed, and the protesters begin to wrestle weapons away from the police and turn on them. The police run away and seek shelter in private homes. Lola and Noni turn them away. Biju decides to return home to India despite warnings not to. He buys various souvenirs to bring home to his father, and takes the cheapest plane possible to Calcutta. When he arrives, the airline loses many bags, and only compensates the foreigners and non-resident Indians. Biju waits for his luggage, which arrives intact, and steps out into the street. He feels at peace in his homeland.

The incidents of horror continue in Kalimpong. There are many robberies and acts of arson. The woman that the judge had turned away returns and steals Mutt in order to sell her. When they realize she is missing, the judge, the cook, and Sai all set out to search for her. When the judge goes to the police station, he is mocked because this seems like a minimal crime relative to the atrocities being committed.
The judge thinks back to the family, the culture, and the wife he had abandoned. One day when he was on tour, a woman had knocked on Nimi’s door and taken her, unknowingly, to be a part of the Nehru welcoming committee for the Indian National Congress Party. The judge had returned and been confronted by the district commissioner. He lost a promotion and had been incredibly embarrassed. When he arrived home, he had cursed Nimi, beaten her, and kicked her. Six months later, his daughter had been born. He never met her. It is then implied that Nimi’s brother-in-law had orchestrated her death, when her sleeve had caught fire on the stove.

Biju is told that there are no buses to Kalimpong because of the political situation. Biju catches a ride with some GNLF men. They take him most of the way before dropping him off and robbing him of all of his possessions, money, and clothing. He is forced to walk the rest of the way to Kalimpong.

The judge grows more and more distraught over Mutt’s disappearance. He blames the cook and threatens to kill him. The cook then goes to the canteen, where he runs into Gyan. Hearing what has happened and growing increasingly guilty, Gyan resolves to find Mutt for Sai. The cook returns to Cho Oyu and begs the judge to beat him. The judge hits him over and over again with a slipper. Sai yells for him to stop, and makes the cook tea. At that moment, the gate rattles, and the cook goes to answer it. It is Biju. The cook and his son leap at each other as morning breaks over the mountains.

CHARACTERS:-

- The Judge / Jemubhai

Called Jemubhai or Jemu in flashback scenes, the judge is the head of the household at Cho Oyu and Sai’s grandfather. He
grows up in a family belonging to the peasant caste, who pour all of their resources into ensuring that he gets a good education. He attends a mission school and then goes on to Cambridge University on a scholarship, aiming to join the Indian Civil Service. Before leaving, he marries fourteen-year-old Nimi in order to gain a dowry, though the two do not consummate the marriage. In Cambridge, even though he is viewed as an outsider, he tries to imitate British culture. He passes his exams and is accepted into the ICS. When he returns to India, he is humiliated when she steals his powder puff and, in retaliation, rapes her. The judge spends much of the rest of their marriage abusing her and trying to strip her of her Indianness. He eventually sends her away, fearing that he will kill her. In the present, the judge is a deliberate, angry old man filled with self-loathing because he is accepted by neither British culture nor his own society. His only solace comes from the company of his dog, Mutt, and eventually his granddaughter. The judge serves as the primary character who experiences colonization firsthand. Though he benefits from it, he must also come to terms with his abuse of his wife and the oppression he has inflicted on others because he was forced to adopt British culture.

● Sai

The judge’s granddaughter. Before arriving at Cho Oyu, she had attended St. Augustine’s convent, where she was “Anglicized” (taught British customs and ideas) just as the judge had been. At age eight, Sai’s mother and Sai’s father are killed in a bus accident, and the nuns bring Sai to Cho Oyu to live with her grandfather, whom she had never met previously. Over the years, she becomes friends with Noni (who tutors her), Lola, Father Booty, and Uncle Potty—the judge’s neighbors who are also upper-class, and who share English traditions with
her like celebrating Christmas and listening to the BBC. The judge is stern with Sai, and so she feels closer to the cook, who often treats her like a daughter. When Sai is sixteen, she gets a new tutor, Gyan. The two have a fast and full romance, before realizing that their cultural differences are too great. Sai is naïve and somewhat self-absorbed, but she is also smart and understands that many of Gyan’s issues with her have little to do with her, and more to do with the circumstances of her upbringing and her privilege.

● Biju

The cook’s son. At the cook’s urging, Biju travels to New York City in order to earn money and make a better life for the family’s future generations. He hops from one restaurant job to another, either due to green card inspections, customer complaints about his smell, or his own distaste for the business owners and customers. He comes to confront his own bias in globalized America when he meets Saeed Saeed, a Pakistani man he admires. Biju also recognizes his own values: he quits his job at a restaurant that serves steak because he realizes that he needs to live according to the principles of his family and his religion. This then brings him to the Gandhi Café, where he meets Harish-Harry. Biju is optimistic and at times gullible, but he also becomes worn down by the life of an illegal immigrant in New York City, whom he calls a “shadow class.” Eventually Biju becomes so exhausted from being overworked and taken advantage of that he decides to return to India, even though he knows he will likely disappoint his father. Biju thus embodies the yearning for home that many of the characters experience.

● Cook

The judge’s cook and Biju’s father. The cook had worked for the judge since he was fourteen years old, and his servant status
is very much ingrained in him. He does whatever the judge asks, though the judge often abuses him verbally, and at the end of the novel, physically. While he understands his own place, the cook also works hard to make sure that his son Biju can have a better life in America. He has a minor illegal business selling liquor on the side in order to make a small sum of additional money. He is proud hearing from his son hopping from job to job, knowing that his own hard work has paid off. Even though the cook is often humiliated by other characters, he has a streak of vanity as well. He exaggerates his position as well as the judge’s wealth and kindness in order to make himself feel better about working for the judge. The primary characterization of the cook, however, is as a servant. The judge and the cook, though they have spent more time with each other than with anyone else, have no personal familiarity. This is reinforced in the novel’s writing as the cook’s name, Panna Lal, is not revealed until the second to last page of the novel, when his son returns. He does not become a fully realized person, then, until he is reunited with his son.

Gyan

Sai’s twenty-year-old Nepali math tutor, though their relationship blooms into a romance. Gyan begins the novel as naïve as Sai, but eventually he matures due to the GNLF movement that arises in Kalimpong. He recognizes that he shares many of their complaints and concerns, and marches in protest with them. After this political awakening, Gyan becomes frustrated at Sai’s innocence and cultural elitism. He betrays her for the movement by telling his friends that the judge has guns at his house and no telephone, leading to the robbery of Cho Oyu. Eventually Gyan becomes wracked with guilt and tries to reconcile with Sai, though their relationship remains unresolved at the end of the novel. Gyan, like Sai,
holds some hypocritical views, because he enjoys tea parties and cheese toast with her, but he also recognizes that these British imports are byproducts of a system that has led to his own subjugation. Ultimately, Gyan is a character reckoning with generations worth of systematic oppression, which becomes personal when it leads to his own coming-of-age process.

Analysis:-

*The Inheritance of Loss* takes place in the 1980s between two worlds: the austere, upper class home of the judge and Sai at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas, and an assortment of New York City restaurants where Biju works. With India still just beginning to establish itself as an independent nation less than 40 years after the end of British colonial rule, and New York continuing to experience waves of immigration, the book explores the effects of colonialism and globalization. Desai’s novel contains a great deal of cynicism about globalization, treating it as a harmful consequence of colonialism as well as showing that it negatively impacts all the book’s characters, both economically and personally, regardless of social standing.

For the judge, who experienced colonization firsthand in his youth and owed his career to the British, globalization results in a loss of identity and an extreme feeling of self-hatred. When the judge is nineteen he studies at Cambridge in order to join the civil service. However, he finds that he quickly becomes isolated because even the lowest members of English society turn their noses up at him and complain that he stinks of curry. In response to this, he begins to reject his Indian identity. His studies and exams focus solely on British cultural staples, like trains and British poets. When he passes these exams and
achieves his judgeship in the Indian Civil Service, he is showered with more and more praise, and is treated like a “man of dignity.” He begins to envy the English and loathe Indians. Yet even on the train back to India, he sits alone reading “How to Speak Hindustani,” because he is still ill at ease with the English, but doesn’t speak the language where he is being posted as a judge. Globalization is shown to be particularly harmful for Indian people in positions like the judge’s because it pushes them to idealize a culture into which they are never fully accepted, and one which exploits their own people. After the judge’s education and career is over, and after India gains independence, he moves to the house at Kanchenjunga (which had been built by a Scotsman) because of its isolation. Desai writes that “the judge could live here, in this shell, this skull, with the solace of being a foreigner in his own country, for this time he would not learn the language.” His complete separation from both British and Indian cultures shows the lasting and deeply harmful effects of colonization, even after it is no longer in effect.

Years after the judge moves to Kanchenjunga, his granddaughter Sai moves in with him. She and their upper-class neighbors around Kanchenjunga believe that their foreign imports, like Swiss cheese, Italian opera music, and Russian paintings, are simply a way for them to express themselves in the modern, globalized era. They don’t realize, however, that these preferences come from a deep-seated cultural elitism imposed by the British, which eventually harms them as well. Lola, Noni, Sai, and the judge’s neighbors all speak English and watch the BBC. They have paintings by Russian aristocrats and an entire collection of Jane Austen books. They become fascinated by the fact that chicken tikka masala has replaced fish and chips as the number one takeaway dinner in Britain, finding it humorous that the British would prefer tikka
masala. Their laughter demonstrates their bias: they seem to take it for granted that British food is better than Indian food. By repeatedly elevating all forms of Western culture above their own, they implicitly denigrate their own cultural heritage as Indians. Eventually, due to the strikes in town brought on by Nepali protests, Lola and Noni are forced to fight to maintain their quality of life. However, they begin to stand out more and more for their wealth, and thus become afraid of what others might do to them or their homes. The things they had previously seen as the harmless trappings of a cosmopolitan life—Trollope, the BBC, Christmas—suddenly make them a target for robberies. Gradually, Nepalis begin to move onto their land in huts. In this way, their British imports become liabilities for them, as others begin to see them as signs of cultural elitism and economic exploitation.

**Biju**’s storyline provides an alternative perspective on globalization through the lens of foreigners arriving in New York City. Biju understands that while foreign cultures and cuisines may be fetishized and highly valued in cosmopolitan cities like New York, actual immigrants continue to be undervalued. In each of the restaurants in which Biju works, the food is appreciated more than the workers themselves, particularly when the food is from Western countries, and the people are from Eastern (or African) countries. Customers at the French bistro are satisfied with the food until they realize that it is being prepared by Algerians, Senegalese, and Moroccans. Thus, globalization can devalue the people from certain countries, particularly those, it seems, that have previously been colonized. Biju himself then begins to realize the hypocrisy of his own actions toward others, in both India and America. Many people in India hold prejudice against Pakistanis as well as black people, and Biju comes to see the irony of the admiration he had felt toward white people, even
though they “arguably had done India great harm.” On the other hand, he showed prejudice toward many others in America (such as Mexican, Chinese, and Japanese people), though they had never done a single harmful thing to India. Thus, even though these cultures have a shared history of oppression under colonial rule, they hold similar prejudices against each other. Biju’s storyline points to the ways in which one of the legacies of colonialism is that the people who were once its subjects often internalize the colonizer’s hatred of non-whites and non-Westerners in a globalized world.

Because *The Inheritance of Loss* spans a large amount of time and two continents, it is able to show the effects of colonization firsthand and the ensuing harm wrought by globalization. Whether it reveals unconscious prejudices, leads to a rejection of one’s own culture, or engenders feelings of self-hatred, globalization visibly perpetuates the oppressive legacy of colonialism. Because it is perpetuated even by those to whom it is harmful, it becomes a particularly insidious form of oppression—a form which, the novel argues, seems impossible to erase in the world as it currently exists.

The characters in Desai’s novel have diverse economic backgrounds, from the judge’s wealth to the poverty of the cook. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, the gulf between those with extreme privilege and those living in poverty is generally shown to be a direct consequence of the legacy of colonialism. Though privilege comes in many forms, Desai illustrates the vicious and self-reinforcing cycle of class privilege by showing how those who have privilege continue to gain wealth and social standing, while those without such privilege live in poverty that only deepens their disadvantaged position. Colonialism reinforces the existing rigid class structure in India by enabling those with existing privilege and disadvantage those without it,
all while falsely claiming a meritocratic attitude towards poverty and privilege.

The central cultural and economic struggle in the novel is experienced by the Nepali people living in India. Gyan and his family represent the typical experience of those who had been displaced and experience a cycle of poverty because of their position in the caste hierarchy. In 1947, the protestors explain, the British granted India freedom and also formed the Muslim nation of Pakistan but did not create an arrangement for the Nepalis in India. Though they represent eighty percent of the population in Kalimpong, they have neither schools nor hospitals that are Nepali-run, and jobs are not given to Nepalis. They are laborers often working as servants. Even though they constitute the majority, the wealth is not in their hands, and so they remain relatively powerless because no one will afford them opportunities. On a more individual level, Gyan is ashamed of his home, which is somewhat modern but very close to ruin. Desai comments that this is not “picturesque poverty” but something even more dismal. Because of this, Gyan is ashamed of being with Sai and bringing her back to his home, which creates a rift between them. She calls him a hypocrite because he enjoys cheese and chocolate at her house but condemns these foods when he’s with the Nepalis because he is unable to afford them. What she doesn’t realize, however, is that he is condemning the fact that some live in luxury while others are extremely poor.

Though the judge himself had not come from a particularly wealthy family, the opportunity to attend school in Britain creates a cycle of more and more wealth and opportunity for his future generations. After going to school in Cambridge, the judge passes the British exams needed to be admitted to the Indian Civil Service and join the government’s judicial body. Because of this, the judge’s salary increases from ten pounds
amonth to three hundred pounds a year. He and another Indian friend together resolve to put their Indian-ness behind them, and they avoid the other Indian students. Because they start to associate Indians with poverty, they divide themselves even further from their culture. When the judge’s daughter (with whom he had very little contact) and her husband move to Moscow, her daughter **Sai** is then sent to a convent and grows up “Anglicised” as well. Sai describes how she only learned how to make tea in the English way; she had never learned the Indian way. When she leaves the convent, she talks about some of the lessons she had implicitly learned: cake is better than **laddoos** (a type of Indian confection); silverware is better than using one’s hands; worshipping Jesus is better than worshipping a phallic symbol; English is better than Hindi. But she only learns these lessons because the judge is able to pay for her to attend school at the convent. When Sai is on the train to Cho Oyu (the judge’s home), the nun accompanying her criticizes the people who defecate on the train tracks. Thus, not only are they too poor to have a system of plumbing, but they are then criticized for trying to go to the bathroom—a basic human necessity.

**Biju** provides another, similar perspective on poverty and privilege as experienced by immigrants journeying to America, noting that those with fortune continue to gain fortune, and those who are poor continue to be luckless. At the immigration desk, Biju observes how the more desperate the people are, the more likely they are to be turned away by the embassy officials. On the other hand, those who are rich enough to travel can prove that they will not stay in America illegally because their passports show that they have already been abroad. Stamps from places such as England, Switzerland, America, and New Zealand and corresponding return dates prove that they reliably return to India. Therefore, the more traveled a person is, the
more likely it is that they will be allowed to travel again. And in New York, even with aspirations of social mobility, being an undocumented immigrant means being relegated to a “shadow class,” because people must often keep moving, finding new addresses, jobs, and names. This happens to Biju as well: after he secures a job, it often comes under threat when there are green card checks, or when people complain because he smells. Thus, the social mobility America promises is not extended to those who are the poorest. When Biju returns to India, discouraged by this “shadow” life, the bags of everyone on the airplane are lost. The airline states it will only give compensation to nonresident Indians and foreigners, not the resident Indians. The resident Indian passengers complain about this injustice—those from rich countries and those who are wealthy enough to live outside of India are treated better than those who live within it. Biju then remarks on the non resident Indians’ good manners as they stand in line for their compensation, thereby “proving” how much they deserved that good fortune.

In both locales—India and America alike—poverty and privilege are each treated as earned and deserved. Though this belief system is an extension of the caste system that India had prior to colonization, this system is also reinforced by colonization and meritocratic myths of capitalism. Those who are most able to afford and adopt British culture are rewarded for their assimilation, and are then assumed to be deserving of that reward. This idea also carries into America, as people immigrate in search of opportunity, but are largely denied it unless they are already wealthy. Those who are most able to afford to be there are accepted into the country most readily—a direct contradiction to the mythology of opportunity and social mobility in America which brings so many immigrants there in the first place.
As the story stretches itself between two worlds and several different cultures, many of the characters experience alienation from the different places they inhabit. Each character, in their own way, exhibits a yearning for home. Biju seeks out a restaurant in New York City that serves Indian food; Gyan and the boys in the GNLF work to establish a political state they can truly call home. The book shows home is a place that is characterized above all not by geographic location but by a feeling of belonging engendered by one’s own culture, traditions, and family.

Two of the physical houses in the novel—Cho Oyu and Gyan’s home—serve as “homes” because they reflect the cultures and socioeconomic statuses of those who inhabit them. The judge’s house had been built by a Scotsman, who had read accounts of the period and the area, such as *The Indian Alps and How We Crossed Them* and *Land of the Lama*—accounts that were written by the English about Indian culture. It had been fully outfitted with piping, tiling, tubing, and wrought-iron gates, representing how the judge feels at home in an Anglicised setting (which extended to Sai’s upbringing as well). It is also interesting to note that the house is rotting and being eaten by termites, a metaphor for the outdated and rotting customs of Anglicised Indians. Gyan’s house, meanwhile, is described as “modernity proffered in its meanest form, brand new one day, in ruin the next.” The house has a tin roof, walls made of cement corrupted by sand, and electrical wiring coming in through the windows. The second floor had been attempted but unfinished, leaving only a few bare posts. Though it tries to be modern, it demonstrates the way the middle class in India can teeter very quickly into poverty. Even though Gyan wants to better his life and the situation for Nepalis in India, he argues that he prefers this house over a house like Sai’s, because to him Cho Oyu represents elitism and foreign luxury.
The Nepalis in India are also trying to establish an atmosphere of belonging for themselves, as they are protesting in order to create a state in which their culture is recognized. After Indian independence in 1947, the British created the nation of India and the nation of Pakistan—a division primarily based on the religious practices of those in the region, but the way in which the border between India and Nepal was drawn left many Nepalis displaced in India. The Nepalis’ primary demands include the ability to establish their own schools (which would teach in their language), run their own hospitals, and have their own army. In India the Nepalis feel like outsiders because they are treated like servants, even though they represent eighty percent of the population in Kalimpong. Thus, in this post-colonial world, they work to have a “home” of their own, striking and protesting in the hopes that a state will be created within India that values them and their culture.

Biju, on the other hand, is physically displaced from his home. Instead, he tries to create a sense of home for himself in seeking out a living space and workplace that values and validates himself and his culture. Biju comes to work in a restaurant that serves steak, a fact that makes him uncomfortable because cows are considered sacred in his religion. He feels that it is imperative to not give up one’s religion and the principles of one’s parents, and so he quits his job. After this incident, he goes to work in another restaurant: the Ghandi Café. He feels at home with the food, the music, and most importantly, the people. The respect for his culture, which he is unable to find anywhere else in New York, is what makes him feel most at home. Ultimately, he returns to India, not only because of his poor treatment in America but also because he feels he has lost his connection to his father.

When he arrives, he describes how he feels “the enormous anxiety of being a foreigner ebbing—that unbearable arrogance
and shame of the immigrant.” But while home may be more about people and culture than physical place, people and culture are inextricably linked to physical places. Biju’s return suggests that while people may try to set down roots elsewhere, their connection to a particular place as home often remains strong. Thus, Biju only feels truly comfortable when he reunites with the cook in India.

Particularly in the newly globalized world presented in *The Inheritance of Loss*, “home” becomes less of a place and more of a sensibility or idea as people and products of all different backgrounds mix. Ending on a hopeful note with the reunion of Biju and the cook seems to suggest that one can never truly feel at home outside of one’s immediate family and culture, which together are what defines a community. As a contrast to Biju at the end of the novel, the judge and Sai feel restless and ungrounded as they live in the gaps between two communities, belonging to neither one. Home thus becomes a physical manifestation of a sense of belonging to a community, and without that community, home is nonexistent.

**Essay Questions:-**

1. The theme of isolation as portrayed in *Inheritance of Loss*

2. Comment on the significance of the title *Inheritance of Loss*

3. Consider how the novel treats fractured identities in a postcolonial world.
About the author:-

Anees Salim was born in Varkala, a small town in Kerala, in 1970. In an interview to The Hindu, Salim says he inherited his love for words from his father who used to work in West Asia. Salim is the Creative Director for FCB Ulka, the multi-national advertising firm, and lives in Kochi. Despite his background in PR and advertising, Salim makes a point of avoiding promotional tours and speaking at literary festivals.

In an interview to the Earthen Lamp Journal, Salim talks about how his first two novels were rejected by publishers. It was his third book, Tales from a Vending Machine, that helped his career as a writer take off. Sold to a publisher within a week, it renewed interest in his other works and, as Salim says, "fetched me four book deals."

Summary:-

The Blind Lady’s Descendants is a darkly comic work with a bitter afterbite. The reader must reconcile to a pleasantly told unpleasant story where even the suggestion of a happy ending would be laughable. The book is a tale of an Indian Muslim family, their daily struggles and its total decadence.

The novel is a suicide note by the blind lady’s grandson, Amar Hamsa. Born to silently warring parents, Amar Hamsa grows up in a crumbling house called the Bungalow, anticipating tragedies and ignominies. True to his dark premonitions, bad
luck soon starts cascading into his life. At twenty-six, he decides to narrate his story to an imaginary audience, and skeletons tumble out of every cupboard in the Bungalow. The Hamsa family lives on a decaying tropical estate in an unspoiled coastal town in Kerala. In exquisite prose, the reader becomes Amar’s confidante, as he shows us his life, framed by a compound surrounded by mahogany and teak in seemingly endless gardens.

Amar’s family’s isolation starts slowly and reaches a pitch that is heartbreaking. With no clichéd references to the Garden of Eden, Amar sifts through secrets and revelations, as he searches for the heart of experience in this seeming paradise. We hold on, hopeful that Amar Hamsa will not give up, for he writes his world with irreverent humor, his descriptions unflinching yet beautiful.

Anees Salim makes you fall in love with Amar and the town that is based on the author’s own hometown, Varkala. The author was born in 1970, and his protagonist was born in 1968, making this novel feel like an actual memoir. Amar is twenty-six years old when the book begins, and he recounts both past and near-present seamlessly. The movement in the novel reminds one of another book, A Fine Balance, by Rohinton Mistry, who, like Salim, makes us fall in love with his characters. But then he breaks your heart. In that sense we are also reminded of Arundhati Roy’s A God of Small Things.

When Amar’s mother, Asma, drives nails into their front door to keep bad luck out, Amar is six years old. “Bad luck, then, must have come in through the back door, for, by the time I considered myself grown up—thirteen or fourteen, at most, sixteen—I had started to regard it as a family member, our parents’ fourth child, someone elder to me and younger than
Sophiya, who would walk away with most of our small fortune much before I turned my present age—twenty-six.”

The truth is, bad luck does not just come from the outside. The world is a mirror to the questionable choices Asma and her husband make. Their isolation pulls the siblings closer.

Salim’s small-town descriptions and narrative tenderness are also reminiscent of R. K. Narayan and Ruskin Bond, but this book is relevant in ways that are even more prescient. The fortunes of this Muslim family are interlocked with the outside world and history, thus bringing important context to the reader. What is at stake is a gentle masculinity and the vulnerability of men like Amar. Across the world, we see boys like him in need of something they are missing. The risks are palpable throughout the book. Such chronicles into the male psyche are especially relevant. We see small towns across the world, including in America, where opportunities can feel elusive, and narratives emerge of isolation and rage.

So here is a universal portrait of a boy as he enters adulthood and grows into a man. The introspective voice, the truth-telling, the playful eroticism, the disavowing of religion, all emerge into a parable for masculinity anywhere. We meet male characters trying to survive in a changing time, despite a lack of control in their lives.

At the end of Anees Salim’s book we are left with many questions about this fragility, wondering whose responsibility it is to make the bad luck turn to better times.

The Blind Lady’s Descendants is an utterly compelling and haunting family saga, brimming with intense heartache and wry humour, confirming Anees Salim’s reputation as one of our most outstanding storytellers. The Blind Lady’s Descendants is
an utterly compelling and haunting family saga, brimming with intense heartache and wry humour, that confirms Anees Salim as one of our most outstanding storytellers.

The novel is the autobiography of Amar who has reached the age of 26, at which his predecessor committed suicide. Amar is a half Muslim since he ran away when only half of his foreskin was sheared. As he grows up he loses faith altogether and declares himself an atheist.

The novel is about the usual conflicts faced by people: identity crisis, meaninglessness, fractured relationships, religious fundamentalism, etc. The blind lady of the title is Asma’s mother who is physically blind. But most other characters in the novel are metaphorically blind: unable to see beneath the surfaces of existence. The novelist succeeds in narrating the tale with ease and grace. The dark humour is the ideal buffer for all the absurdity that underlies the lives of the characters, the absurdity of life itself.

Essay Questions:-

1. Comment on the character of Amar who serves as the narrator of the novel.

2. Consider how the novelist employs blindness as a powerful metaphor throughout the novel.

3. “The Blind Lady’s Descendants presents a sombre world of melancholy inked with dark comedy”- explain.
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*SparkNotes*, www.sparknotes.com/.


