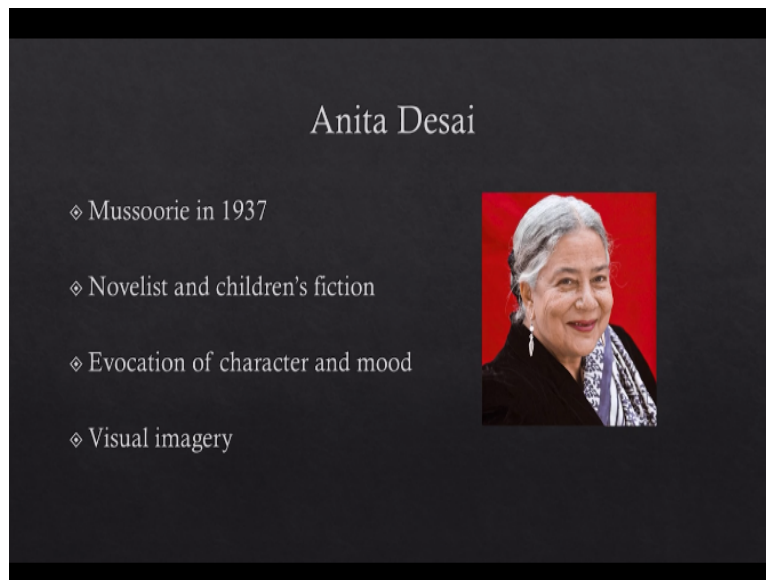


**Short Fiction in Indian Literature**  
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**Indian Institute of Technology – Madras**

**Lecture – 12**  
**Childhood Anxiety at Play in Anita Desai's Games at Twilight - I**

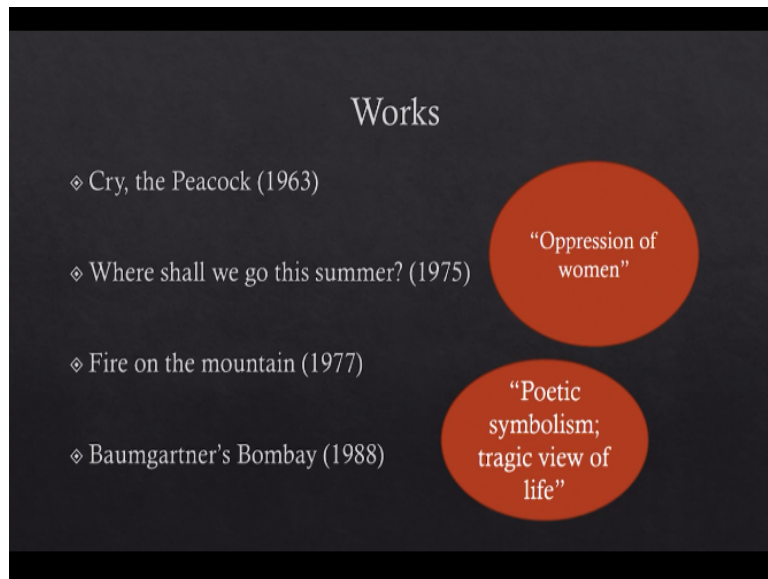
Hello and welcome to the final week's lecture and the topic of today's lecture is Childhood anxiety at Play in Anita Desai's Games at Twilight which is a highly evocative story with lots of rich as well as bleak imagery. So let us see what the story is all about. I will begin the lecture by giving you a brief introduction about Anita Desai.

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She was born in Mussoorie in 1937 and she is a critically acclaimed novelist and a writer of children's fiction. Her evocation of character and mood is well-known as some of the best strategies and that she employs to create a very, very effective story line in her fiction and she does this kind of evocation of mood and character through a very powerful application of visual imagery.

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So these are some of the very significant works of Anita Desai. Her first is *Cry, the Peacock* published in 1963 which dealt with the oppression of women. *Where shall we go this summer?* was published in 1975 and *Fire on the Mountain* published in 1977 won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1978. *Baumgartner's Bombay* was also very, very well acclaimed and that was published in 1988.

So Anita Desai is known for her poetic symbolism and for her tragic view of life. So a closer look at her symbols, her images, the patterns and the motives colors a lot about the pessimistic side of life, the bleak side of life and it kind of indicates tragedy in a beautifully dense language okay.

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She also wrote several collections of short stories and Games at Twilight is part of the collection mentioned there. Games at Twilight and Other Stories published in 1978 and Diamond Dust and Other Stories published in 2000. So these are two short story collections and she also wrote several children's books including The Village by the Sea published in 1982. So she also won the Guardian Children's Fiction Award and she also taught at several American Universities okay.

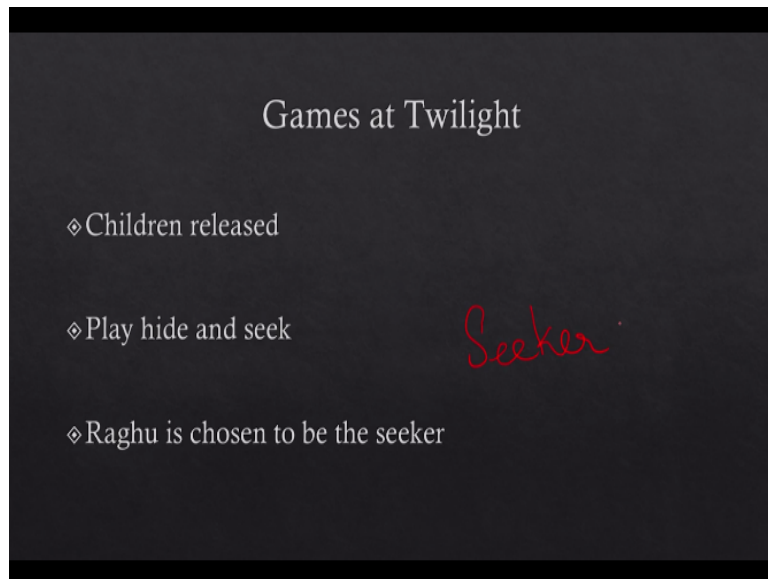
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So let us come to Games at Twilight. The story begins in the afternoon. It is a hot day, too hot to play outdoors according to the third person narrator and the children beg to be released and the mother is not ready to let them out. So the atmosphere at the beginning of the story is uncongenial. There is a sense of claustrophobia. There is a sense of being imprisoned on the part of the children in this massive house.

The setting is probably Delhi and this is an upper middle class or upper class household that we see in Games at Twilight.

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So eventually unable to bear the persistent request of the children or the demand of the children, the mother lets them out with a promise that she gets from them that they should play on the porch and not go out into the garden. However, that promise is broken pretty soon and the children play hide and seek and they have to decide who is going to be the seeker. That is a very interesting term in terms of the symbolism in this story.

So the children initially suggest that Raghu should be the seeker because he is the oldest and he refuses saying that why should I be the seeker just because I am the older one. So eventually what they do is they kind of use or employ a childhood game and then ultimately at the end of the game Raghu is chosen to be the seeker because he loses that particular game okay.

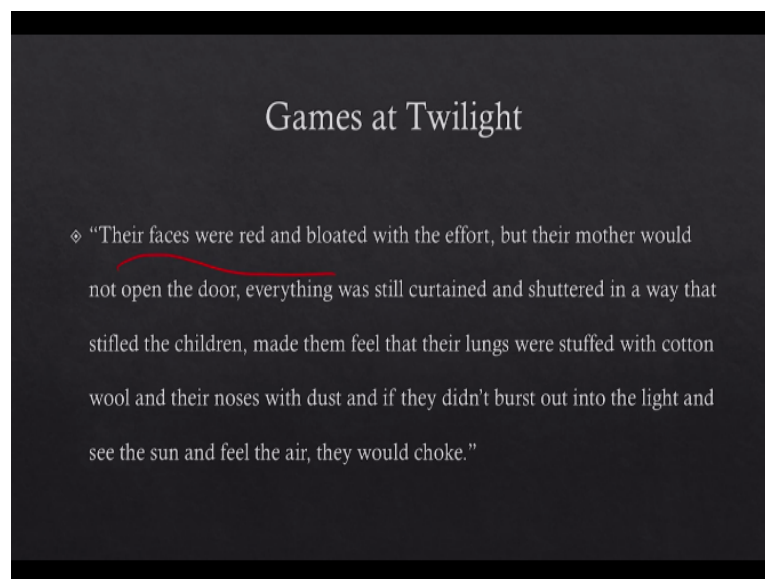
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The story of the Games at Twilight is very, very simple. There is a game of hide and seek that happens in the story. The seeker is Raghu and Ravi a very small kid hides in an old shed and he waits for Raghu to find him out but as the afternoon progresses he realizes that he is completely forgotten by not only Raghu but the other children who are in the house and then at the end of the evening at Twilight, he just comes out and then he goes and touches the (()) (05:32) which is what he supposed to do in order win this game.

And then he realizes that the other children are engaged in a different sort of game and they have completely ignored the position of Ravi and Ravi is completely humiliated, he cries and shouts and the mother tries to discipline him but ultimately Ravi refuses to join the children in another game and he realizes his insignificance in the grand scheme of things. So this is a very simple plot of Games at Twilight.

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So let us do a bit of close analysis of Games at Twilight and this is a set of description that we see about the children before they are released from the imprisonment “of the house.” So their faces were red and bloated with the effort, but their mother would not open the door, everything was still curtained and shuttered in a way that stifled the children, made them feel that their lungs were stuffed cotton wool and their noses with dust and if they did not burst out into the light and see the sun and feel the air, they would choke.

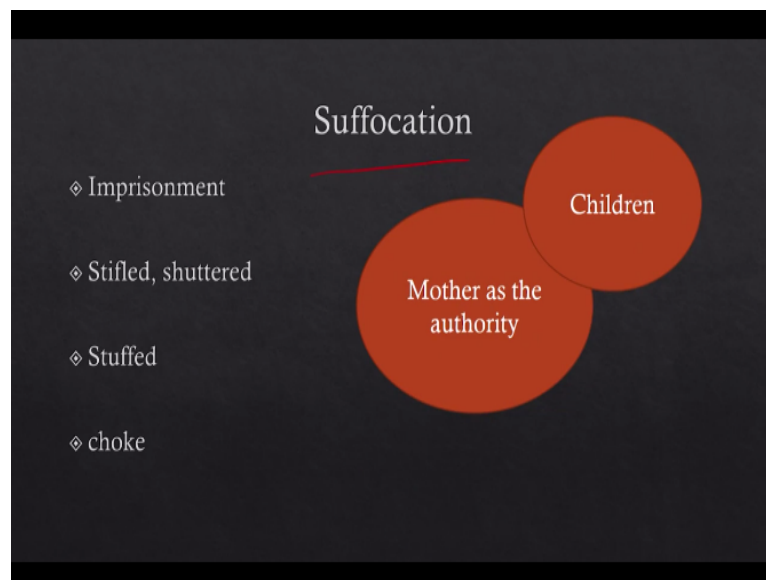
So this sets the tone for the entire story in the sense that the children feel or the third person narrator observes that the children feel a massive sense of confinement within the big house at the beginning of the story and if you read the description a little closely, the narrator says

the faces were red and bloated with the effort. It is as if it is a massive physical effort expended by the children in order to get themselves release from the house.

But we do know that it is not a prison literally but it is a symbolic prison in which the children are confined in. So the mother would not open the door and she is almost like the you know the guardian who would not open the door and everything was still curtained and shuttered. So that nice image, beautiful image is evoked in our minds. So we can see all these curtains and shutters which have been pulled down in order to block the harsh rays of the sun.

And this stifled the children and made them feel as if the lungs were being stuffed with cotton.

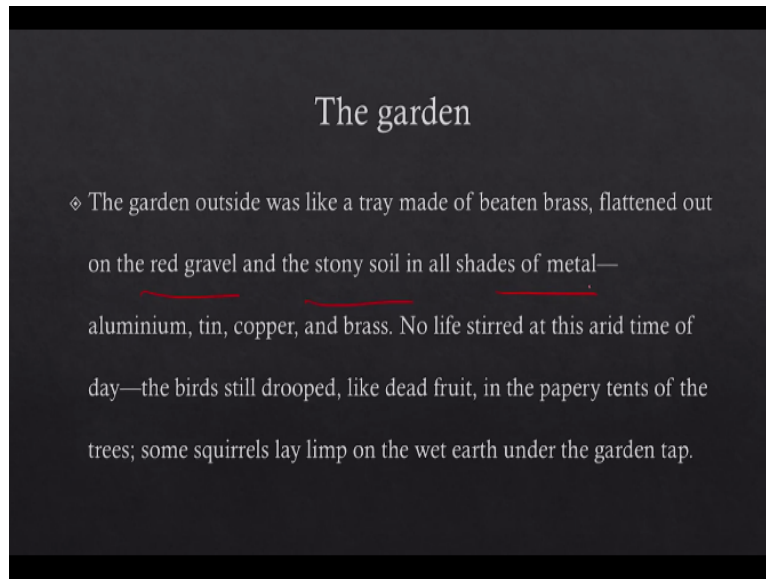
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So there is a lot of harsh imagery employed here and we get a little sense of suffocation communicated through the evocation of the vivid images that Desai uses in this particular story and she says that the children feel as if they are choking with the sense of dust that is there in their lungs. So the narrator says that if they do not see the sun and feel the air, if they do not get out into the fresh air, they would choke of the dust and of the things that are within the home.

So we do not get comforting sense of homely atmosphere indoors. So we never get to see the intricate details of the home narrated at that present moment. So the mother is also a figure of authority here who tries to put her foot down in order to protect the children from the hot sun but then eventually the children convinced her to let them out.

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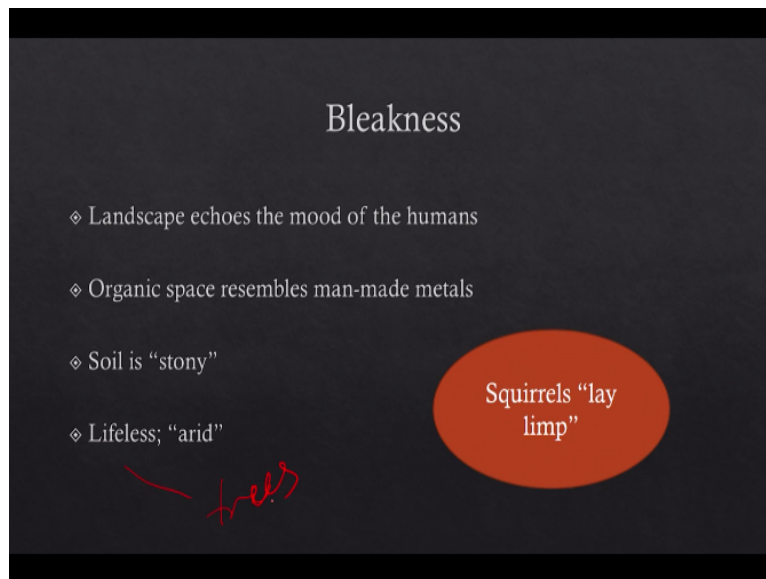
So we get again another description of the garden. So we got a description of the sense that the children had within the home and now we have a vivid description of the garden outside the home. The garden outside was like a tray made of beaten brass, flattened out on the red gravel and the stony soil in all shades of metal, aluminium, tin, copper and brass. No life stirred at this arid time of day.

The birds still drooped, like dead fruit, in the papery tents of the trees; some squirrels lay limp on the wet earth under the garden tap. So outdoors is not perfect either, it is not a welcoming outdoor in the sense that if you look at the ambience of the atmosphere of the garden, it is again very harsh and look at the details there, the red gravel, the stony soil, hard soil in all shades of metal.

So the soil resembles the flinty sense of the quality of the metal, so aluminium, tin, copper, brass, all these metal colors are not very, very pleasant for the eye sight. It will kind of reflect a harsh glare which will hurt the eyes of the children and again no life stirred at this time of aridity. So all this region is arid, very dry, it is dry time of the day. The birds still droop like dead fruit and the tents of the trees are like paper again not very organic, it is inorganic material.

And some squirrels lay limp as if they were dead. So it is not a very beautiful picture of the outdoor. So the indoors is not very conducive for the children, the outdoors is not very conducive either.

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So the landscape if we look closely at the landscape it echoes the mood of the humans. We can say that in terms of this particular story, so there is not a lot of congenial atmosphere among the children at play in the story. So we can say that the landscape echoes that uncongenial sense as well and the organic space itself lacks fertility, it is not very green, it is not very welcoming.

In fact, it resembles you know the toughness and the hardness or the flintiness of manmade metals and as I mentioned before the soil is stony just as people can be stony-hearted and it is a lifeless spot. There is no life there. Even the trees look lifeless like paper, so that is very interesting. Even the trees look lifeless and papery and again there is lack of water aridity and the squirrels lay limp.

Squirrels are supposed to be very, very energetic running here and there you know collecting nuts to eat but then here in this story they lay limp, so one after the other the story gives us a sense of passivity, anger, hard-heartedness in terms of the materials that are lying about in the garden and even within the house the choice of words used to describe the state of emotions of the children such as you know choking as if dust is choking their lungs.

All these elements tell us something about the nature of life for the children within the big house.

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So further details are available in terms of the landscape which is surrounding the house and one such creature is the dog, the outdoor dog and like the squirrel the dog lies as if it is dead. Again the state of being very limp and unconscious and passive is once again evoked and it would be interesting to look at the features of the dog such as its paws and ears and tails reaching out like travellers dying of thirst.

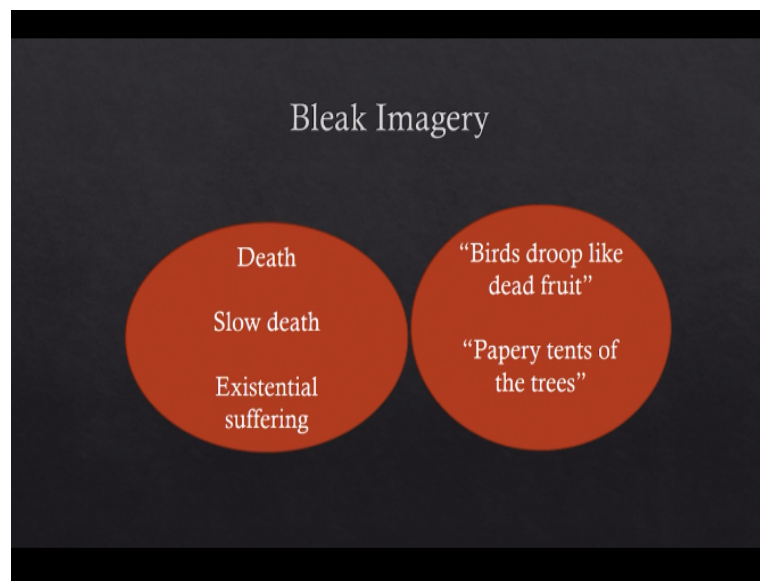
You can get a sense of the dog being stretched out its paws, ears and tails, stretched out completely lying limp on the ground and the narrator says that these features are like travellers dying of thirst and again the imagery is not a very, very pleasant one. You are immediately reminded of a group of travellers travelling on the desert, looking for water here and there and gradually dying of thirst.

So that image is transferred onto this outdoor dog in this big house and again the eyes of the dog seem to wordlessly beg for sympathy from the people who are around it. So again the big question is why is it seeking for sympathy either children being very, very brutal towards this dog or they troubling the dog or they harassing the dog, so we do not know but the dog begs for sympathy.

So all the creatures that are in the garden which are supposed to be very lively are in an afternoon lying very passive and lethargic. There are two ways to look at it, one is of course it is an afternoon, they all resting. So that is how these things will be, afternoon is hot in India in the North during summer and you know the creatures are also affected by the heat of the Indian climate.

And therefore that is why they look and behave as if they are dead that is one way of looking at it, but the symbolic way of looking at it is this, life for the children, life for the people in the house is somehow innovating, it is very exhausting, it is perhaps very dysfunctional and which is why even the elements which are surrounding this particular house, elements which make up life within this big house is also reflecting the mood of the people who are inhabiting the place okay.

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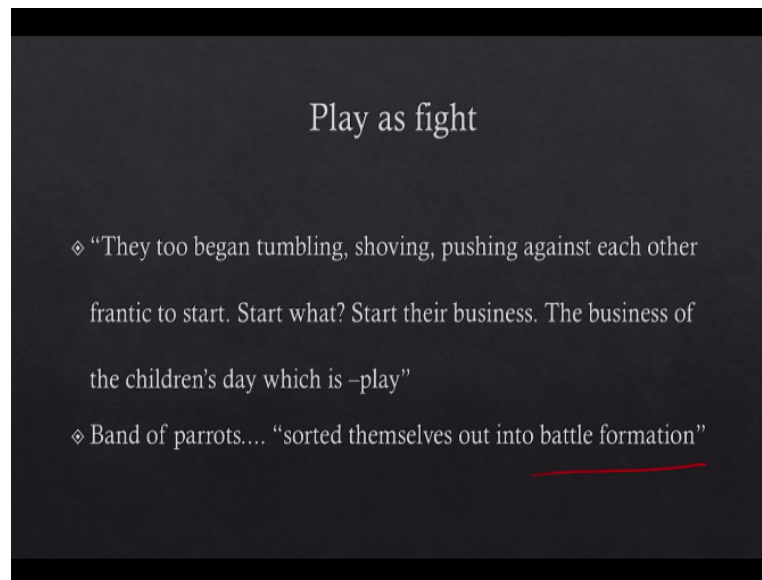
So let us list out some of the bleak imagery that is communicated through the details in the narrative and mind you there are plenty of details in this particular story of Anita Desai as there is in many of our other fiction and her narrative as I said is very dense and we need to take it really slowly to look at each and every word to get a sense of the layers of figurative language that she employs and the relevant symbolism that is communicated through those words.

So in terms of the bleak imagery, we have the idea of death that is there in a squirrel's lying like death creatures and we have slow death communicated through the physical appearance of the outdoor dog and there is a lot of existential suffering which seems to be the case that is communicated through the even the trees that are surrounding the house, the papery trees, the lifeless trees.

The way the trees are kind of harm you know the trees on the branches are hanging down like you know paper you know with no life in them and even birds troop like dead fruit and

associating birds with dead fruit is also very interesting which again points to the color of the birds, the colorful birds which are there on the branches of the trees and again those birds do not communicate a sense of happy spiritedness instead they communicate dead fruit, fruit which are no longer edible okay.

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So we do get a very clear sense of the ambience for this particular story and now the children once they are out in the open from the house, they began to fight. It is kind of instant, the moment they are outside they fight and the narrator says they too began tumbling, shoving, pushing against each other frantic to start. Start what? Start their business. The business of the children's day which is play.

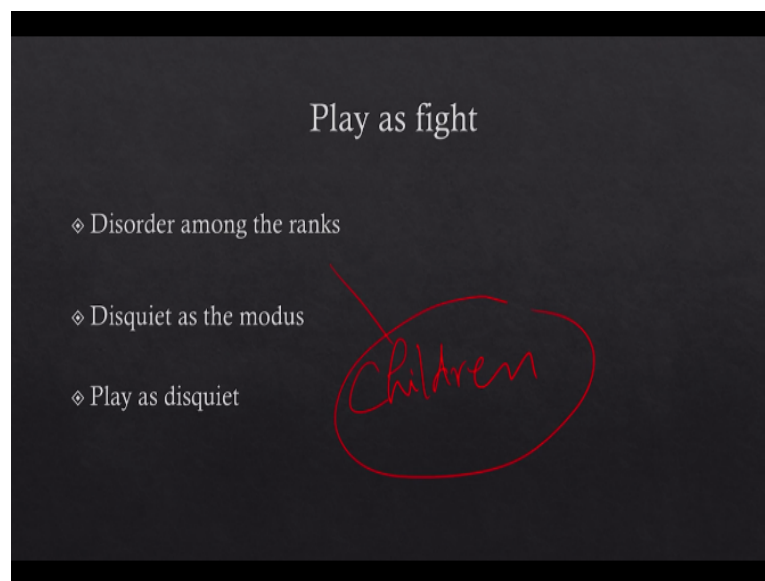
And he compares the children's as squabble. The narrator compares the children's fight to a band of parrots which get disturbed by the noise of the children and which falls off an eucalyptus tree and then they suddenly sort themselves out into battle formation. So if you look at the words none of them are very, very simple or peaceful and even the band of birds arranged themselves into battle formation.

Why should they arrange themselves in battle formation? The children are battling between themselves, they are fighting between themselves and again the creatures in the children's home is also fighting amongst themselves. So you can see a direct association between the human world and the animal world and even in the natural world. So why are they fighting? That seems to be the natural state of affairs for the children of this house.

And the narrator says that they are ready to start their business and again the business is associated with play and that is a very interesting association. A business means discipline, order, profit making and which is the reverse in the case of the idea of play. Play does not mean a lot of order at least not very much of order is there in the context of these children and then there is no profit there.

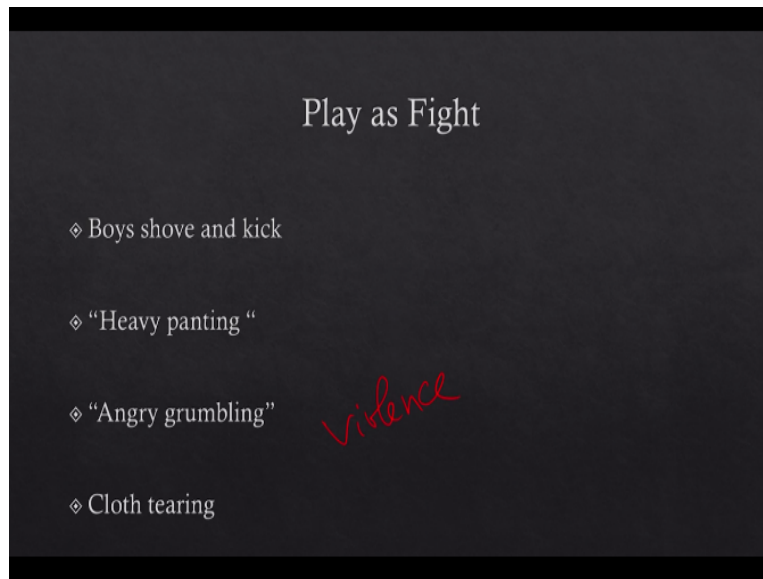
Somebody loses and somebody wins among the children as there is no either emotional or monetary profit there. So association of contrasting aspects of human life is done in a very, very interesting manner by Desai here.

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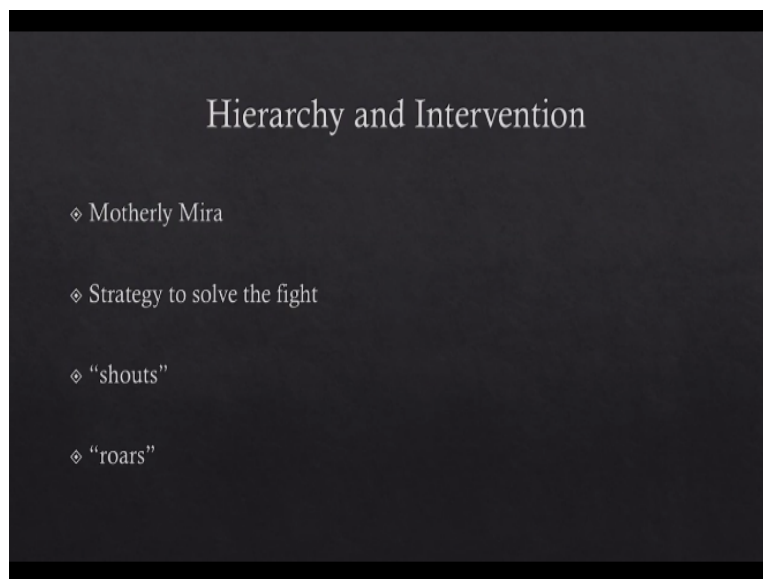
So as I said there is a lot of disorder among the ranks of the children and there is a lot of disquiet. There is no peace, in fact play itself is a kind of disquiet for the children. So the moment they are outside, they are fighting. So that disquiet seems to be the modus operandi for the children in terms of their approach to play during the summer. So the boys shove and kick at each other.

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There is heavy panting because they are fighting vigorously, there is angry grumbling and in that fighting in that you know scuffle that is happening, clothes get torn, so there is a kind of you know kind of a violence there among the children which is very apparent. So that violence needs to be noticed and analyzed so this play is a play of violence and this play is real fight hiding his play.

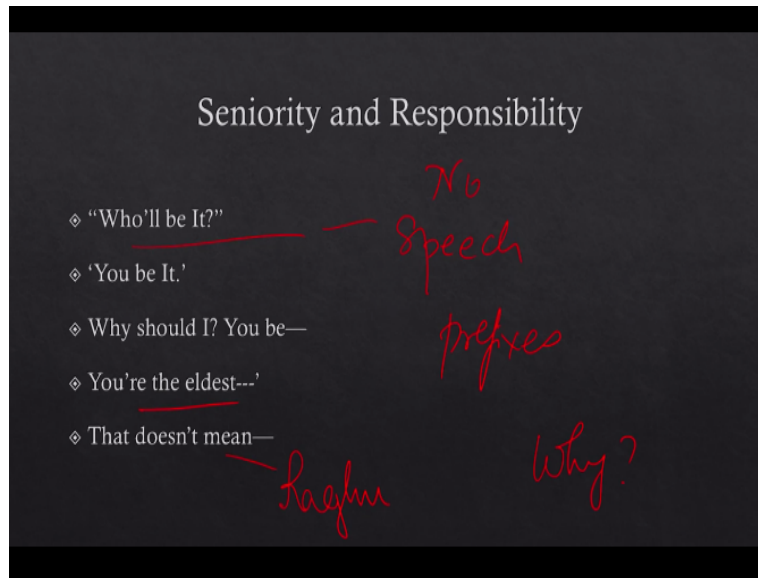
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And what happens the motherly Mira, there is a female child who is called as who is described as motherly and she tries to separate the kids who are fighting and her strategy to solve the problem there as to who should be the seeker is to come up with this child’s game and then they sing a rhyme and somebody who is the final one or the last one to finish it is the one who is going to be the seeker.

o there are even the motherly Mira shouts and roars at the children. So perhaps this motherly Mira is mimicking the real mother who had let them out of the house so even the mothers are not pictures of quiet dignity. In fact, they are fierce when there is occasion to be fierce. So let us look at this conversation one that I mentioned early on.

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And who will be it? Who will be the seeker in the game of hide and seek? You be it someone says and it is very interesting to note that there are no speech prefixes here. No speech prefixes why? That is a big question to ask. Why are not there are any speech prefix? Because any child is as good as the other child in terms of the question it raises but you can also find out who is the person who is being referred to in terms of the eldest.

We can make a reasonable speculation about the eldest child there. So who will be it? You be it, someone says you be it. Why should I? You be. You are the eldest. That does not mean. So we can kind of assume that this eldest figure is Raghu the one who is very tall and powerful and who kind of oppresses the smaller children in the house.

So there is no consensus there, there is no unanimity, there is no generosity, there is not cordiality. It is pretty rough and it is very complicated and conflicted and there is a no joy which is apparent in this particular game and that is very interesting and something which needs to be studied to elicit the symbolic or the meaning behind the games that are played in this particular narrative.

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Seniority and Responsibility

- ◇ “You cheated—Mira cheated—Anu cheated—but it was too late...”
- ◇ Resorting to higher authority
- ◇ “Ma said—Ma said to stay in the porch!”

Control the subordinates

And then at the end of that particular game or the rhyme that Mira asks everybody to chant while doing some actions with their hands at the end of that particular game which decides who is going to be the seeker, Raghu is the final one who is left behind and ultimately he has to be the seeker and he says you cheated, Mira cheated, Anu cheated but it was too late.

So if you look at the repetition of the concept of cheating, cheating, cheating you know expressed by Raghu, one can sense that he does not want to understand and accept the outcome of the childhood strategy to you know spot a seeker to choose a seeker. He says everybody is cheating that is why I have been left out to be the seeker but then you know the children have come to a consensus as to the fact that Raghu is going to be the seeker and they all go and hide.

And while they do that Raghu realizing that he is in a losing position. He resorts to a higher authority which is the mother figure who is there in the house and he says Ma said to stay in the porch, so only when he has been pushed into a corner he resorts to referencing the higher authority. Even then he is again on the losing position and the children have all fled to hide.

So we can see that Raghu is a figure who controls the subordinates who is really very harsh in his relation to the subordinates and he uses really strong language to discipline the younger children who are there.

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Anxiety at Play

- ◊ Manu's appearance "invisible cloud or from a bird's claws"
- ◊ "Chews his finger and near to tears"
- ◊ Falls scared by the "bloodcurdling yell" of Raghu

Anxiety at being caught

So this game of hide and seek has begun and first won to be spotted by Raghu this fierce older boy is Manu. So Manu is a younger boy and he gets caught by Raghu and the narrator says that his appearance on the garden suddenly found by Raghu is like you know Manu being dropped from an invisible cloud or from a birth bird's claws and again the fact that a bird would lift a small kid and suddenly drop him from the sky suggest the vulnerability of a little child in the scheme of things.

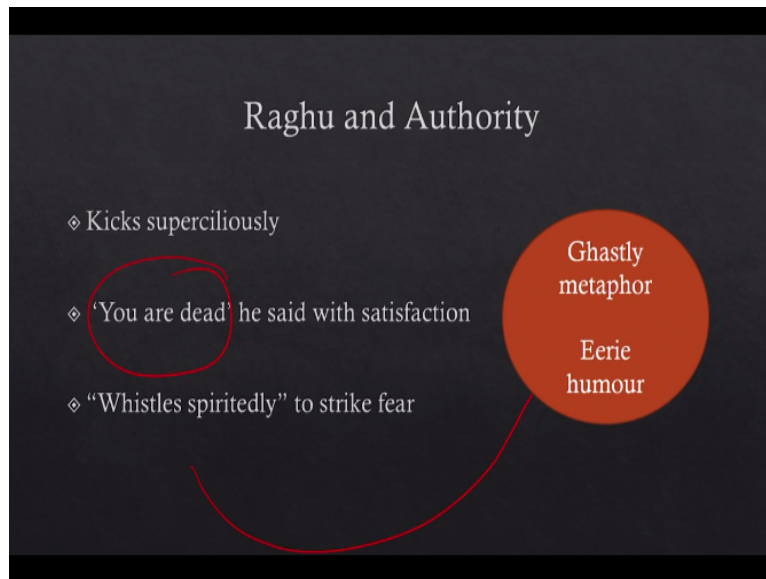
So not only do big boys oppress small boys but even you know non-human creatures seem to treat young children as prey victims. So Manu suddenly appears on the scene and Raghu spots him and then before he is being sported by Raghu, the narrator clearly expresses the anxiety that this boy is undergoing. After all it is a game but that does not seem to be the understanding on the part of all the little kids who are engaged in this game.

And this boy chews his finger and he is very close to tears because he is afraid that he would be found out by this big boy Raghu and he falls, he trips over garden hose pipe because he is scared by the bloodcurdling yell of Raghu and the choice of word there bloodcurdling, a cry that will you know that will kind of send a chill down your spine is a very, very interesting noise to make or give to a bigger boy in the context of play.

So again we get a sense that all the young children are terrified of this big figure Raghu.

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So once Raghu spots this boy Manu, he kicks him superciliously and says you are dead. He says that with satisfaction and this kicking is also very indicative of the fact that physical brutality is present even among the “play” that is happening among the children and again look at the choice of the language, you are dead that is very symbolic of course, perhaps this is said as part of the game that is being played in the context of this particular set of children in this household.

We can easily make the connection to argue that you know harsh, brutal, pessimistic, bizarre and serious ideas are communicated through the choice of language employed by the children and then Raghu also whistles spiritedly to strike fear among the hiders who are there. He did in the various spots of the garden.

So that whistling spiritedly is very interesting because it kind of suggest an eeriness. Whistling is usually associated with happy sounds but here in the case, it is very eerie and because of the earlier ghastly metaphors, the metaphor of the death that is employed by Raghu okay. Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.