

**Short Fiction in Indian Literature**  
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**Lecture – 12E**  
**Short Fiction in Indian Literature - Overview II**

Hello and welcome to another recording of a conversation between me and my teaching assistance for this course who are also students of MA at IIT Madras. I have with me Ms. Sanjana and Mr. Aakash here and we are going to talk about the second half of this course and cover some of the most interesting themes in terms of larger issues that are at work in the Indian society and which gets reflected in the short stories as well.

So what we are going to do is first begin with the short story, *Reflowering* by Sundara Ramaswamy. I am going to read a particularly interesting extract from the story and we will begin the discussion from that extract. So this is what I want to share with you. So we have a dispute, you know, that has, that has happened between Rowther and Appa who runs the textile business and the child narrator, the son of the businessman is narrating the story and this is how he reads the situation.

The boy says the dispute between Appa and Rowther had started mildly enough the previous evening. Look here Rowther. What are you going to do if you let your debts keep mounting like this? Appa had asked. Appa's question had been provoked because Rowther had chosen clothes for his entire family and pile them up by his side before thinking of asking Appa for credit. It was quite clear that Appa did not like this.

What can I do, ayya, my house is full of woman? My sons are useless. My sons-in-law are useless. Four sons, four daughters-in-law, eight granddaughters, eight grandsons. How many is that? If I have them just one item of clothing a piece, even then the cost is high. So I will stop there. What do you make of this extract Sanjana? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** I think that is very interesting because see Rowther is going through a lot of financial troubles and this and that.

But at the same time he considers it very necessary to give his family this piece of clothing and also during times of crisis, he says his sons and sons-in-laws are useless because we, we never see them, we never hear of them. We do not know what is happening with them. Generally, the burden, you know, cared of by the sons. But here we see none of that. So that is something... Quite right, quite right, yes, yes.

Mam, I think that just like Appa is a patriarch in his house and also in the shop setup. Rowther is also a patriarch in his house and this sentence pretty much reflects it. Yes, absolutely, absolutely. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** He somehow seems to be proud of the fact that he can provide for all the members of his family and it is a massive family. It is a big family, right. Lots of sons, lots of sons-in-law and none of the sons and none of the sons-in-law seems to be very responsible enough to look after this large family.

What are the other perspectives in terms of this man and the crisis that is engulfing him? Can we talk, talk more about it? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes mam, but before that just for that, because we, we actually talked about this, I think this relationship between the shopkeeper or basically the, here Appa and Rowther who is the servant and then the servant and his family.

The parallels between them, it is, it is very common theme in Indian literature. Right. And we come across this in many other stories, especially in The Flood as well. So mam, would you like to talk about it? **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** So the parallels here, parallels between Rowther and Appa, the funny thing is Appa is very very short tempered and that does not seem to be the case with Rowther.

He has this very benevolent, benign attitude towards his entire family and he does not seem to have any sense of irritation or annoyance despite the fact that he is shouldering this big burden on his, you know, on his entire self. So that is very striking and the other thing I wanted to mention is the fact that the family is at the heart of the crisis for this man, right. That, that is why I read out this extract because the root cause of all the problems seem to be contained within this extract.

This conversation by Rowther where he mentions that the sons are useless and nobody is there to, you know, run the family except himself and the family seems to be causing the financial crisis, right. So that is indicated in this particular extract, right. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Another thing that I, I think one of the major themes of the story is technology.

Yes. And technology and as well as change, like how lives change in time. That is, that is a very, very very striking theme of the story. So basically how Rowther change him, changes himself to meet the necessities of the time... Yes. Is something that is very moving. Yes, yes, yes. Do you want to comment on that? Yes. It is just like it raises questions of like, may be for humanity or may be when you have new technology.

Does not mean that it is obsolescence or like, you know, that just puts people out of work or they had become irrelevant or like in this story shows that Rowther, you know, he again has a reflowering and he goes back up so to, do humans have the capacity to, you know, go beyond and reinvent themselves in the... Yes, yes, yes, absolutely. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”**

That seems to be happening obviously because we have the intrusion of technology in the, in the object of this calculator and that moment in the story, he just touches that object, you know. He touches its front, he touches its back and he asks is this the thing that is doing all these calculations and the Gomathi says yes Papa, yes. It is doing it and then he says you keep it. I do not want to do anything to do with it and he rejects that object even though that has come to replace him and he does replace him even at the end of the story.

But the funny thing or the most interesting thing about Rowther is that he has this battle of wits with that object and he comes out as the winner because he reinvents himself. He, he kind of finds a new personality for himself. He somehow supersedes and he no longer becomes obsolete. So it seems as if the, this object, this technology is pushing him to become better and better and human beings are good at that.

They have that evolutionary proof to show that. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Definitely so mam. And the, the most important thing is that he assumes a position which is actually superior to what he was doing earlier. Absolutely. He is now a manager and... Yes, and, and the funny thing you wanted to bring up that last line in the story, is not it? Do you want to read that for the audience?

Yes, mam sure. Ibrahim Hassan Rowther is no longer a mere adding machine. He is now the manager. It is God's will, Rowther replied. Yes, yes, yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** and, and I think I, I mentioned it in my lectures too. For the first time, we get the full name of this old, blind man and he utters his entire name with a lot of pride. Is not it? And, and what is that indicate?

It indicates that he is no longer a mere adding machine. He has a personality and, and he seems to come out as someone who, who is kind of on top of everything, right. Who can manage each and every aspect of the shop including the, the boss himself, right. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes. So do you want to mention some details with regard to that? Incident also shows that may be he was not particularly happy with; he calls it a mere adding machine.

So that shows his attitude towards may be his previous job. We never found out whether he disliked or liked it. Yes. But now we get an incline of now he thinks he is superior. Yes. Because he is not just doing calculations. He is not doing the calculations but he is taking care of so many other aspects. He is making sure like Appa pays the bills. Yes. And like takes care of his wife and this and that. Yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”**

And, and the point that you made that is very interesting because we do not know whether he like his job. But we know that he is really good at it. So that, that is established in the story and now he sees himself as having been promoted to a higher level, right. He almost becomes god. God like, in the way he directs, manages everybody. There is a directorial aura to him and he quite enjoys that.

The way he can, you know, lord it over the other people in the store. So that really comes through in the story. So family and the point that I want to, you know, get across to the audience is that there are complexities in the way a family is run, you know, and that is evident in the story and it also shows how the family could be at the heart of several financial crisis and how the feudal setup also, you know, adds to the burden of this blind, old man.

So we have a family where the women cannot work. So we have a family even when the men cannot work. The older father figure has to take up the responsibility. He cannot just shirk responsibility and say get out of the house, go and, you know, make money on your own. So all those, you know, complications are evident in this particular story. So how family is binding in some sense, right.

**“Professor - student conversation starts”** And with something very Indian. Yes. So I think Indian, the theme of Indian literature here. Yes. Definitely comes. Yes, quite right. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** So the family is at heart. Is not it? It can be a, a dysfunctional family, can be a very functional family, can be a happy domesticity, unhappy domesticity but he cannot get away from it.

It is, it is, it is like the, the basic unit with which we work, right. So that is, that is quite evident. So what are the other themes that we can think about, that are very very striking in terms of the other stories that we have covered in the second half of the course. Can we talk about The Shroud? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Sure. In society actually mother and Ghisu were oppressed but in the household, it is Budhia who is oppressed actually, definitely so.

Yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** That is a, that is a very interesting observation and not many people make a note of that because the general criticism about the story is that either it is anti-dalit story or it is a story that kind of lays there, the oppressions of the dalits in the Indian society. But we somehow forget the absent woman or the marginalized woman who is at the heart of the story, Budhia with whom the story begins and, and the death of the woman is somehow "celebrated" by these men.

In fact, the final lines of the story are about that. They say that I now she has fulfilled our dearest wish by dying and she will of course go to heaven. So those are the words uttered by the one of the men in the story. So the, the woman rarely gets noticed and, and that is very interesting because oppression has been injured by this woman to a great extent and that needs to be noticed and, and talked about, right.

And do you want to comment further on this fact? The way the woman is marginalized that is kind of drawing parallel through the other marginalization that happens in terms of caste, in terms colour, in terms of other marginal issues, right. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes. So man, this actually is a theme across all these stories, most of the stories we, we saw it in Summer Vacation and, not in Summer Vacation but in The Flood and we... **“Professor - student conversation ends.”**

We can also see it in Summer Vacation in the case of Nani Amma and Amni, right. They seem to be marginalized and somehow associated with the dark room, right, by the Varakini. Is not it? So that marginalized room has associations with marginalized deeper with dark women and women who do not have men in their family, right. Amni, Amma and Nani seems to be without men folk to look after them, right.

So those associations are also there. You are quite right. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** And mam rather than just putting it across like that, we can also see it as like 2 layers of oppression and whatever those 2 layers are, most of these stories have 2 layers of oppression and they add to the sophistication of the story. Yes, yes. Quite right. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”**

I mean if you can pick up from what you have said, we have Muthassi who is the "feudal landlord in some sense," and somehow or the other, there is some kind of oppression going on if you look at the class angle and at the same time, she also acts in a benevolent way, just like the landlord in The Shroud. He offers money because he has to take care of the funeral expenses. So benevolence is combined with exploitation in some sense and there are other layers of exploitation and sometimes these intermingle, right.

So we need to be observer with that to. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes. Mam. so mam like when you say that food is actually the theme of The Shroud, it is, it is interesting and it is surprising as well. Yes. Because the many other things as well in the story, the theme of death, and then the theme of caste oppression. Yes. And everything. But why do you think mam is that food is the most important theme? **“Professor - student conversation ends.”**

The reason is pretty obvious, you know. The most important motivation for these 2 men is how to get the next meal, right. And even the beginning of that story with Budhia making blood curdling cries inside the hut, is combined with them roasting potatoes outside the hut and they do not want to step in and check-in on her because they are worried that the other person will finish off the roasted potatoes.

And there are constant references to these men, you know, scavenging for food, right, you know, tilling out, you know, stuff from other people’s fields, sucking on sugarcanes, fanaticising about that meal that they had long back and sometimes when I reread the story, I am also wondering whether this actually happens or is just a fantasy that he has created for himself, you know, just like Muni creates the fantasy of a daughter giving him money for his 50th birthday.

So I wonder whether he has created that idea in his mind and he wants to recreate it in reality which will happen once Budhia dies and the other people contribute, contribute money for her shroud. So it is a very very apparent motif that somehow seems kind of, you know, submerged because other very very apparent ideas about, you know, dalit issues or the exploitation of the landlords, how, or how chiefs come in to creation, how convent are created and other things and how Budhia is ill-treated, how she feeds these 2 men and how she does the job and still she gets, you know, rejected by them and not cared for.

So all these things are there and these are important. I am not rejecting them but at the heart of the story is starvation, plain starvation and these men have starved for ages and, and that is why all their, you know, concentration is on how to get food. What do you, what do you make of that? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Mam, yes, the thing is, I can take that as a they are

ready to give the shroud money and they get food and that when we do the topic of the shroud itself, because it, it represents more than just a cloth.

It represents the whole series of tradition. Yes. And you can see Madhav and Ghisu try to like, may be break it or rebel or whatever it is, they go and they decide to buy food, buy meal and throughout their entire life, they are using resistance, you know. Yes, yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** Resistance, that is a, that is a good word. They are resisting it in a very very subtle manner. It is a very diplomatic resistance.

And, and they kind of exploit the tradition for their benefit in the sense that they get a really good feed out of it and they still believe that these traditions will be maintained by the entire village because that is how things are done. These rituals have to be carried out in order to keep the fabric of, of, of the society together. So they know that she will ultimately get a shroud and, you know, they will also get a meal out of that, right if she dies and she does die, right.

**“Professor - student conversation starts”** It is very important to note that you said it is such a resistance compared to an outer attribute there. Yes, they have not revolted. Yes. It is a very subtle resistance. Yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** And, and that is, that becomes clear when, when Ghisu goes to the landlord someone who he does not see for days together and somehow he goes and falls at his feet and said you are my lord, you know, you are a father to me.

Kindly help me in this moment of distress and he knows that this is all sham but still he has to do the right thing, you know, in order to make sure the society stays together. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** And the landlord like even though despises Ghisu so much. Yes. He knows that ultimately even though they are spending the money on food... Yes. It is all sham but they have to make sure the shroud is there, just to make sure--

Yes, yes. Symbol of tradition oppression should continue. Yes, quite right. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** And that is what Ghisu knows that very well. It is very interesting that they know how the society functions, right and which is why he says I can even tell them that I dropped the money somewhere, you know, what can they do? They cannot do anything; you



know?

Even if they do not believe their version, it is alright. Life will go on, right. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Mam, another important thing is that I noted I think is that in this story of, despite the fact that both the major characters are non-conformists. They do not conform to societal norms but when, interestingly when it comes to conversation between them, sometimes they seem to be maintaining this façade and this correctness.

So Budhia is dying inside, nobody is like, nobody is saying that why should we go. They are playing mind games with each other and it is, it is... Yes. It is there in, I think, 3 or 4 instances in the conversation between them. Yes, yes, yes, yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** As I said, you know, ultimately it is like every man for himself. That is the, you know, bottom line for them.

So even if it is father-son, they, they worry about the amount of food that goes in each, you know, each body's tummy and, and, and I, I have mentioned this in, in my lectures while a food, food is a double edged notion here. It, it is essential for survival but at the same time that survival is the cost, at the cost of someone else. So this feast that they have is at the cost of the pain and sufferings of Budhia whom they have exploited too the maximum.

So that food that they enjoy, it comes at her, at the cost of her life. So it is a very very problematic aspect for them. So even though they are the fringes, even though they are scavenging, even though they are marginalized, even though they can be victims, they are also victimizers. So that needs to be, you know, reinforced, that idea needs to be reinforced and they cannot be forgiven for this selfish attitude.

**“Professor - student conversation starts”** But mam, there is a realization I, I feel at the end of the story. They say that Budhia will go to heaven. There is a... I feel the measure of them to sort of rationalize what they did. Yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** So I, I would shelf that notion under the mind games that you have mentioned a little while ago. So these are the games or these are the comfort talk that they uttered through, you know, themselves to make sure

that they are, you know, sane and, and they carry on with their lives.

So what is the other thing? So we have talked about female oppression. We have talked about oppression because of belonging to particular communities. We have talked about the feudal landlords. We have also talked about Muthassi, you know, the Summer Vacation story that we have talked about in the previous section. So we have talked about family being one of the problematic units that contains within itself, lots of oppressions, right.

And, and the funny thing is some critics have awarded how on earth did Budhia land in this particular family, you know. Who in their sanest mind would offer their daughter to this particular set of men, right. And, and, and that is a question. Regardless of the fact that, you know, how bad you are, you will ultimately get a, a female as a bride for, for you. So that thing is there in the Indian society, right.

So... **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Another, another interesting thing which people might wonder is when he says that I think 9 sons. Yes, yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** That exaggeration, we do not know whether that is an exaggeration or a reality. What happened to the 9 sons, we do not know? Did they all die as, as young children, we do not know? So that is a bit of speculation, a puzzle that is there, we do not know how to look at it?

So how about the story Price of Bananas, can we talk about that? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes. Mulk Raj Anand's story. Sure mam, but can we end with this note like, what do you think of the criticism of the, The Shroud by the dalit critics that it actually... Yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** I have heard this criticism time and again about the story.

And my interpretation is that, I am not convinced by that criticism, by that argument because I, I also mentioned it in my lectures that, you know, Premchand is not a character, is not a writer who would, you know, quite sincerely reject the oppressions or the sufferings of, of this community and he would not, you know, write the story about that, you know, that, that is there but leaving that reputation of Premchand as the champion of the underdogs aside, even within the story.

There are, you know, narrative moments which talks about why such psyches have been created, these psyches, the psyche of Ghisu and Madhav. They are quite distorted psyches. They are quite monstrous psyches, right. And such psyches have been created because of, you know, age old oppressions, age old exploitations and there is a logic behind such a set of attitudes that these men have.

So he is not pointing the finger of blame entirely at Ghisu and Madhav. He is also pointing a big finger of blame at the landlords and all the chieftains and all the, you know, leaders of the... **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Feudal set up. Yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** Leaders of the society who have created these men. And we also need to remember these are, you know, "extraordinary human beings."

They are not the norm. Even within dalit community, they are not the norm, right. So we need to see them as outcaste, real outcaste who are rebelling as you pointed out in a, in a weird way at, at the injustices that have been heaped on them. So it is a rebellion alright, but it is a very very problematic rebellion which also exploits people who come under its clutches such as Budhia, right.

So we need to look at in a more broadminded way and, and I have also pointed out the extracts which talk about the, the, you know, the activities or, or the, the behaviour of the landlords, you know, throughout the ages. So it, it is not a very very convincing argument, at least in my interpretation. So shall we talk about The Price of Bananas. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes. I actually wanted to compare the, you know, Seth Ji from The Price of Bananas with Ram Bharosa from Blue Umbrella, because both of them are men of privilege.

Yes. And they both are bad notes, in the sense they use obscene language. But I guess we can see the difference in the sense of, you know, Ram Bharosa undergoes a transformation. Yes. But do we see that in the terms of Seth Ji, like, do we see that, does he even get justice for the bad, does he even get punishment or does, does, you know, does, is their justice in the end of the story because it is, like, okay, yes, they make caricatures of the man.

Yes. And they look, look at him with the disgust but is that really changing things. Yes, it is a good comparison, quite like the, you know, parallel you have drawn between Ram Bharosa and Seth Ji. Aakash, do you want to respond to that? Yes. I mean, I was also thinking when you were drawing that comparison that this realization is not there in The Price of Bananas. He does not realize that he has committed a mistake and that is probably because he does not get a punishment I believe. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”**

So let us go back. Do you have a copy of that story? I want to, I have mentioned this extract time and again but I want to go back to the argument that he makes, right, Seth Ji. Look at the way he reacts when the narrator, the artist narrator says give him one more annas Seth Ji, he says. I said with the dried face. And he response, the Seth Ji response, you do not know sahib, you do not know these badmashes.

They are in league with the monkeys. Bananas are 2 a pice (()) (25:58) asking for an anna for 1 rotten banana. So he sees, he has convinced himself that he has a valid rationale for rejecting, you know, or, or, you know, refusing to pay this man more money. Unlike the case of Ram Bharosa, he is very very convinced about his perspective on life, right. And that is very very warped, way of looking at things.

Is not it? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Definitely so. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** So, let us, let us talk more about the motivations of Seth Ji. Ram Bharosa and Seth Ji are comparable in some respect but they are also not comparable because this one, Ram Bharosa undergoes a wonderful transformation, right. He has learnt for being very very greedy, very stingy and despite he offers the necklace, a sliver necklace.

A pricy one, right. It cost about Rs.10 and he has to go to the town to get bear claw made as a pendant for this particular necklace for this silver chain, right. So he is willing to shell out a lot more money. So there is a combination of, of economics as well as, you know, traditional superstition as well as a genuine warmth towards this little girl and so many other things in, in the activities of Ram Bharosa which is very enduring to look at and, and, and that is completely

absent in the case of Seth Ji.

But we can see human warmth in the figure of the fruit vendor or the monkeys on the, on the branches of the tree on the station where they, you know, behave generally towards the young ones and the fruit vendor tries to feed the, you know, monkeys with the, with the bananas that, and he also makes a living out of that. So tenderness does not come in association with Seth Ji. That is, that is not there so...

**“Professor - student conversation starts”** Mam, this parallel also brings out the caste divide in the society and how, sorry, the class divide in the society and how upper class people look at the lower class people and The Blue Umbrella, it is not just Ram Bharosa but also when the story begins and the, actually the family that umbrella belongs to, how they look at it, that is, that is also very striking.

Yes, yes, quite right. Sanjana, do you want to comment on that? Yes, I would let it out to about, about the point that you were also raising, the point, about like, the short contrast in the characters of like all the other characters like monkeys and the fruit vendor and Seth Ji in the word of, they use, they both use a word badmash. Badmashes. But madmashes is used in such an enduring way by the fruit vendor in such--

Yes. Insulting way. Insulting way by Seth Ji, absolutely and they are in league. He is kind of conflating human beings and monkeys together as one category, right. So they become a community together, the fruit vendors and the monkeys and Seth Ji becomes a class apart, a species apart in fact, right. It is a (( )) (29:07) support that one draws on another. Yes, yes, yes, absolutely. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”**

And as I point out, you know, tenderness is, does not seem to be associated with, you know, wealthy people, at least, not in the literature that we read, write. There is, there is not a lot of tenderness even in Muthassi, I mean not obvious tenderness. She is very brusque, very abrupt, right and she is a matriarch and she has a lot of money and wealth and property. Of course, there is a softer side to her but it is not very apparent and that is not apparent in Seth Ji too, right.

And that is not apparent in the landlord too, in *The Shroud* and we have seen that he has also beaten these 2 men several times. And, and so harshness, lack of empathy, sympathy, very very autocratic behaviour seem to be the characteristics of the upper, wealthier, economically very powerful sections in society. So those are the characteristics that we can kind of pick up on and stitch together to form a picture.

Yes, I am sure that is, that is a kind of a stereotype but stereotype is also played out time and again in, in our fiction. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes, definitely. Quite right. Why do you think that the monkeys that have been shown here to be caring for the young ones in a tender way? Why do you think the author makes it very like, makes it known to the readers how loving the monkeys are to may be one another.

Yes, yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** The funny thing that I notice in that story, I mean, when you mention this point is that there are no women, right. It is just a complete absence of women in that story by Mulk Raj Anand and that place has been taken by these monkey mothers, right and the tenderness, the gentle behaviour are associated with the activities of these monkeys, the female monkeys and the other figure, the fruit vendor, who really speaks tenderly to these monkeys.

And he observes that these monkeys are hungry which is why they disturb them, right. So he somehow makes excuses for these monkeys. Of course, he has an economic motif for feeding the monkeys, that is there but apart from that, we can see a kind of genuine relationship between these poor people. They seem to kind of, you know, be very noticing about the difficulties faced by "their brethren."

So empathy again seems to belong to a particular class of people, right and not very evident in the other one. So the absence of women is very very interesting and I think that space has been taken up by these non-human characters and, and characters from the lower classes as well. And even the artist figure is very very empathetic. We need to talk about that, right? We have forgotten about the artist.

**“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes mam, that writer... **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** It is very very empathetic somehow, is not it? And, and he stands for the porter, he stands for the fruit vendor. Do you want to comment on that Aakash? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes man, and it is a very, the way he stands up, he is also, sometimes it is very passive as well when he is drawing the caricature.

It is, it is not active resistance to what Seth Ji is doing but it is, it is very passive. But he is, he is basically, his aggression is coming out in a very passive way. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** And we say that is the only weapon that I have, right. And we say that is the only weapon that I have, right. And, and when the other men in the compartment want to share the caricature about Seth Ji himself, he says no, let us not do it.

So I do not know what are the motivations for not sharing that particular caricature with the Seth Ji whether he, he thinks that that is punishment enough or he is genuinely of, of, you know, a broadminded character who does not want to treat the Seth Ji very harshly and, and other things. So again that the passive interference is very very interesting because personally speaking, we would think that these characters need a bigger punishment, right for harassing all these people who have served them.

So that, that is there. That is my take on it. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Mam, do you think that the absence of female figure in the story specially in The Price of Bananas, is it also related to the fact that the divide between public and private life and in public life, there is not much role for the women to play. Yes, yes, very interesting remark there. What do you think Sanjana?

We have another railway station in Karma, right and we have another railway station in Summer Vacation. We have the grandmother, you know, crossing the borders there. She is very transgressive in that regard, right. And she tells the steward, I, I can take care of myself. I know all the details, you know. You do not have to, you know, give me all the information. Do not repeat yourself and, and she is an exception I would...

That is definitely in the star. Yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** She is, she is, she is an exception in Kerala, you know. It has a different colour but Karma, we have Lachmi who is very very passive and who, you know, who accepts her position as a, as a kind of a slave in that relationship between her husband and herself and then what is the other railway station that we have, this one.

Is not it? So you do have a point in terms of the larger theme about the gender roles and their attendant, presences in public and private spheres. So the train stations are very very public space and, and women are not, you know, common figures on the platform. In fact, they are, they are boxed in the separate compartment in the class jnana, right. They are taken care of, you know, in a separate box, right, jnana curtained off from, from prime public eyes.

Is not it? So it is, it is a nice comment and, and again I want to bring out the subtle subtext that is there, the artist figure, the fruit vendor and, and the monkey, the female monkeys, they all somehow are (( )) (35:04) for the female persons because of the empathy, because we have the stereotype of the woman as being very very sympathetic, very nurturing, very caring and, and, and very giving, right.

So the artist and all the other figures seem to be symbolic female presences in the story, that is what I, I would, I would say. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** We do add the feminine touch to this. Yes, yes, I think, I think so too. What about Games at Twilight? Do you have a mother figure, several mother figures, right? This is it. So it is, it is a very very interesting story and somehow very different to the other stories.

Why is it different to the other stories? Do you have something to say about it Sanjana? One thing is may be because major characters are often children which is not the same thing, same case with most of the stories. Yes. In some sort of rural setting and, yes, it is very interesting, it not only focus on one character and its time is not spent to interact with anyone but mostly spent on his own.



Yes. You know, alone in the spheres. Yes. And securities. Very good, very good observations. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** It is an urban setting, and the urban setting is not quite common in the text that we have chosen and almost even in literatures so. Indian literature is quite fascinated by the rural side of Indian life, right and, and we have this cage that India lives in the villages, continues to live in the villages, right.

And that is reflected in Indian literature too. So we have a different time, an urban setting and we have an upper class family which is represented in this story, again not very common in, in Indian literature, you know. So that makes it really stand out. So we have a mother figure and we have the child, Ravi and as you said, we live in his mind to a greater extent in the story. So the inner life, the psychic life of, of Ravi becomes expressed in the narrative to a greater extent which is why it has a very very psychological feel to it in terms of the themes that are, you know, discussed in that story.

So what is your take on that? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Mam, so the most interesting part here is that not just it is an urban Indian setting but it is an urban Indian setting of 20th century. Yes, yes. So and probably somewhere, sometime between mid 20th century to late 20th century and I think the game of hide and seek they are playing, it is very interesting. Yes. For me to note that at least because like in 21st century, it would be children setting with the computers on and playing computer games.

Yes, yes, quite right, quite right. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** Yes, and again it is vacation, summer vacations are of ambience, right. That is there and the children long to get down. So we have themes of confinement and, and, and wanting freedom or relief or release from incarceration. So that theme is there. So using the children as somehow symbolic figures, we can connect the story to larger issues this causes of, of, of, you know, imprisonment, freedom, liberty and all these issues, right.

So that, that is quite there in that story. How about the sibling rivalry, you know, the discontent that arises of the sibling rivalries and, and the hierarchies that become manifest? So these are some of the themes that are quite evident in the story as well. But the most important thing, at

least to me, is to see a character of the mother in a different way. Is not it? Even when Ravi is hurt, not physically hurt but emotionally hurt, we do not see that excessive gush of, of sympathy on the part of the mother which is very, very odd, right.

**“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes mam. In Indian literature as well as in Indian society because the stereotype is that as soon as something very minor happens to the child, the mother is very very... Younger side. Yes, yes. The youngest. The mother becomes very abusive, that is the stereotype and she says do not be a baby. Stop acting like a baby and, and that is very very...

I think it also has something to do with the fact that her piece of mind, her sister is being disturbed. Yes and the other thing is, you know, being very very immature is looked down upon, frowned upon. So becoming mature at a very early age is, is, is supposed to be a good attribute. Specially in urban settings. Urban centers, right when, when they want the children to be more independent, more mature and, and not cry like a baby and, and crying is somehow associated with feminine attributes and, and the mother does not want that for the son, the younger son.

Is not it? So that is also there. Lots of, lots of interesting themes with regard to death, growing up, the harsh realities of life kind of blend in, in the, you know, themes of the story. Mam, the interesting part for me about the story is the character Ravi definitely. And the fact that he considers himself an underdog who has to prevail, who must perform. Yes. To prevail over all the others and when he thinks he has prevailed, the bubble is burst.

Yes. The bubble burst there, right there and he is like no one is noticing. Yes, yes, yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** That the, the pain is about being left out, you know, rather than not becoming the winner. Initially his aim was to become the winner, to be the champion and, you know, lady realizes that nobody cares about his absence and that becomes the hardest part to bear, right.

The fact of, that you are left behind and that is very very symbolic again. It has thematic resonances about being forgotten by people that you love and care, right. So those themes are

there too. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes mam. It, it has a, it has a very striking parallel with life as well. I feel that if somebody works really hard in order to put other people behind and come first and something and despite the fact that they are the underdogs.

And we have a disadvantage at the beginning and they would definitely very disillusioned. Yes. With the world. When their triumph goes unnoticed by everyone else. Yes, yes, yes. And that is also a trick on the part of society, why? Especially the people who have the power, you know, that if you ignore somebody's success, you are defeating them again, right. Just do not notice the triumphs of the underdogs.

And they lost in victory. Yes. Actually. Yes, yes, so. Is a lost victory, you are quite right and that hurts quite a lot. Is not it? **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** That hurts quite, again the feudal setup where the, where the elder sons get all the, you know, attention and prominence that is also there as part of a theme of this particular story and the younger ones are somehow left behind there to constantly prove themselves.

And again, you can, you know, parallel the emotions of this young child with other characters who are in the margins. So that can also be done, be it Chanan's dog or be it Nani Amma, be it other characters such as Budhia or Ghisu and Madhav or, or Lachmi even so. All these can be connected thematically. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Like, when you mentioned it, I can see parallels with the in The Flood and, and the, the story of, sorry, Ravi.

Because both of them are sort of forgotten. Yes, yes, absolutely. Especially Chanan's dog, right. Yes, I think so. It is very very interesting moment in the story when the boat takes off and with the entire family except the dog. Nobody notices the dog which is living at a particular corner and, and we can, we can, as you rightly pointed out, draw parallel between Chanan's dog and Ravi because nobody notices.

Even the mother, even the father who has come back from work, does not notice the absence of the younger son. That is very very abnormal and, and that is very very suggestive of disfunctionality or, or we can say that either he is really striving to make a point there which is

why he kind of sets up a scene where the parents also not notice this very young child, right. So that is very interesting, the comparison that you have drawn and even when Chanan comes back, right, after a particular number of days when the flood waters have receded, he is not very sure if it is his dog because it is no longer recognisable, right.

He uses his feet as if it... Yes, yes, exactly. So that, I think that also has the, this theme of lack of compassion on his part. Lack of compassion, yes again you can connect it to Games at Twilight where the other children say why are you crying, shush, you know, join the lines. Do you want to play with us, come up, play? Otherwise, you know, stay quiet, right. So this lack of empathy and, and the funny thing is the boy mimics death.

The little boy mimics death when he lies on the ground as if he is hugging the earth and we can again draw parallel between Chanan's dog which is somehow cradled by the, you know, shallow waters. There is a gentle rocking moment, movement in, in the waters, right. So both, both these figures seem to go back to mother earth to draw a sustenance. Is not it? So those, those symbolic resonances are there.

What about Biniya? Have we talked enough about Biniya? Yes, about the story Blue Umbrella, we can talk about like when she gets the blue umbrella from the mem sahib, it starts from there where there like, where they question why do you need this objective beauty. And this is an interesting question like this is something like she has gotten but no one from the upper class or upper caste are able to, you know, like handle that objective beauty does not belong to them but it belongs to a girl.

So it also, it is somehow like how can a poor person... Yes. Basically. Own something beautiful. Yes, own something beautiful or they think that they do not admire the aesthetics enough so that... Yes, yes, quite right. I mean, in fact, the mem sahib who gives away the umbrella, right, her question itself is interesting in that regard. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** She says what she, how dare you ask for my umbrella, you know.

She is kind of taken aback by the fact that this little girl can appreciate the beauty of, of this blue

umbrella and, and that thing is, you know, this wonder about a poor man or woman or child's appreciation of aesthetics run through the entire set of, I mean, in several cases at least in our collection, right. So if we go back to Nani Amma, she wears a very nice ring and, and Ammu is attracted by it.

So she asks, I mean, she says that she is fortunate to wear that ring, right. And, and even Ammu asks do crows know what is beautiful, right. Because she cannot reconcile the idea that, you know, these creatures can understand beauty and, and that is a very symbolic, you know, idea because that suggests that lower class people, people who are on the margins are not able to appreciate the aesthetic things in life, right.

And again ultimately, that, that umbrella gets taken away from this little girl. It is as if, you know, Ruskin Bond himself does not allow this girl to enjoy the beauty, you know, on her own. So that becomes, the umbrella becomes everybody's, you know, umbrella ultimately. So does not get to have it for own. And that is quite sad, right and it is as if she goes back to nature. She, she kind of returns to mother nature to enjoy the beauties there.

She sings and she, she runs along on the hillside, right. That is how the story ends. So it is, it is as if, you know, there is a message that these girls cannot have all these things in, in life, you know. All these manmade thing at least. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** What do you think of Biniya's relations with her brother, Bijju. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** Bijju and Biniya, very very lovely set of siblings, you know.

Because Bijju always comes to the rescue of Biniya and, you know, and he, he brings her all these berries to eat and she, you know, gives away the umbrella for a little while to hold. They walk back together, you know, And, and once there is this incident with the snake, she runs away in fear and then everybody else. Bijju comes back to look for the snake and chase it away. All these things are kind of establish a very lovely set of, you know, relationships, at least in that particular family and, and that is something we have not noticed so far, right.

And, and he somehow, you know, acts like a hero for her and he, ultimately he is the one who

kind of overpowers Rajaram and gets the, you know, help to get her the umbrella. But, but what you think? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes, we can also see instances where she really idealises her brother where she say, she feels proud that she is as immune to negligence or as...

Yes. Like how Bijju used to be. Yes. I can climb trees as well. Yes, yes. So she is always comparing and saying that she considers her brother like the ideal. The standard to which she kind of aspires and, and kind of equals him in all these, you know, physical activities as well. So that is very very interesting. But have you noticed how the final struggle between Bijju and Biniya get played out.

What do you make of that? These 2 boys fight with each, each other, right. Yes. Pretty fiercely. Biniya does not intervene. True. Goes to save her umbrella. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** So how eye is caught by that object, that is very, you know, slightly disturbing in, in some sense at least because she does not kind of intervene and, and take these, you know, ask these boys to, you know, stop it or nothing of that sort.

She does not, you know, help reconcile the conflict. On the other hand, she is kind of, you know, distracted by the umbrella, this, this object. So somehow perhaps she has been punished for that in, you know, when she loses the umbrella ultimately or may be Ruskin Bond takes away the, the disturbing object that kind of, you know, prevents the basic humanity of Biniya to comfort. So all these things are there.

**“Professor - student conversation starts”** We can also take it as reflection of gender roles where the boys are seen as to be violent and girls are not to interfere into that. It is, it is a sort of man's business. Yes. Yes, mam. Yes, that is also there. That is also there. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** But if you look at Games at Twilight, we have Mira intervening when she kind of, you know, steps forward to stop the squabbles between the boys, right.

**“Professor - student conversation starts”** But still mam, in the story, it, I think the author Anita Desai notes it as motherly Mira. Motherly Mira. Metaphor is of the mother. Motherly Mira and

the motherly Mira again does not acknowledge the emotional turmoil of this little boy Ravi at the end, right. So that stereotype gets smashed (( )) (50:12) at least in 2 occasions in that particular story, right.

So what are, what are the other themes, anything very striking that you want to talk about in terms of the other stories? Have you talked about The Chess Players? No not yet mam. Chess Players, is a very very interesting story. Is not it? Let us talk about the women. Let us talk about the women. I, I think it is really the 2 women could be serious, almost the opposites over each other because one, Mirza's wife really wants to spend more time with him.

She is very devoted. Whereas Mir's wife, she is adulterer, she is like the bad wife. Yes. Indulging in pleasure. Somehow they seem to be playing out the stereotypes, right. The extreme stereotypes, the clingy wife. Yes. And, and the unfaithful wife. Is not it? What do you think, Aakash? These are myths. This theme has been, this theme has, it is a recurrent theme in Indian literature and the trope of, the trope of basically unfaithful wife or basically adulterers, that is there and then the trope of faithful perfect wife.

Yes, yes. How women should be, that is there. So I find it quite interesting. Yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** and this theme also comes up in, in a marginal way in Horse and Two Goat as well by R. K. Narayan. Muni says that, you know, in a philosophical tone, you got to look after the wife. You got to keep an eye on the wife. Otherwise, you know, she will, you know, run away with, with another man.

So all these themes are kind of, you know, there at the margins in all these Indian fictions. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** So mam, the one thing that actually sets Shatranj Ke Khiladi or the Chess Players apart from all the other stories that we have read that, it, it does not have much of a mention of the lower state of the society. It deals with the aristocracy. Yes. And that has been missing in most of the stories.

How aristocracy, how the aristocrats lived and... Yes, yes. And it captures really the, the collapse of, of the power as well as the, the moral compass of the aristocrats. Yes. Right. The crumbling

from the inside. It is the time of Wazid Ali Shah and it is all, it is, it is an unsettling, unravelling. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** And especially this particular story captures the decadence rather than the, the height of art and culture, it captures just the decadent perspective of that particular theme.

Yes. Is not it? Indulgence, women indulgence may be. Over indulgence and that seems to be the cause of the fall of Awadh, of, of Lucknow. It falls quite easily, you know, without any kind of rebellion on the part of the local rulers or the local populous. It was a very very easy victory for the British, that is the sense that we get from the story. Is not it? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** You can see that the people in power, they like lived their life, lavish lives but do not really come up, step up on the plane to do their duties.

Yes, yes. They are only living in decadence., They only have that good aspects of it. You know, whatever comes with their nobility, their position in society but they are not willing to actually do what is necessary when it is time. Yes. Absolutely, absolutely. And if you connect the dots with history actually, I think that with these 2 aristocrats, Premchand is also basically trying to showcase what the rule of Wazid Ali Shah was like because Wazid Ali Shah's character is also described.

I think there are very striking parallels between the historical character of Wazid Ali Shah and then these 2 men. Yes, absolutely, absolutely. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** And, and the other, most important thing is that, you know, there is a political indifference on the part of these 2 aristocrats and, and as you pointed out, they refuse to do their duty. They refuse to fulfil their social contract, right that they have with the, with their lords.

Is not it? And what, what do you make of the political indifference and the, and their obsession with chess playing which ultimately leads to their deaths? There is a big contrast between these 2, right. They are not cowards. They are not cowards. And that is proved. Is not it? So what do we make of that? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** We can see how the chess is inheritably, quite a political strategy game.



But they are not willing to put it into their real life. They only immersed in the game and the only thing that they care about ultimately we see is their ego. Yes. They are indifferent to everything else except when their egos come into play. Yes. So... Yes. That is quite important. Yes, absolutely. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** So what is very very pressing, important for them is their attraction to their own lineage rather than their loyalty to the feudal lord, right.

So in order to protect their personal family honour, they fight a battle between themselves and they die, right. So their loyalties become very very narrow, very very personal, very very self-centered and very very egoistical, right. So they are not connected to larger political issues at all. Is not it? So that seems to be the central, you know, the message, **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes the very interesting thing to note here is that that chess board can be seen in connection with the, basically what the country was undergoing at that time and the turmoil that was happening in basically the real battles.

So that is interesting but then these 2 gentleman... Yes. Were totally isolated with those battles and their egos were... Absolutely. Played out on the chess board. Absolutely. And but it materialises in real deaths. Yes. Rather than losing the chess game literally. True, true. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** And it is very symbolic that the woman throws the chess board away. Is not it? Mirza's wife does that and, and that is a very interesting moment in the story.

And, and she, she somehow protects the public face of Mirza because the public face of Mirza seems to be chess playing in the story. So that rejection is made very very clear and strongly by Mirza's wife there. So again, you know, how aristocratic connections are kind of dismantled? How connections to your land, to your family, to your, you know, nation gets unravelled is, is quite evident in this particular story and people become very, very narrow-minded, you know.

So that seems to be the major message out of this particular story. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Mam, the closing line of the story actually, you can see it in the connection with basically the situation in the country or in Awadh, actually specially, around that time as well. It reads silence reigned all around. The broken arches, the ruined walls and dust laden

pillars of the mosque were watching these corpses and cursing their fate.

Yes. Exactly like what happens after a battle and people who have died, their corpses lying. Yes. It is just these 2 people here but... Absolutely. They just try to draw that analogy very, really very well. Yes, yes. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** That battlefield ambience is brought about in those lines, right and, and, and these people have failed all these mosques, these people have failed their duty, right to the battlefield, to the kings and to the, to the society at large and that becomes manifested and the broken arches very, very powerful.

**“Professor - student conversation starts”** Image. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** Image that are there at the end of the story, right. So on that note, shall we come to a closure about the conversations that we have had. So thank you for watching. I hope that you really had a good time listening to our conversation about some of the major themes that cut across all these stories. Thank you for watching.