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B.A. (HONS) ENGLISH SEMESTER - IV

PAPER I : SHORT FICTION (CODE : ENG – 401)

UNIT - IV

ANITA DESAI - 'GAMES AT TWILIGHT'

Introduction to the Author :

- Anita Desai is one of the most significant Indian women novelists and short story writers of the post independence period.
- Was born on June 24, 1937 at Mussoorie, India, to a German immigrant mother and a Bengali father.
- Was raised and educated in Delhi.
- Grew up speaking German, Hindi and Bengali -First learned to read and write in English when she went to a mission school.
- English became her 'literary language' – started writing at an early age of seven , published her first story at the age of nine , contributed short stories to the college magazines.
- Appeared on the literary horizon with the publication of her first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* in 1963.
- Anita Desai has several novels, collections of short stories, books for children and essays to her credit.
- Her major works include :
 - Novels -
 - Cry, the Peacock* (1963)
 - Voices in the City* (1965)
 - Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971)
 - Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975)
 - Fire on the Mountain* (1977)
 - Clear Light of the Day* (1980)
 - In Custody* (1984)

Baumgartner's Bombay (1988)

Journey to Ithaca (1995)

Fasting, Feasting (1999)

The Zig-Zag Way (2004)

The Artist of Disappearance (2011) – a collection of three novellas.

Collections of Short Stories -

Games at Twilight and Other Stories (1978)

Diamond Dust and Other Stories (2000)

The Complete Stories (2017)

- She has written several books for children, including *The Village by the Sea* (1982) which won the 1983 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize.
- Anita Desai has added a new dimension to Indian fiction in English with her sensitive psychological probing and sharp social criticism- she is chiefly interested in the interior landscape of the mind, her writings offer interesting studies of human psyche and character.
- Is known for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters.
- As a stylist, Anita Desai is known for her intense and suggestive use of imagery – her novels and short stories evoke characters, events and moods with recourse to a rich use of visual imagery and details inviting comparisons with the modernist sensibilities of T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf.
- Awards and Recognitions :
 - Was shortlisted three times for the Booker Prize – in 1980 for *Clear Light of the Day*, in 1984 for *In Custody* and in the year 1999 for *Fasting, Feasting*.
 - Won the 1978 Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel, *Fire on the Mountain*.
 - Received the Padma Bhushan in 2014.
- Anita Desai is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the American Academy of Arts and Letters and of Girton College, Cambridge .
- Currently lives in the United States where she is the Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Games at Twilight :

- 'Games at Twilight' is the title story in Anita Desai's first collection of short stories, *Games at Twilight and Other Stories* (1978)- (the collection has eleven short stories).
- It tells the story of Ravi, a young boy, who is part of a large family and looks up to his elder cousin, Raghu, whom he aspires to beat in a competition in order to gain attention and some sort of success.

- The story is remarkable for its insights into child psychology, powerful evocation of atmosphere, vivid imagery and symbolic use of setting.
- Anita Desai provides a psychological exploration of the protagonist's mind by delving deep into his childhood fears, emotions, perceptions, desires, and thought processes.
- The story opens on a hot summer afternoon when the children (Ravi ,Raghu, Mira , Manu and others) , who have been kept indoors all day to escape the oppressive heat of the sun, feel confined and suffocated. After much pleading, they are allowed by the mother to go out and play in the veranda and are told not to step out of the porch.
- The children are filled with thrill and excitement and decide to play a game of hide-and-seek. Raghu , the eldest, is chosen to be the "it" - the seeker. As the game begins, all the other children run and try to find a suitable place for hiding. Ravi hides behind the locked garage. A little later, he hears his little brother crying because he has been caught by Raghu. He next hears the thumping sound of Raghu's feet . Raghu appears to be somewhere near the garage. As Raghu's whistling becomes louder, Ravi panics. In an attempt to escape being 'caught' , Ravi, in a moment of fright, slips through a small gap into an abandoned shed next to the garage.
- From this point in the story, the narrative filters through Ravi's consciousness and the readers get a peep into the deepest recesses of his psyche.
- Though the shed is dark, damp and spooky, littered with junk and infested with moths and crawling insects, Ravi finds it a welcome haven. His initial fear of darkness disappears at the thought that he was perfectly 'safe' in the shed as no one could possibly find him there. When Raghu , after whistling and whacking his stick in vain around the garage, moves away in disappointment, Ravi feels exultant at the thought of not being 'caught' and the prospect of registering a great victory in the game.
- In his imagination , Ravi begins to relish the new sensation of his victory over Raghu and the thought of being recognized as a champion in a group of older children. Ravi has never been victorious in any of the games that the children have played so far and is very much excited at finally getting the opportunity to beat others . For Ravi , the game of hide-and-seek is of utmost importance as he feels that by winning this game , he can prove his worth and assert himself in front of other older children who have never taken him seriously or treated him well. He is tired of being treated as a baby ,of being kicked and shoved around, particularly by Raghu .
- Completely absorbed in his fantasy, Ravi loses track of time. At twilight , as darkness engulfs the shed, he suddenly realizes that , according to the rules of the game, he has to claim his victory by dashing to the veranda and touching the "den": *"He had only remembered the part of hiding and trying to elude the seeker"*.
- To rectify his mistake, Ravi comes out of the shed and rushes towards the veranda to proclaim his victory . However, to his great anguish, Ravi discovers that the game of

hide-and-seek has long been over, that no one has even noticed that he was missing. Completely oblivious of Ravi's existence, the children-“ chanting , singing, laughing “are busy playing another game : *“They had quite forgotten him... Having disappeared from the scene, he had disappeared from their minds”*.

- With tears in his eyes, Ravi cries out at the top of his voice to assert his existence and claim his victory but no one pays attention to him- despite winning the game it is not a victory for Ravi.
- In the last climactic scene of the story, Ravi decides to withdraw from the children's game completely. He lies silently on the ground almost lifeless. In a quick flash of intuitive understanding, Ravi accepts the reality of his situation. Hurt and humiliated, he is suddenly overcome by a feeling of alienation, powerlessness and insignificance: *“The ignominy of being forgotten – how could he face it? He felt his heart go heavy and ache inside him unbearably. He lay down full length on the damp grass , crushing his face into it, no longer crying, silenced by a terrible sense of his insignificance”*.
- *“Games at Twilight”* is about growing up and learning about one's insignificance in the grand scheme of things. It deals with the universal theme of children at play and their fantasies and disillusionments.
- The theme of fantasy versus reality is symbolically reflected in the title of the story - the word 'twilight' suggests an interplay of light and shadow, blurring the distinction between reality and fantasy.
- The story offers a Freudian exploration of a child's play and unconscious reality – Ravi is dissatisfied with the reality of his present circumstances- he feels sidelined, ignored and dominated by the other older children of the family , particularly his cousin, Raghu. He wants to assert himself and prove his worth before them by emerging victorious in the game of hide-and-seek.
- Anita Desai begins the story objectively from the third- person point of view with an omniscient narrator but, as the action progresses and the tension mounts, she skillfully shifts the narrative focus to the consciousness of the chief protagonist, Ravi, allowing the readers leisurely insights into the inner working of his mind.
- The story is remarkable for its graphic description and vivid imagery -the opening paragraph describes the oppressive and suffocating environment in the house as the children felt *“that their lungs were stuffed with cotton wool and their noses with dust”*. This is followed by a beautiful picture of listless life in the garden conveyed through a series of visual images and vivid similes: *“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. The outdoor dog lay stretched as if dead on the veranda mat , his paws and ears and tail all reaching out like dying travellers in search of water”*. The description of the dark shed is meticulous in concrete details. Also Anita

Desai's description of the twilight is quite evocative and poetic, characterized by soft and sensuous imagery: "It grew darker in the shed as the light at the door grew softer, fuzzier, turned to a kind of crumbling yellow pollen that turned to yellow fur, blue fur, grey fur. Evening Twilight ... Through the crack Ravi saw the long purple shadows of the shed and the garage lying still across the yard. Beyond that, the white walls of the house. The bougainvillea had lost its lividity, hung in dark bundles that quaked and twittered and seethed with masses of homing sparrows".

- The setting of the story not only forms an integral part of the action but is also evocative and symbolic – the atmosphere of intense and oppressive heat serves as a fitting background to the rising human conflict. The garden, the shed, the veranda and the lawn all play an important part in shaping the action of the story.

SHASHI DESHPANDE – ‘ A LIBERATED WOMAN’

Introduction to the Author:

- Shashi Deshpande is one of the leading contemporary Indian women novelists and short story writers writing in English.
- Was born on August 19, 1938 at Dharwad, Karnataka.
- Is the daughter of the renowned Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar, Shiriranga.
- Began her literary career with short stories which were first published in several well-known magazines - *Femina*, *Eve's Weekly*, *Illustrated Weekly*, *Deccan Herald* and many others.
- These short stories were later collected and published in her first volume of short stories, *The Legacy and Other Stories* (1978).
- *The Legacy* was followed by several other volumes of short stories - *It was Dark*, *The Miracle and Other Stories*, *It was the Nightingale*, *The Intrusion and Other Stories*.
- Most of her short stories are reprinted in the two volumes of her *Collected Stories*.
- Major novels – *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1992), *A Matter of Time* (1996), *Small Remedies* (2000), *Moving On* (2004), *In the Country of Deceit* (2008) and *Shadow Play* (2014).
- Has also written several books for children – *A Summer Adventure*, *The Hidden Treasure*, *The Only Witness* and *The Narayanpur Incident*.
- Is the recipient of several awards including the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *That Long Silence* (1988)
- Received the Padma Shree in 2009.

- Shashi Deshpande's fiction focuses mainly on the domestic situation and the man-woman relationship within marriage.
- Her writings show a concern for the modern educated middle-class Indian woman who finds herself suppressed in an oppressive patriarchal social set up.
- Shashi Deshpande's attempt to explore the psyche of this woman and give an honest portrayal of her hope, frustration and disappointments makes her writings susceptible to treatment from the feminist angle.
- The primary focus in her short stories is on woman in different roles – wife, mother, daughter and an individual in her own right. In Shashi Deshpande's own words : *"... my writing comes out of my own intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society, it comes out of my experience of the difficulty of playing roles enjoined on me by the society, it comes out of the knowledge that I am something more and something different from the sum total of these role .My writing comes out of a consciousness of the conflict between my idea of myself as a human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman"*.
- Commenting upon the subject matter of her short stories, G.S.Amur observes: *"Woman's struggle, in the context of the contemporary Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother and, most important of all, as human being is Shashi Deshpande's major concern as a creative writer"*.

A Liberated Woman:

- "A Liberated Woman" is a short story that first appeared in Shashi Deshpande's volume of short stories, *The Legacy and Other Stories* (1978).
- Has been termed "a thesis story" by G.S.Amur – it deals with a typical Indian situation – "an otherwise happy marriage between a talented woman-doctor – the "liberated woman" of the story – and a mediocre college lecturer that turns out to be a nightmare because of the injury to the male ego by the wife's success".
- The story unmasks the fragility of the male ego which refuses to accept a secondary position in marriage.
- The title is ironical as the protagonist, professionally qualified, successful and financially independent, is viewed by the world as "the essence of modernity" - "a liberated woman", but in reality is trapped and feels suffocated in an unhappy marriage with a husband who is a sexual sadist.
- The story is narrated in the first person by an unnamed narrator who knows the woman and her family and, twelve years ago, had helped the woman marry the man of her

choice against the wishes of her parents, especially the mother who was very much against her daughter's marrying outside the caste.

- A chance meeting with the narrator after a long gap of twelve years suddenly makes the protagonist feel wretched and she wants to speak out about her predicament revealing the 'dark side' of her apparently happy married life : *"You tell me what to say about a marriage where love-making has become an exercise in sadism"*. She confesses, *"A sadist – that's what I have for a husband"* - Her marriage is on the verge of collapse.
- The woman recalls that the initial years of her "romantic, runaway marriage" were full of bliss but her steady professional success gradually transformed the man, she desperately fell in love with and married, from a romantic hero quoting Shelley to his beloved wife into a sullen husband who was uncomfortable with his wife's superior social and economic status and ultimately turned into a sadist.
- It all began the day a girl, who had come to interview the woman for some magazine, innocently asked her husband – *"how does it feel when your wife provides not only the butter, but most of the bread as well?"* The question had obviously humiliated and insulted him. That night, he gave vent to his inferiority complex by making his wife a victim of his sadistic onslaughts.
- The husband, a loving and caring person during the day, turns into a monster in bed, abusing and bruising his wife and creating such terror in her that she finds no voice to scream or cry for help: *"But at night I become just a terrified animal. I can't scream, because the kids in the next room may hear ... I can't fight back, either, he's too strong for me ... And so I just endure"*. She feels terrified and humiliated and does not speak about it even to him during the day time when he is perfectly normal perhaps unaware of his cruelty during the night : *" But we've built a wall of silence between us"*.
- The woman now realizes that for the success of a marriage a wife must remain a step behind her husband: *"Listen, have you seen really old-fashioned couples walking together? Have you noticed that the wife always walks a few steps behind her husband? I think that's symbolic... The ideal Hindu wife always walks a few steps behind her husband. If he earns 500, she earns 400. If he earns 1000, she earns 999- or less... And it isn't only money. It's other things too. Never overtake your husband in anything"*.
- The woman blames herself for ruining her marriage by hurting her husband's ego : *"It's his way, the only way, perhaps, of taking revenge on me for what I've done to him. To his ego"*.
- She feels trapped in this marriage with no way of escape-she cannot divorce her husband as she does not want her children to know about it nor does she believe in exhibiting her *"sores in public"*. She does not want the narrator to intervene or talk to her husband because she feels that the cruelty he subjects her to at night is unconsciously done on his part.

- Towards the close of the story, the narrator is left astonished at the “*feebleness*” of “*an educated, earning competent woman*” who has plugged “*all her escape routes herself and acts like a rat in a trap*”.
- After about a month, the narrator comes across a magazine in which the protagonist has been interviewed under the title, “A Liberated Woman”
- The story is remarkable for Shashi Deshpande’s handling of the ‘new woman’ and her dilemma and the complexity of man-woman relationship within marriage in the Indian context. With rare sensitivity and depth, she portrays the dilemma of the Indian woman who finds herself trapped between her aspiration as an individual and the forces of patriarchy which confine her.
- Shashi Deshpande expanded the central theme of the short story in the form of her first published novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980).

ROHINTON MISTRY - ‘SWIMMING LESSONS’

Introduction to the Author :

- Rohinton Mistry is an Indian-born Canadian writer of Parsi origin.
- Is considered to be one of the foremost writers of the Indian Diaspora.
- Was born on July 3, 1952 at Bombay, India.
- Emigrated to Canada in 1975.
- Began his literary career with short stories.
- Major works : Novels
Such a Long Journey (1991)
A Fine Balance (1995)
Family Matters (2002)
The Screams (2006) – a novella

Collection of Short Stories:

Tales From Firozsha Baag (1987) – also published as *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories From Firozsha Baag*(1989)

- His books portray diverse facets of Indian socio-economic life as well as Parsi Zoroastrian life- customs and religion.
- Rohinton Mistry’s writings also address immigration issues, “especially immigration to Canada and the difficulty immigrants face in a society that recognizes their cultural

differences and yet cannot embrace those differences as being part of itself”(Vivian Zenari)

- Awards and Recognitions :
 - Was shortlisted for Booker Prize for Fiction for each of his three novels.
 - Was shortlisted for the prestigious Man Booker International Prize , 2011
 - Won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1991 for *Such a Long Journey* and in 1996 for *A Fine Balance*
 - Was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 2012.
 - Has won several other awards : The Giller Prize, The Los Angeles Times Book Prize, International Dublin Literary Award ,The Canadian Authors’ Association Award for Fiction .

Swimming Lessons :

- ‘Swimming Lessons’ is a short story first published in Rohinton Mistry’s volume of short stories , *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987).
- The volume was published in the United States under the title *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag* (1989).
- The volume consists of eleven connected short stories set within Firozsha Baag , an apartment complex in Bombay.
- The stories, with a heavy dose of autobiographical elements, provide insights into the lives of Parsi inhabitants of the apartment.
- ‘Swimming lessons’ is the last story in the volume.
- The narrator’s name is not mentioned in the story but it is clear that he is Kersi Boyce, who appears in several other stories of the volume, existing on the fringes and emerging as the chief protagonist here .
- The story revolves around four main characters- the protagonist narrator, an old invalid man living in Toronto in the same building and the narrator’s parents living in Bombay, India.
- By depicting the life of the narrator , an Indian immigrant living alone in Toronto, Canada, Rohinton Mistry focuses upon the issues of loneliness, racism, cultural adjustment and acceptability for migrants in an alien land.
- While trying to come to terms with a different life and culture in Canada, the narrator maintains connection with his past and his parents living in Bombay, India – he writes letters to them on a regular basis.
- The narrator is living alone in Toronto writing a book of stories about his life in India and taking swimming lessons.

- The story begins with the narrator's encounter with the old invalid man living in his building- he reminds the narrator of his own grandfather , his illness and the difficult time his mother had taking care of the ailing old man who ultimately died in a hospital in Bombay.
- There is a Portuguese woman, the narrator often comes across, who disseminates information about people living in the building.
- On the first day of his swimming lessons, the narrator finds the chlorinated water of the pool as foreign an element as the suburban life around him.
- Swimming is a metaphor for acceptability and, for the narrator, learning to swim is overcoming the problems of being an immigrant. Ignoring racial taunts, he continues going for the swimming lessons.
- His fantasies about the two bikini-clad women sunbathing in the lawn , a gorgeous woman becoming interested in his "delectable Asian brown body" and his dwelling too much on the straying pubic hair of a woman volunteer at swimming suggest that he is gifted with strong imagination and lives , to a large extent, on dreams.
- He finds swimming very difficult and, after several failed attempts at it, decides to stop going for the lessons.
- When the narrator completes writing his book of stories, he sends it home to be read by his parents.
- His parents receive the book and read the first five stories which are all about Bombay. To the narrator's mother, the stories suggest that he is unhappy and is missing home. But his father does not agree with this : *"he said it did not mean that he was unhappy, all writers worked in the same way, they used their memories and experiences and made stories out of them , changing some things, adding some, imagining some, all writers were very good at remembering details of their lives"* .
- As the narrator's letters to his parents do not reveal anything about his life in Canada -- *"Everything about his life is locked in silence and secrecy"* , his father hopes that there would be some story based on his experience in Canada which would tell them something about their son's life there but adds that *"he is probably not using his Toronto experience because it is too early "* and explains that *"it takes a writer about ten years time after an experience before he is able to use it in his writing , it takes that long to be absorbed internally and understood..."*
- The narrator's parents appreciate his stories and feel proud of their son's achievement as a writer. After reading the complete book, they feel that they have come to understand their son better now , *"yet there was much more to know, they wished there were many more stories ; and this is what they mean , said Father , when they say that the whole story can never be told, the whole truth can never be known..."*

- The narrator knows that if he wants to assimilate with the Canadians, he must learn swimming otherwise he would remain on the fringe.
- The narrator, ultimately, overcomes his fear of water. Towards the close of the story, instead of taking a shower, he steps into the bath tub filled with water, immersing himself up to the neck. He, at last, learns the way Canadians bathe: *“The bath is full...I step in and immerse myself up to the neck. It feels good. The hot water loses its opacity when the chlorine, or whatever it is, has cleared. My hair is still dry. I close my eyes, hold my breath and dunk my head. Fighting the panic, I stay under and count to thirty. I come out, clear my lungs and breathe deeply...I do it several times, over and over. The world outside the water I have seen a lot of, it is now time to see what is inside”*. This gives him a lot of confidence and he decides to re-register for the swimming lessons: *“The spring session for adult non-swimmers will begin in a few days at the high school. I must not forget the registration date”*.
- The narrative goes back and forth in time and space with frequent shifting from the present to the past – The main narrative, set in Toronto, Canada, is intersected by the reaction of the narrator’s parents (living in Bombay) to his letters – their reactions are given throughout in italics “making it a sub-text tagged along with the main narrative”.
- In “Swimming Lessons”, Rohinton Mistry gives us a portrait of not only a struggling immigrant but also a struggling writer.
- The story, to a large extent, is autobiographical.
- Rohinton Mistry deftly includes within the story a commentary on and a critique of his own writing, uniting the two traditions in the short story - the conservative semi-autobiographical mode (that projects connected stories of childhood) and the newer self-reflexive mode (wherein the function of the story is to comment on itself).