

BLOCK: II

Unit 1: Charlotte Bronte (Background)

Unit 2: Charlotte Bronte: Letters

Unit 3: Salam Pax : Background

Unit 4: Salam Pax: *The Baghdad Blog*

UNIT- 1

CHARLOTTE BRONTE: BACKGROUND

Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introducing Charlotte Bronte
- 1.3 Life Writing in Victorian England
- 1.4 Charlotte Bronte and her prose writings
- 1.5 Summing Up
- 1.6 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 Objectives:

This unit is an attempt to understand the significance of Charlotte Bronte as a writer of the Victorian Period. After reading this unit, you will be able to

- *know* about Charlotte Bronte's life and works,
- *understand* the epistolary form in Victorian England,
- *analyse* Charlotte Bronte's prose writings.

1.2 Introducing Charlotte Bronte

Charlotte Bronte was born in 1816 to an Irishman called Patrick Bronte and his wife in Yorkshire, England. Bronte had four sisters and a brother, all of who were left under the care of their aunt, Elizabeth Branwell, after the demise of their mother. The five Bronte girls were sent off to Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge following which two of her elder sisters died due to health complications during the time there. This tragic episode was a bitter experience of the surviving three sisters, and later, Charlotte Bronte represented the brutality of the stringent life and suffering in a fictionalized girls' school in her work *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte and her younger sisters, Emily and Anne, were soon brought back to be homeschooled. The education at home opened a vivid new literary experience for the trio as they read and admired the works of

Lord Byron and Walter Scott as well as fantasy tales such as *The Arabian Nights*. Charlotte and her brother Branwell soon began to create microscopic magazines, imitating the *Blackwood Magazine*. The four Bronte siblings also invented an imaginary kingdom called Angria and locations such as Gondal and Glass Town, and began writing poems and accounts of these fictional places.

Between the years 1831 to 1832, Charlotte Bronte went to Miss Wooler's School at Roehead and following the completion of her education, she became trained to be a teacher. It was during her time in Miss Wooler's School that she developed a strong friendship with Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor, and she maintained correspondence with the two through letters even after her return. During the years 1839 to 1841, Bronte worked as a governess for the families of Sidgwick and White. Later, in 1842 she went with Emily Bronte to study languages at the Pensionnat Heger in Brussels but were untimely recalled at the end of the year on account of their aunt's death. The following year, however, Charlotte Bronte returned to Brussels as she wanted to educate herself more. It was during this time that she fell deeply in love with M. Heger, who failed to respond to the letters she wrote to him after her return to Haworth. She also aspired to establish her own school, with her sisters, but unfortunately her project failed.

Charlotte Bronte sought to find and leave some relevance as a woman to the society and the times she was living in. She was a young woman who refused to be governed solely by the societal norms wherein the dreams of herself and her sisters wouldn't find fulfilment. On discovering her sister, Emily's poetic compositions, she initiated the task of publishing a collaborative work of all the siblings. She published it under the pseudonyms and named the work *Poems by Currer, Elis and Acton Bell* (1846). The work failed to garner any attention but the three sisters were determined to continue their literary venture. Each of the sisters began to work on a novel individually. Charlotte Bronte's first novel *The Professor* failed to find a publisher. However, the novels, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* by her younger siblings were accepted for publication by Thomas Newby in 1847 and published in the following year. Charlotte Bronte was unaffected by the rejection and instead

worked with determination on her second novel *Jane Eyre*. When it was published, the novel aroused speculation among the readers regarding its author. Later, both Charlotte Bronte and Anne Bronte decided to make the identities of the authors of the three novels, public through the publishers, Smith, Elder. This was initiated by the sisters in order to quell any suspicion or made-up rumour regarding the authorship of the novels.

In spite of the success that followed the publication of the novels, Charlotte's happiness did not last long. She lost all her siblings soon after. Her brother, Branwell, passed away in September, 1847, followed by Emily in the December of the same year. Anne died in the summer of the following year. Her later years were filled with loneliness and she found solace in confiding to her biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell whom she met in 1850. Charlotte Bronte refused marriage proposals, and it was only after much persistence from her father that she agreed to marry A.B.Nicholls, her father's curate. In 1854, after her marriage, Charlotte and Nicholls spend some months in Ireland. Nicholls did not share his wife's intellectual pursuits but Charlotte was happy to take up her new role as a wife. She began to work on another novel *Emma* but failed to complete it as she fell ill owing to complications caused by pregnancy and passed away in 1855. Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of the author was published two years later, in 1857.

Check Your Progress

1. What were the pseudonyms used by the Bronte sisters to publish their first collaborative work?
2. Which novel by Charlotte Bronte was published after her death?
3. Who wrote the biography of Charlotte Bronte?

1.3 Life Writings in Victorian England:

The term "Life Writing" encompasses many varieties of personal narrative such as autobiography, biography, memoir, diary, travel writing, autobiographical fiction, letters, collective biography, poetry, case history, personal testimony, illness narrative, obituary, essay, and reminiscences.

The term is a testimony to its flexible and vibrant format, with an outward-facing as well as introspective purpose. From the beginning, life writing acknowledges the possibility of a reader, while conveying a sense of intimacy through the writing. The term is applied to poetry as well as prose, with some of the greatest 19th-century examples being Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850) and Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), but it equally applies to brief autobiographical statements, such as George Eliot's "How I Came to Write Fiction" (1857) or summaries of domestic life in the Bronte sisters' letters. In the "Introduction" to *Life Writing and Victorian Culture*, David Amigoni writes that "texts such as diaries and letters explicitly articulate some of the more unsettled, displaced and repressed modes of identity that can be glimpsed in both the canonical texts of Victorian culture and its journalistic practices" (2).

The use of life writing as a form is also adopted in the fictional works of writers such as Samuel Richardson, Fanny Burney, Anne Bronte and Mary Shelley. When the epistolary novel developed as a mode of writing in seventeenth century Europe, especially in England and France, the letter form was used by the writers as a biographical or autobiographical device for the characters in the narrative to reveal the series of events. Fictional letters as a way of describing events have existed much before that. This technique of writing established itself as genre in the seventeenth and eighteenth century on account of the realistic effect it gave to the events described. Epistolary novel could be termed as a precursor to the realistic novel.

The epistolary novels of sensibility from the late eighteenth century foreground a complex interaction between thought and feeling within the divided minds of their characters, which again complicates the representation of consciousness. The key texts include Frances Sheridan's *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), Henry Mackenzie's *Julia de Roubigné* (1777), Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778), Charlotte Smith's *Desmond* (1792) and Eliza Fenwick's *Secrecy* (1795). Some of these works revealed the complex alternating perspectives of individual characters, an aspect that have become a significant area of study in the twentieth century. It is often seen as an exclusively late seventeenth and eighteenth century phenomenon

and an early, experimental form which faded away once the third-person novel attained its potential in the hands of novelists such as Jane Austen, the Brontes and George Eliot.

Self-Assessment Question

Why was the epistolary form commonly adopted by eighteenth and nineteenth century writers in England? (in 50 words)

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1.4 Charlotte Bronte’s prose writings:

Bronte’s first novel *The Professor* which was initially rejected by publishers, was published posthumously in 1857. The narrative is told in first person by an English tutor in Brussels, and is based on Bronte’s personal experiences. Her writing was modified after being reinforced by reading her sister Emily’s *Wuthering Heights* which became a classic of its time. This was reflected in *Jane Eyre*, the success of which was the strong conviction with which it represented a highly independent woman. The protagonist is a strong woman who craves for love and affection but is equally able to renounce it to maintain her self-respect and ethics. The narrator and protagonist of the novel, Jane Eyre, is an orphan and is governess to the ward of Mr. Rochester, a handsome and mysterious employer with whom she falls in love. Her love is reciprocated, but on the wedding morning it is uncovered that Rochester is already married and keeps insane wife in the attic of his mansion. Shocked by the discovery and betrayal, Jane leaves him. After suffering some hardship, Jane finds work as a village schoolmistress. However, when she learns that Mr. Rochester has been maimed and blinded while trying vainly to rescue his wife from the burning house that she herself had set afire, Jane seeks him out and marries him. The novel is infused with certain subjective experiences without being autobiographical by nature. Further it is episodic by nature and are seen to be necessary to the full expression of Jane’s character with the narrative centering around the theme of love, independence, and forgiveness.

In her next novel *Shirley*, Charlotte avoided sentimentalism and coincidences and widened her scope. *Shirley* became the first regional novel in English that incorporated local elements—Yorkshire characters, church and chapel, the cloth workers and machine breakers, primarily inspired by her father’s early life. The work had a strong sense of strong but rather embittered feminism. In *Villette* Charlotte repeated the Brussels setting and the first-person narrative which was absent in *Shirley*. It was seen that the characters and incidents are largely variants of the people she met and the life she experienced in the Pension Heger. Against that background of Brussels, she wrote about a woman deprived of her aspiration but who finds fulfilment in love.

Charlotte’s combination of romance and satiric realism had been the mode of nearly all the women novelists in the nineteenth century. Her fruitful innovations were the presentation of a tale through the sensibility of a child or young woman, her lyricism, and the picture of love from a woman’s standpoint.

Charlotte Brontë’s brief vocation as a teacher and a person with more acquaintances in comparison to her sisters, ensured that she maintained a steady correspondence with people in the form of letters. She had written considerable number of letters to her school friend, Nussey, her former headmistress, Miss Wooler and her Belgian teacher, Mr Heger. Unlike the others, Heger never replied back to her letters, and most of these correspondences were publicly released after the demise of Charlotte Brontë.

Check Your Progress

1. Write an essay about the life and works of Charlotte Brontë.
2. Write a short note on the Significance of the epistolary form in fiction.
3. Discuss the contribution of Charlotte Brontë as a writer to nineteenth century English Literature.
4. Write briefly on the relevance of *Shirley*.

1.5 Summing Up:

After reading this unit, you learnt about the nineteenth century English writer, Charlotte Bronte and her contribution to the development of English literature. You also learnt about the term life writings and its context in nineteenth century England.

1.6 References and Suggested Readings:

Albert, Edward. *History of English Literature*. Visionias, 2023.

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UNIT- 2

CHARLOTTE BRONTE: LETTERS

Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Letters in Victorian England
- 2.4 Reading the letters of Charlotte Bronte
 - 2.4.1 To Ellen Nussey, 7 August 1841
 - 2.4.2 To Constantin Heger, 8 January 1845
 - 2.4.3 To G.H. Lewes, 12 January 1848
 - 2.4.4 To W.S. Williams, 13 June 1849
- 2.5 Summing Up
- 2.6 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 Objectives:

After reading this unit, the learners shall be able to:

- *learn* about the background of letter writing in England,
- *understand* socio-cultural relevance of the letter,
- *develop* an understanding of the letters of Charlotte Bronte.

2.2 Introduction:

Letter writing is considered to be an infallible part of understanding an individual's personal history. Women letter writers throughout Europe created lengthy correspondences, where they expressed their intellect and their creativity; in the process, they also left a rich historical legacy. Over time, a large number of women's correspondences have been made the subject of publications. Some among them ignored the literary value of these missives that were sometimes circulated by their recipients.

Some correspondences were, on the other hand, strictly private and their literary value—and historic value, as well—was not revealed until the rediscovery of these letters, perhaps long after the death of their authors. The significance of the letter was such that it gave rise to the epistolary novel. In this unit, the learners shall be introduced to select letters written by Charlotte Bronte.

2.3 Letters in Victorian England

Letters were seen as the most intimate form of maintaining communication in the nineteenth century England. In medieval England, the letter was used by clergymen to maintain records of the church while for the royalty, the letter as a form was used as tool for asserting political statements. Gradually, the letter became more personal. It was not only used for clerical and mercantile purposes, but also worked as the only form of communication between people who were separated from their loved ones owing to travel, etc.

Letters played a significant role in times of conflict, chronicling tales of conquest, death and everyday mundane affairs. This tradition of personal letter writing grew stronger in the later part of the Middle Ages, contributing significantly to the development of the English language as we know it today.

During the Renaissance and the Enlightenment periods, letter writing witnessed substantial changes. Not only did it become more widespread due to increased literacy rates, but the style of letter writing also evolved. There were several famous letter writers during these periods such as the philosopher John Locke and natural philosopher, Issac Newton. Their letters offer precious insights into their thoughts and lives, becoming valuable historical documents.

The Industrial Revolution marked another significant turning point in the history of letter writing in the UK. The creation of the postal system, including the introduction of the postage stamp, made letter writing more accessible to people from all walks of life.

This period saw a surge in the volume of letters being sent and received, as the postal system made communication faster and more reliable. Letter writing became a commonplace activity, and it was during this period that the format of the letter as we know it today was generally established.

In the Victorian Era, letters played a crucial role both in society and in literature. Letters were not just a means of communication, but also a reflection of one's social status and education. This significance was often echoed in Victorian literature, where letters served as pivotal plot devices or means of character development. Before Queen Victoria's reign, posting letters was expensive. Further, the burden of the cost was on the recipient, as prepaying was seen as a social slur. Victoria wanted to reduce postal rates.

The prepaid postage stamp we see today was introduced in 1840. Further, The Penny Post - a system in which normal letters could be sent for a penny - made writing letters much more accessible. It revolutionised letter writing:

The Penny Post allowed Victorians to transcend geographical boundaries. Suddenly, it became possible to stay connected with friends and family despite relocation, emigration, and travel.

One of the first things Queen Victoria did when she came to the throne in 1837 was to appoint a Select Committee on Postage, chaired by Robert Wallace MP and charged to look into the condition of the post with a view towards postal rate reduction. Victoria, on August 17, 1839, gave royal assent to the Postage Duties Bill and, in 1840, ushered in Uniform Penny Postage and the enormously popular adhesive postage stamp, prepaid by the sender (an unpaid letter cost the recipient 2 pence to encourage prepayment). The Penny Post abolished the much-abused system of franking — postmarks granting Members of Parliament and the Queen free carriage of mail — and transformed the mail from an expensive tax for revenue to civic service affordable to all social classes.

Self-Assessment Questions

- Write a short note on the practice of letter writing during the Victorian Period. (about 50 words)

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- Write a short note on the role of letter in society and literature of this period. (about 50 words)

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2.4 Reading the Letters of Charlotte Bronte:

The majority of Charlotte's letters that still exist are those that were written to her close friend Ellen Nussey, whom she had met as a girl at Roe Head School. Up until her mid-twenties, Charlotte wrote in what may be described as a cautiously flippant manner about her possible marriage prospects. Having turned down a proposal from Ellen's brother she wrote of how after she had turned down a second proposal of marriage, she was 'doomed to be an old maid' but that she had 'made up my mind to that fate ever since I was twelve years old.'

2.4.1 To Ellen Nussey, 7 August 1841:

The letter was written by Bronte to Nussey from Upperwood-House where she was assigned as the housekeeper and governess for the children of the White family. It was written when Mr and Mrs White had gone to stay with a Mrs Duncome of Brook-Hall and Bronte confessed that she was relieved by their absence and more at ease staying in the company of the children and the servants at the house. This was largely due to Bronte's discomfort in having to maintain a pretensive nature of being constantly agreeable to her employers.

Bronte was 25 years old and it is clear that like any other young woman of her time, she too liked to share her thoughts and experiences with her closest confidante. In the letter, she also mentions two other

acquaintances, Martha Taylor and Mary who went to Brussels for a finishing school. Bronte was pleased by the gifts she received from Mary but the scenic descriptions of Brussels made her feel how much she did not know about the world and wished to explore it. She confessed to Nussey that she did feel some strong emotions and desire to acquire a pair of wings that only wealth would provide. Here, we see that Bronte was not entirely content with her situation, given the limited nature of her employment that restrained her ambitions as an imaginative individual. She reveals her fear of living as a governess. Bronte asserts that if only teaching was the requisite of her employment, she would have been entirely happy but she is dismayed by living in strangers' house and maintaining a cold, apathetic personality, something that she was not. She had hopes of establishing a school with her siblings, a project she knew had become uncertain due to lack of wealth.

In her letter, Charlotte Bronte also expresses her concern for her younger siblings, especially, Anne, who had a very docile personality in contrast to Emily and herself. She feared how would Anne deal with the wounds inflicted by an unkind society, in her absence.

2.4.2 To Constantin Heger, 8 January 1845:

Constantin Heger was a Belgian teacher, who was the founder of a school in Brussels and Charlotte Bronte's French teacher. She was the first person outside her family to have taken her seriously as an intellectual. Bronte even after returning to Haworth continued to maintain correspondence, and it seemed that she had fervently fallen in love with him although it was unrequited. Bronte's letters to Heger were written in French and were translated after they were discovered and made public, after being discovered in the Heger household. Her letters reflected her despair as he never replied back:

If my master withdraws his friendship from me entirely I shall be absolutely without hope – if he gives me a little friendship – a very little – I shall be content – happy, I would have a motive for living – for working. Monsieur, the poor do not need a great deal to

live on – they ask only the crumbs of bread which fall from the rich men’s table – but if they are refused these crumbs - they die of hunger - No more do I need a great deal of affection from those I love – I would not know what to do with a whole and complete friendship – I am not accustomed to it – but you showed a little interest in me in days gone by when I was your pupil in Brussels – and I cling to the preservation of this little interest – I cling to it as I would cling on to life. (Smith, Vol I, p 379)

This letter was written by Charlotte Bronte after Heger did not reply to the letter she had sent a letter dated October 24th, 1844 through Joe Taylor. Heger’s failure in communicating back to Bronte, left her feeling despondent as she remained unsure about the nature of their friendship for a long time. She confesses in the letter that although she would be shocked if he “candidly” asserted his disinterest in her, it would be less painful than the uncertainty about their relationship that she was then being subjected to. Bronte also asserts that she is well aware that her letter would be read by “cold and rational” people other than him, and they would make snide remarks that she is frantically in love. She hopes that such people would suffer the same torment for a single day that she had to bear for eight months. Here, we see that Bronte’s closeness with Heger during her time in Brussels left a lasting impression on her. His later indifference left her broken, and in the letter we get a glimpse of a person immensely distressed by her uncertain circumstances. The translation of this letter that was later published had many missing lines and parts, owing to the fact that Bronte’s letters to Heger, were initially discovered, either torn in parts or in unkempt manner.

2.4.3 To G. H. Lewes, 12 January 1848:

When Jane Eyre was published in 1847, a complimentary copy was sent by the publishers to a journalist named G.H. Lewes. Lewes stated that he was very much interested in writing a review of the book and had even approached the Fraser’s Magazine. In a letter to Charlotte Bronte’s biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell, Lewes wrote that the novel had filled him with delight. It is evident that Charlotte Bronte had developed

a literary friendship with G.H. Lewes who encouraged and advised her writing. In her letter to G.H. Lewes written in January 12th, 1848, Charlotte Bronte expresses gratitude to him for his generosity and leniency in reviewing the novel. As it is understood from the letter, Bronte was advised by Lewes, in careful choosing the materials for new works. She confessed that she had very limited experience and materials when it came to writing anything new. In the letter, she also writes,

I mean to observe your warning about being careful how I undertake new works; my stock of materials is not abundant, but very slender; and besides, neither my experience, my acquirements, nor my powers are sufficiently varied to justify my ever becoming a frequent writer. I tell you this because your article in Fraser left in me an uneasy impression that you were disposed to think better of the author of Jane Eyre [she is still trying to conceal that she is a woman I deserved; and I would rather you had a correct than a flattering opinion of me, even though I should never see you. (Smith, Vol II, p 9-10)

Bronte informs Lewes that if ever in the future she is ever to write a book, she would avoid any melodrama. Her opinion as a writer is extremely significant especially in a time when society had its prejudices when it came to a woman writing or giving voice to the art of writing:

when authors write best, or, at least, when they write most fluently, an influence seems to waken in them, which becomes their master-which will have its own way-putting out of view all behests but its own, dictating certain words, and insisting on their being used, whether vehement or measured in their nature; new-moulding characters, giving unthought-of turns to incidents, rejecting carefully elaborated old ideas, and suddenly creating and adopting new ones. Is it not so? And should we try to counteract this influence? Can we indeed counteract it? (Smith, Vol II, p. 10)

Charlotte Bronte's words intertwine with the Romantic idea of imagination and her clear awakening as an author. This becomes evident when she

writes to Lewes that she is curious to read his next work and wonders if he would apply his own theories and principles in the composition of that work. She defends the method of composition which she opines is an experienced reality. To her, imagination is a synthetic and magical power that is of more value than “penetrating into the inner recesses of the heart, and of showing us a character in its inner and outer workings...” Lewes demanded an objective and analytical exploration of reality which Bronte was unwilling to. She strongly questions Lewes’ undeniable admiration of Jane Austen’s works which he remarked as superior to that of William Scott’s. In contrast to the common acceptance among the British celebrating Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte showed her preference for the works of the French novelist, George Sand. She boldly asserted her preference for a life in motion.

2.4.4 To Williams S. Williams, 13 June 1849:

William S. Williams was the literary editor of the firm, Elder & Co., which had published *Jane Eyre*. She had written letters to Williams that reveal the doubt, pain, hope and confidence she felt before she went on to become one of the greatest novelists of her time. Her letters to William show that he soon became a close confidante of Bronte who was concerned about the well being of the Brontes. This letter was written shortly after the demise of her youngest sibling, Anne. She begins the letter by assuring him that her father had accepted everything quietly and was not shaken by the trauma. Charlotte confesses that she went out to comfort herself and it had been the kindness of close friends like Ellen and him that consoled her out of her deep grief.

Anne’s death was peaceful as she was remained happy in spite of the pain she was suffering from. Charlotte Bronte expresses that she did not know what was more tragic, to see Anne dying happily without any remorse at the age of twenty eight, or remembering Emily’s struggling to live as she lay on her dying bed. It was clear from the letter that Charlotte Bronte was heartbroken after witnessing the consecutive demise of the three of her siblings:

It is over. Branwell – Emily – Anne – are gone like dreams – gone as Maria and Elizabeth went twenty years ago. One by one, I have watched them fall asleep on my arm – and closed their glazed eyes – I have seen them buried, one by one – and – thus far God has upheld me. From my heart I thank Him. (Smith, Vol II, p 220)

The writer was grateful that in spite of their short lives, her sisters had a note-worthy life and an honourable career. She was grateful to the fact that she was alive so that she could at least go back home to her father and comfort him, although she dreaded the solitary existence that she will be leading with all her siblings gone. She however conveys her gratitude towards friends like Ellen who constantly maintained correspondence by letters as it was difficult for her to meet due to the distance between the their residences. She ends the letter by thanking Williams for his kindness and prays for the well-being of his ailing little daughter.

In another letter to Williams, Charlotte Bronte, wrote that she chose to keep her expectations low in spite of the success of Jane Eyre. She said, “A mere domestic novel will I fear seem trivial to men of large views and solid attachments.” It is in her letters to her friends and publisher that she revealed the things she endured during her time as a governess and her true identity as a writer. Her letters were also marked by a sense of despair and pain as she witnessed all her three adult siblings fall ill and die in quick succession.

Check Your Progress

- Write a note on the history of letter writing in England.
- Discuss the nature of the letters written by Charlotte Bronte to her acquaintances.
- Write a note on the writing style of Charlotte Bronte.

2.5 Summing Up:

After reading this unit, we have learnt about the history behind the development of letter writing and its significance in British culture. The significance of letters was such that it also gave rise to the epistolary novel. Letters written by literary figures, historians, political leaders, etc, were often preserved as the form not only gave a glimpse of the personal life of the individual but also revealed some aspect of his or her art and the contemporary society. The letters of Charlotte Bronte largely revealed the aspirations of a young woman born at a time and in a society that was yet to recognize and emancipate its women.

2.6 References and Suggested Readings:

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<https://victorianweb.org/victorian/technology/letters/intro.html> accessed on February 6th, 2024.

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UNIT- 3

SALAM PAX: BACKGROUND

Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Salam Pax: The Baghdad Blogger
 - 3.3.1 Difficulties Pax Had to Overcome as The Baghdad Blogger
 - 3.3.2 Salam Pax's Identity
- 3.4 Pax and the Politics of his Location
- 3.5 Pax's Notion of War
- 3.6 Pax's Writing Style
- 3.7 Pax's Blog as Life Writing
- 3.8 Summing Up
- 3.9 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives:

This unit is an attempt to analyse the ideas of Salam Pax as a writer. After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- *understand* how to read the politics of location of an author in regards to their texts.
- *analyse* Salam Pax's writing style and distinguish it from other modes of writing,
- *discuss* Salam Pax as a journalist of war ,
- *analyse* the notion of war put forward by Pax from a subversive position.

3.2 Introduction:

Hailing from the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, Salam Pax is the pseudonym for Salam Al-Janabi. Pax used to work at an architectural firm in

Baghdad and was an interpreter to foreign journalists before the Second Gulf war and became a contributor of *The Guardian* in June, 2003. He is an Iraqi journalist who promptly gained popularity after his blog “Where is Raed” garnered traction on the internet during the Second Persian Gulf war of 2003 where US led-military invaded Iraq for the attempted siege of alleged weapons of mass destruction housed by Saddam Hussein.

The unit will discuss Salam Pax in great detail, about his views and ideologies that inform his texts and the genre of life writing being incorporative of blogs in the modern century and its effectiveness in capturing voices independent of the mainstream media controlled by the state. Such voices against oppression are not just a creative outlet but also important in the understanding of history so that within the conflict of the larger nationalistic discourses, the voices of the real victims of war aren’t silenced.

3.3 Salam Pax: The Bagdad Blogger:

I became the profane pervert Arab Blogger (Pax, 2003)

During the 2003 Iraq War, Salam Pax enjoyed a massive popularity among media outlets and his readership who tuned in regularly to get updates of the war from an unhinged, sarcastic and ironic perspective of a journalist who was stuck in war himself while reporting around it. He chose his pseudonym very carefully while making his position clear as both the words Salam and Pax stand for peace in Arabic and Latin respectively. He underwent several risks along with threats and surveillance from the government in power and had to endure extreme difficulties during the entire process of blogging, especially once it started getting popular. It actually started as a joke with his Jordanian friend Raed, who had shifted to Amman after attending architecture school in Baghdad, until popular media houses like *The Guardian* picked it up and it became a sensational hit.

Once the internet made its entry into the households of Iraqi people, people slowly started getting interested in the web. Similarly, Pax too

got a hold of blogging and started spending most of his hours on the internet reading these blogs. It was then that he realised there are more than enough voices from the west who were speaking for the Iraqi people which gained more popularity because of English as a medium of language. He swiftly decided that it was necessary to put an Iraqi voice in the midst who could actually share the lived experience of people there instead of someone else speaking for them.

Stop to Consider

The Second Gulf War was an invasion of Iraq by a US-led coalition which happened in two phases. In the first phase, Iraq was invaded by armed troops and their military and paramilitary forces were defeated. It was followed by a longer second phase when the US occupied Iraq and was met by an insurgency. The violence began to subside only after 2007 but it wasn't until 2011 when US troops had completely withdrawn their forces from the Iraqi soil.

3.3.1 Difficulties Pax Had to Overcome as The Baghdad Blogger:

While talking about the restrictions faced by the blogger during the time, he says in an interview with *The Guardian*-

“Of course, things were not that easy, there was a firewall. A black page with big orange letters: access denied. They made you sign a paper which said you would not try to get to sites which were of an "unfriendly" nature and that you would report these sites to the administrator. They blocked certain search terms and they did actually have a bunch of people looking at URL requests going through their servers. It sounds absurd but believe me, they did that. I had a friend who worked at the ISP and he would tell me about the latest trouble in the Mukhabarat [secret police] room.”

Keeping the blog going during the war was no easy feat as the people did not have any access to satellite TV or magazines. But this was not just because of the war but the tight control Saddam Hussein exercised on the people of Iraq towards the later parts of the decade. Those had

to be smuggled inside the country through illegal means because the national narrative was that the TV and web will “corrupt one”, while a selected few could have access to it all who had good relations with the President.

Pax talks about the scepticism related to the coming of the first state-centred internet as until the 2000s, when the rest of the world was surfing high on the developments of the web, in Iraq, the government saw it as overrated. People were hesitant to look for news sites because nobody knew whether it could get them in trouble with the authorities. There was a shift a year later once people got access from home and realised that they can browse the web without any surveillance. But that didn't last because most often than not browsing platforms like Google would be blocked anytime someone wanted to search about Saddam Hussein or his sons.

Pax speaks for all the citizens of Iraq when he recalls the troubles they had to face with accessing websites because the free websites weren't made available to them. It was only through the maid IDs given by the state's Internet Service Provider that they could access these websites and it was monitored. But due to the versatile nature of the internet, there were new websites all the time who offered services to breach the firewalls and it was hard for them to keep track of everything all at once.

Even after several media censorship and threats from people online who saw it as an attack, Pax kept going with his blog. There were times when he would disappear for hours, days or months but would come back and update on his blog to inform his readers about his whereabouts and that he was safe and sound, despite the difficult circumstances of war.

It was not just the government that Pax had to worry about while writing his brutally honest blog but also the online death threats which he was receiving on his email and comment section. Things were starting to take a scary turn, as he informs on the blog yet that didn't seem to deter him.

The lack of availability of the internet was a hindrance to post his blog regularly because of the war and he was missing for several days but then with the help of his friend, Diana, with whom he frequently corresponded despite having different opinions, he managed to keep his readers updated about the circumstances.

Check Your Progress

1. How has the Gulf war influenced Salam Pax to write a blog about it?
2. What hindrances did Pax have to overcome to publish his blog regularly?
3. What was Pax's job before he became a war blogger?

3.3.2 Salam Pax's Identity:

I laughed out loud... I howled. Salam Pax, the most famous and most mysterious blogger in the world, was my interpreter.

(Peter Maass)

There had been a lot of speculation about Salam Pax's identity once his weblog started gaining traction and became the most famous blog in the world during the Iraq war. He had an "appetite for verbal tricksiness" as Ian Katz says. The mysterious nature of this blogger sparked more interest in the blog if it wasn't only for his mastery of witty and cynical observations about the hypocrisy of the war. People searched and investigated about him from any crumbs that they could find like the address of his site. Due to his very clever play on words, it read "dearraed", which is a palindrome and it sparked even more curiosity in the minds of the people.

Some thought he was an agent of the Ba'ath party due to his opposition to the US-led military, while others were convinced, he was either a Mossad or a CIA operative, depending on where their loyalties lay. But what often got lost in this whirlwind of speculation was the fact that Pax's motives and actions didn't neatly fit into any one box.

Stop to Consider

Saddam Hussein was a member of the Ba'ath Party and was caught in an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the President, after which he had to flee the country in 1959. He continued his studies after 1963 once the Ba'ath party assumed power but was then jailed after the party was overthrown the same year.

He then swiftly took over the party and became its leader and was successful in staging a coup in 1968 which brought the party back in power. In 1972, Saddam played a significant role in a pivotal moment for Iraq by directing the nationalisation of the country's oil industry. This move had far-reaching implications, not just for Iraq but for the global energy landscape as well. It marked a turning point in the country's economic and political landscape.

Saddam's role in this decision was a testament to his growing influence within the Iraqi government. It's worth noting that this nationalisation was part of a broader trend in the Middle East during that era, where many countries were taking control of their oil resources, often driven by a desire to exert more sovereignty over their economic future.

Saddam Hussein's actions and rise to power were a complex and critical chapter in Iraq's history. His legacy is one filled with both political manoeuvring and, later on, international conflicts, such as the Gulf War and the Iraq War. These events, in many ways, trace their roots back to the decisions made during that period in the early 1970s.

What people failed to recognise was that he didn't limit his fierce criticism to just one direction or one nation. Instead, he had a broader perspective that many failed to recognize. In a world where geopolitics often dominate the headlines, it's not always easy to spot those who look beyond borders and ideologies to advocate for a more compassionate and humane approach. Pax, it seems, was one of those individuals who dared to challenge the status quo and question the actions of powerful entities for his people. His complex, multifaceted perspective is a reminder that in the midst of political polarisation, there are actual people who are

suffering the brunt of it all in the street, people who have nothing to do with the power battles planned inside closed doors.

The ones who were incessantly following his blog and the regular commentators went deep into the nooks trying to find out his identity by conducting technical checks elaborately by using his email information to track the location of where he is posting from because people also thought that he might be just another liar on the internet who's pretending to be someone he is not. But many came forward and established their personal associations with him as evidence of his authenticity.

The key moment came when he casually mentioned that one of his friends had been involved in translation work for The Guardian in Baghdad. This seemingly innocuous reference set off a chain of events. The Guardian's correspondents, eager to uncover more about this enigmatic figure, began to dig into who this friend might be. After the little puzzle solving that they did of identifying the person, they were able to secure an interview that filled in some major gaps in the narrative.

Self- Assessment Questions

Do you think the real identity of Salam Pax had anything to add to what he was speaking about? Discuss. (100-200 words)

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During the interview, this elusive character only had one request: not to reveal their last name to the public (He used his real first name for his pseudonym). However, by that point, the wheels of deduction were already turning and people had started to piece together the available information and make educated guesses about their true identity.

3.4 Pax and The Politics of his Location:

The location of a writer is a very important factor that helps to determine and understand their perspectives and the importance of what ideologies they subscribe to, that have informed and influenced their writing. What

makes Salam Pax's location extremely central to the essence of the book is that it is an isolated writing of a person stuck in war. The dominant way of reading about a war is usually statistics, about how many people were killed, how many bombs were dropped. This has a desensitising effect as the trauma of war then gets contained within the scope of numbers only instead of understanding the agony of singular stories and people.

The widespread and dominant narrative of war is that it is pleasant and proper to die for one's country. The heroic accolades conferred upon those who lost their lives by the people in power doesn't really do anything for the families and the survivors. It is just a narrative that is circulated viciously to enact the plans of people far away from the trenches.

The coverage of the war online was mostly taken over by the English-speaking voices which reached a larger audience. So, it was easier for them to make up stories and assumptions about how the Iraqi citizens are reacting to the US armed forces. There was no one who could speak for them, about their actual lived experience right from the middle of what was happening. So Pax decided to take matters into his own hands. But that doesn't mean he was anticipating or hoping for this much coverage on his blogs. The very few blogs that actually existed in English from people in Iraq were full of religious undertones. That was enough to provoke Pax into writing, "I was saying, 'Come on, look, the Arabs here: sex, alcohol, belly dancers, TV shows, where are they?' All you saw was people talking about God and Allah. There was nothing about what was happening here."

He swiftly became the "spokesperson" of every Iraqi online and that was a huge responsibility that was conferred upon him because now he was not just responsible for speaking his own truth but also the truth of his people. He now had the eyes of the whole world on him and everyone was glued to their screens to watch his every move by reading what he has to say. This gave him the immense opportunity to shed light into the sufferings and violent turmoil that had been slowly wrecking his beloved city into shreds. He was given a platform with this to speak for his people, and he took it very seriously.

People (and I bet “allied forces”) were expecting things to be much easier. There are no waving masses of people welcoming the Americans, nor are they surrendering by the thousands. People are doing what all of us are: sitting in their homes hoping that a bomb doesn’t fall on them and keeping their doors shut. (Pax)

The western saviour complex held an idealistic belief that their intervention in a conflict would be met with open arms, as they expected the local population to embrace them as liberators from their perceived “oppressive and barbaric” leaders. This notion, however, often proved to be far from reality. In times of war and upheaval, people’s reactions are shaped by complex factors that go beyond a simple dichotomy of welcoming or opposing foreign intervention. There are no mass surrenders or welcomes. But they retained their narrative even after the war ended as Bush said in his speech, “We have difficult work to do in Iraq. We’re bringing order to parts of that country that remain dangerous”.

Stop to Consider

Colonialism might have ended on the physical level but it had found new ways to colonise the world through the economies. This is called neo-colonialism, where economic, cultural, political or any other ways are used to dominate other countries, especially the ones which are former dependencies.

During the era of the cold war, there was an emerging arms race and space race which continued even after it ended. There was a race to increase the influence of one’s ideology when the world was divided into capitalism, communism and those who abstained from taking any sides. When the countries in the Middle east started taking control of their oil resources, it threatened the control of power that the west retained all this time. So, the western propaganda spread through state-sponsored media that demonised Saddam Hussein to justify their intrusion into Iraqi soil to “save them”.

Edward Said in his book Orientalism looks at the western representation of the Orient and talks about how it is a category created by the West to establish a discourse about the East.

Orientalism is a powerful colonisation tool that was used to construct the Orient and justify colonisation. In a similar sense, using the same threads of construction, the West tried to justify their numerous invasions and proxy wars, meddling into conflicts in the guise of bringing order in a “disorganised” and “chaotically wild” East.

Bush called the Middle East "an axis of evil" that needs to be liberated by them. They attacked Iraq under the alleged possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) by Saddam Hussein, to search for which they sent their top scientists but couldn't prove anything. The war happened all under the pretence of a supposed possibility.

This statement offers a thought-provoking perspective on the gaps between expectations and reality in military interventions, emphasising the importance of recognizing the humanity and vulnerability of those caught in the midst of the conflict. The people caught in a conflict zone are more concerned about their survival and safety issues instead of their responses being guided by other political considerations. In such times, people will always look at outside forces with suspicion rather than seeing them as a messiah.

The projection of the Middle East as the barbaric “Other” is a western propaganda to ensure more economic and ideological control over a land rich with oil resources. It is a narrative that justifies their intrusion into their lands and projects them as the saviours for the people in “dark” under oppressive forces. But that is not how the people there view themselves and they would not support a foreign occupation on their lands, especially one who does not follow the same religious ideologies and does not adhere to the codes of conduct of an Islamic life.

The perspective of a writer is undeniably shaped by their location and the ideologies that influence their worldview. Salam Pax’s unique position as an isolated observer in the midst of war adds a profound layer of authenticity to his writing. While mainstream narratives of war often reduce the suffering and trauma to mere statistics, Pax’s blog offered a counterpoint by illuminating the personal stories and struggles of Iraqi

citizens. It underscores the importance of understanding the complexities of war, dispelling preconceived notions, and recognizing the unique stories and experiences of those living through it. Ultimately, Pax's work stands as a testament to the power of personal narratives in revealing the true nature of war and its impact on individuals and communities.

3.5 Pax's Notion of War:

Wednesday, 7 May 2003

War sucks big time. Don't let yourself ever be talked into having one waged in the name of your freedom. Somehow, when the bombs start dropping or you hear the sound of machine-guns at the end of your street, you don't think about your "imminent liberation " any more. (Pax)

Here is a person reacting to something beyond his control, but Pax had been quite vocal about his opinions on the war in his blog. No matter how oppressive a regime is, war in the name of saving people from the violence of their country only perpetuates more violence. The justification that is given in the name of protecting the citizens of a country is a hoax and it's those same people that the war is hurting. What his statement offers is the cold hard truth that when the war starts and bombs start dropping on your head, you are scared for your life and your safety. You are not chanting for one team to win over the other, no matter what one's ideology is. In times of war, there are no winners, but only sufferers on both sides.

In his blog from 15 November, 2002, he gives the perspective of a person opposed to the war. He talks about how neo-colonialism is working its way through the ongoing processes initiated by the US as he says, "Colonialism isn't the word, but it has the same colour scheme". It is easy for Americans to justify the war but it is essentially all about the control of oil resources. His blog is about the Iraqi people and looks at the violence Iraq has faced as a country for decades which also led to the rise of ISIS. There are divisions among the Arabic world as people turn to religious leaders when the state rulers become oppressive, and these divisions are being exploited. He talks about how you cannot love your country if you support war.

Pax made it clear again and again that speaking against American foreign policies does not mean he's not anti-American as many of the US supporters believed him to be. He isn't taking sides in the war but looking at it from a humanitarian perspective and talking about what evil war brings upon the helpless people of a country. His position in the war has been made clear since the beginning, with his pseudonym which stands for peace in two languages.

3.6 Pax's Writing Style:

It is from Pax's writing style itself that one can identify that it is not a usual war narrative. Even though the first chapter starts a few days before the war, there is no sense of urgency in the tone of the writer. It is witty and funny which sets it apart and makes the readers question whether it is a farce or why it is not following the usual tone one is used to in war narratives. It portrays the sad reality of how used to bombing, people in Iraq have been.

Readers can readily discern a noticeable shift in the tone of the blogs at various points during the war. The writer's customary wit and humour gradually give way to a sombre and more serious demeanour as the true gravity of the conflict becomes apparent. With the escalation of personal threats and an increase in the suffering of those around them, the transformation in tone becomes increasingly evident.

Nick Denton rightly calls him the "Anne Frank of the war" because the process of his writing can be compared to that of Anne Frank's "Diary of a Young Girl". There are two kinds of war writing - introspective and live. They were both documenting things that were happening live instead of relying on their memory. Only that Pax's blog posts could be published instantaneously and read by millions while Frank's was published posthumously. The idea behind Frank's diary was not to get published, it was a one-sided story. But with new age technology, Pax's blog could be an interactive one with a feedback link attached to it for comments. Both are narratives that emerged out of violence, situated right at war.

Things get deeper and deeper as one continues reading along the book as Pax starts to dig into parts of what it was like being an Iraqi citizen

under the paranoid regime of Saddam Hussein. It was reported that more than 200,000 people were “taken care of” for far lesser offences than speaking against Saddam’s regime so Pax was really treading on a very dangerous rope by speaking out about the kind of things that he was. It was not that he was unfamiliar with what he was dealing with; he had seen people around him get abducted and face torture without any reason.

In the span of just one year, as Salam Pax attests, four members of his family disappeared without any valid reasons. In this same year, one of his close friends faced a brutal execution, while another friend was grievously shot in the head. Furthermore, two other friends were unjustly imprisoned, and one of them never returned.

The writer revealed some of his deeply personal details with people when he acknowledged his homosexuality. Such a revelation is undeniably significant, especially when it originates from a region not typically recognized for its acceptance of non-heteronormative sexual orientations. Salam Pax's decision to disclose his sexual orientation is an act of great significance not only because it represents a personal assertion of self-identity but it also challenges societal conventions and stereotypes while putting himself in danger by doing so.

Despite all of this, Pax remained committed to the cause and stayed true to his journalistic integrity. He provided simplistic and direct descriptions of “Hotel Pax”, as he called his abode in which he was stuck in during the harrowing days of the war and revealed on his blog about his daily lifestyle and how he had to get supplies to survive in a war-torn country. His family home was getting filled up more and more each passing day with relatives who came to seek refuge with them and it is the honest description of the anxieties of the people that keeps the reader hooked to the pages of the book.

He talked about how people had to live in fear of the Ba’ath party militia arriving unannounced and how horrified his neighbours were because they take up positions and install and set guns in empty houses near the street, he lived in. He also documented about the soaring high price of tomatoes because of the war and how difficult it was for people to get their rations in order.

Self-Assessment Questions

How is Pax’s narrative style different from any other war narratives that are conventionally written? (100 words)

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3.7 Pax’s Blog as Life Writing:

In the 1980s, Stephen Greenblatt demonstrated the concept of cultural materialism by taking account of Renaissance texts and other cultural background materials which consisted of non-literary forms like letters, slangs and paintings to show that these add to the existing knowledge that literary texts provide. This kind of interdisciplinarity is required to understand a literary text in a much more nuanced way and understand the socio-historical milieu of a certain age better. He also found that we can trace the development of the vocabulary of each period that influences the language of the literary texts via these background texts.

This is why it is so important to look at blog entries as part of the life writing genre even though it might not be considered as a literary text. That is what is flexible about the genre of life writing that it does not only include literary texts like autobiographies, memoirs, and biographies but also considers under its purview other mediums like letters, eye-witness, anthropological data, oral accounts, blogs, gossip columns, posts on social media outlets. It goes beyond just the written word as it looks at the testimonies of personal experiences without any limitations on the medium.

Life writing is an essential medium through which one can look at the historical phenomena through the personal narratives of people that stand against the larger nationalistic discourse. Hayden White in his essay “History as a Literary Artefact” goes into detail how history doesn’t provide an objective perspective because it is full of biases. History is not a stable structure because as soon as one begins to write a historical narrative, one enters the realm of language and literature where there is an instability between the signifier and signified. But that does not mean

one history is false while the other is correct; every historical narrative has some truth to it. The problem with nationalistic histories is that it tends to talk in a broader sense which in turn erases the little histories of the individuals. It speaks over them and it speaks for them while the reality of these people might be completely different.

Stop to Consider

Ferdinand de Saussure in his seminal essay “Course in General Linguistics” talks about the nature of the sign, one of which is the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. The linguistic sign unites a concept and a sound image not a name and a thing. The sound image is not a tangible thing but the psychological imprint that a sound makes in our brain. The sign is made up of the signifier (sound image) and the signified (the concept) which has to inner relationship that links it to each other.

History has always been presented as the absolute truth and fact that one speaks about the past but theorists have questioned this grand narrative of history during the era of poststructuralism. Due to this questioning, little stories were given more primacy in the late half of the 20th Century as the nature of truth dwindled. With Derrida’s deconstruction of the stability of western metaphysics, these systems of knowledge started being questioned instead of accepting cultural practices and traditions as naturalised truths.

With the paradigm shift that happened during this time and the early modern technology pacing at a significant speed, blogs and other forms of digital narratives started gaining prominence with its ease of access and the opportunity that it provides for different people to share their realities, which wouldn’t be accessible to us otherwise.

Reading Salam Pax in Life Writing allows us a deeper understanding of the private lives of people stuck in the Iraq War and helps us draw parallels with the false narratives that had been circulated. It is an alternative history that gives us a peek into the early 2000s and provides insight into the raging war that had been going on between the global

east and the global west since after the Second World War. Amidst the larger war for economic and ideological dominance are the sufferings of real people who are caught in the war.

Check Your Progress

1. How is Pax's writing a subversive narrative in the face of the larger nationalistic discourses?
2. Discuss Pax's blog in the context of life writing.
3. Trace the transition of the narrative voice according to the tone and context of its space and time throughout the text.
4. What difficulties did Pax have to undergo to keep himself safe during the war?
5. Discuss the significance of Pax's use of a pseudonym to write his blog and how it impacted the authenticity and impact of his blog.

3.8 Summing Up:

Salam Pax's blog became a sensation as he shared his experiences and thoughts as an Iraqi citizen during the war, offering a different view from the mainstream media. His choice of pseudonym, combining "Salam" (peace in Arabic) and "Pax" (peace in Latin), emphasised his desire for peace in a war-torn region. He faced internet censorship and threats from the government but continued blogging.

Salam Pax's writing style was distinct, blending humour and wit with deeper insights into life during the war. His tone evolved as the conflict's gravity became apparent, shifting from humour to a more sombre and serious demeanour.

He not only provides a scathing criticism of western media reports but also shares the despicable circumstances under which the Iraqi people were being terrorised by their own government. He had put his life in danger several times by speaking up about the things which were blasphemous to the government showing his journalistic integrity to report the truth of things.

His blog exemplifies life writing, a genre that encompasses various forms of personal narratives, providing essential perspectives on historical events and countering nationalistic narratives. It offers an alternative history, shedding light on the personal experiences of those caught in the midst of war, beyond the statistics and mainstream narratives.

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UNIT- 4

SALAM PAX : THE BAGHDAD BLOG

Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 A Brief Context
- 4.4 Analysing the Content of the Text
 - 3.4.1 Effects of War on Mental Health
 - 3.4.2 Profits of War
 - 3.4.3 Constituting the East- A Discursive Formation
 - 3.4.4 Iraq under Saddam Hussein's Regime
- 4.5 Form and Narrative Structure of the Text
- 4.6 Reception of the text
- 4.7 Summing Up
- 4.8 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives:

This unit will look at the Salam Pax's notable work, *The Baghdad Blog* and attempt to analyse various components of the book. After going through this unit, you will be able to —

- *understand* the socio-historical context of the novel,
- *discuss* The Baghdad Blog as a literary text,
- *analyse* the content of the text and understand its references,
- *connect* it with the larger political circumstances of war during the early 2000s.

4.2 Introduction:

I thought the Arab world deserved a fair representation in the blogosphere, and decided that I would be the profane pervert Arab blogger just in case someone was looking.

- Salam Pax

The Baghdad Blog by Salam Pax is a book that started as a weblog. It's about the 2003 Gulf War, also called the Iraq War during which, a coalition led by the United States invaded Iraq. The reason for this invasion was their belief that Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi leader, had dangerous weapons like Weapons of Mass Destruction, which they thought he might use against them. Originally a part of the blog "Where is Raed", it soon gained popularity as media houses picked it up because of the relentlessly "quirky" outlook of the author on the ongoing war where he was stuck at and blogging about it.

The diary provides a very fresh perspective coming out of Iraq because the dominant narratives in English that had been circulating online from Iraq had mostly been about religious phenomena or aspects of spirituality. Pax's blog stands out against these as he calls out the hypocrisy of such posts. He calls them out for not showing the reality of Baghdad which is burning. He quickly became the spokesperson of the Iraqi people with his quick wit and journalistic passion to speak of the truth.

This unit will attempt at analysing the content of the book, *The Baghdad Blog*, while also learning about the socio-political context that it was written in. It will look closely at the mood and tone of narration of the author and try to figure out the effects of war on people while looking at the broader picture.

4.3 A Brief Context:

The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion but rather by its superiority in applying organised violence. Westerners often forget this fact, non-Westerners never do.

- Samuel P. Huntington

In 1945, towards the end of the Second World War, Berlin became a point of division between the superpowers and they formed an uneasy alliance that led to the formation of the Berlin wall and the start of a cold war that would last for decades. This conflicting situation further led to several proxy wars for dominance from each side. There was a war between the western capitalist ideology and the eastern communist

ideology, both of which wanted to spread their ideologies for more economic control and were severely paranoid of each other's intentions which further ignited the tensions.

With the formation of NATO in 1948, other countries started getting access to nuclear weapons which was starting to threaten the very fabric of a peaceful society. Swiftly after that, in 1955 the WARSAW pact was formed between the eastern countries to share their military power during crises and against the alliance of NATO.

In Iraq, Saddam Hussein came to power as the President of Iraq after Al-Bakr's resignation. He was the leader of the Ba'athist party military coup which pressured the former President al-Sadi to resign. During the same time, Iran saw the uprising of Islamic fundamentalists, being a pro-western country before and that threatened the stability of Hussein in the neighbouring Iraq because he doesn't associate with the Shiite majority in the country. A government which is in control of the oil resources in oil producing countries, controls the economy of the west. This is why the west wanted to put people in charge with whom they have connections with which led to a tension between the West and the reign of Saddam Hussein.

Saddam Hussein invaded Iran's oil fields in the year 1980 which led to the long, dragged-out war between Iran and Iraq forces for almost a decade until 1988, when both the countries decided to call a ceasefire. The war didn't lead to any significant political changes but caused severe devastations to both countries. During this time, the Soviet Union also started disintegrating which meant the end of the cold war and the hegemonic rise of the United States as a superpower. The war meant that both the countries had to get arms from other sources and they acquired a significant amount of debt in the process. Iraq got financial assistance from Kuwait during this time but a new conflict threatened to break out when Hussein refused to comply with returning the money to them.

In 1991, the first Gulf war started when Saddam tried to take over Kuwait, stating that it is actually the 19th province of Iraq and not an independent state. He strategically placed his army at the border of

Saudi Arabia for three months to show that if he takes over the country, he will control 50 percent of the oil fields in the Middle East giving him a significant advantage above all other countries economically. This war also guaranteed the rise in the prices of oil all over, which is why the United States decided to intervene and started bombing Iraq. Saudi Arabia then became the only Arab country to have a US military base. This leads to a swift de-escalation of the war once the Iraqi forces withdraw and Kuwait starts its supply of oil to the United States.

After the unfortunate terrorist attack on 9/11, the US-coalition started bombing Afghanistan and accused Saddam Hussein of having nuclear weapons. In 2002, the US decided to send a team from the International Atomic Energy Agency to Iraq to investigate whether Saddam Hussein was building chemical weapons or Weapons of Mass Destruction there without having the legal authority to do so. The Gulf war that followed after that was a subsidiary of the Afghanistan bombing. But these gaps in time didn't mean that Iraq enjoyed a harmonious existence in between. There had been constant friction in the country and even when they weren't officially engaged in war, it didn't stop the US from constantly bombing them. Violence is all that they have known for decades so it doesn't quite come as a surprise to them when the Iraq war was starting officially.

Stop to Consider

Proxy wars are the kinds of wars where the major powers do not directly take part in it but instigate and influence it through their economic and military support. After the second world war, when the cold war started, there were several proxy wars one after the other for economic and ideological control and influence.

4.4 Analysing the Content of the Text:

Saturday, 7 September 2002

I'm preparing my emergency lists these days- any suggestions are welcome. At the moment I have:

Candles

Alcohol (maybe red wine?)

Good books

Crunchy munchies

I think that will get me thru the bombing quite nicely.

** Salam pax 12:52 PM [+] **

The first chapter of the books sets the tone for what is unravelling in Baghdad at that point of time. The diary starts prior to the war when everyone in the state had started storing the supplies that they will require for the upcoming war to survive and generally preparing for the upcoming war. Pax’s nonchalant way of describing the preparation goes to show how normal it has been for people in Iraq to be in a state of war. Ever since the late 1970s, Iraq has been a witness to many proxy wars under Saddam’s regime and it has been a place of turmoil ever since they can remember. Even the previous decade before that saw a turbulent government in Iraq. After the initial horrors calm down, all there’s left is to prepare for yet another war and confine oneself to any safe place of hiding they can find. He talks about how his relatives had been flooding his gates to crash at his place during the war which really captures the anxieties of people during these times as they want to spend their time with their loved ones. (1)

Self-Assessment Question

Discuss how the first chapter of Salam Pax’s *The Baghdad Blog* set the tone for the rest of the book. (100 words)

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One can understand the economic hardships the country was facing during the war when Pax casually says that he won’t be getting paid that month due to “cashflow trouble”. As soon as he started talking about the war, his blog got linked by Pandavox and was being circulated

at a faster pace than he could imagine. He goes on to talk about the post in other blogs and criticise the propagandist US media that seemed to be demonising Saddam to justify the US invasion in their lands. The use of graphic data was a conscious attempt on their part, it was like laying a foundation of ideology to make it easier for later attacks that they are going to carry out.

The Iraqi people will experience a prosperity unknown to them. The Iraqi people will see they have a friend with the American people. Most importantly, Iraq will no longer contribute money to terrorist groups (2).

Pax shed light on the western media's tactics of actively working towards using Israeli and Iranian bloggers to spread fake news about the Iraqis. The above-mentioned excerpt is a blogpost that he found of Pandavox where these bloggers were working actively towards furthering the western narrative of bringing peace to a land of oppressed people to justify their war violence. They are referring to Al Qaeda's connections with Saddam and spun the narrative around to say that it is the state which was financing Al Qaeda instead of the financial assistance that they got, to irk the people who would obviously support the American mission then. This was in 2002, just one year after the 9/11 attacks which meant that people were already paranoid of terrorist groups, so to include that information in their narrative was a highly tactical move to garner support from people. These are very colonial remarks which is racist because it assumes that without the help of the West, the Iraqi people wouldn't have known any prosperity (3).

Self-Assessment Questions

2. How can Pax's narrative be read as taking a subversive stand against the dominant hegemonic narratives of the East and the West? (in 80 words)

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He regularly takes excerpts from other blogs and posts from western media outlets to dissect and criticise. On a post from 22nd September 2002, he took an article from The New York Times which provided details about the American war preparations with destructive weapons like B-2 bombers with 2000-pound satelliters and air defences. The main objective of the preparation was to sever the communication lines from Baghdad and isolate it in the process. And this is exactly what they did 5 months after that. All these waiting had been a test of patience for the people who are expecting to be bombarded any moment now and they just want this imminent danger to be over as soon as possible.

Salam Pax breaks down the obsession of Hollywood in misrepresenting other countries just like Pandavox combined Taliban with Saddam without any proper information on it. The news was scripted and lacked any facticity. But at the same time in another blog, he also comments on the news that they will be having presidential elections soon, which is ironic because Iraq was a democracy only on paper. There was no opposition party which dared to compete against Saddam and the writer sarcastically comments on the last 40 years of history by showing the declining state of democracy in the country. He remarks on an article from *The Guardian* which goes as far as to list the unhealthy things that Saddam does for example, eating high cholesterol food and smoking heavily to paint a negative image of him in front of the world (5).

The Economist, despite being pro-capitalist and pro-American, tried to hide its bias by reporting objectively on what people were doing in Iraq at the time. They reported how the general population has been getting ready for the war with extra supplies and bicycles. During times of war, the main areas to be affected or bombed are the airports and petrol pumps to control the mobility and communication networks in the country so there is no easy way out. As such, people were getting bicycles because there won't be any oil to run their vehicles once it is bombed. With years of war, they have begun to understand the pattern and keep themselves better prepared (6).

Pax refers passingly about the clear skies in Baghdad, for a while, which is a foreboding of what is to come when the skies will be covered in smokes and fighter jets as the war starts in Baghdad (7).

The crisis of war needs justification from its perpetrators to further their agenda which Pax exposes critically. He shows how the Bush administration uses the same narrative and same arguments for their invasion of Iraq that Saddam Hussein used while invading Kuwait which is “National security concerns” and “helping the poor bastards over there to get rid of their evil government”. The fact that it is always the aggressor who uses such narratives, Pax is questioning the authenticity of such arguments.

4.4.1 Effects of War on Mental Health:

Thursday, 3 October 2002

Spiralling down fast . I have been listening to Coldplay’s “Politik” non-stop since 9 a.m. Either the world is not worth commenting on or I am just plain lazy.

salam pax 11:39 AM [+]

From this time onwards, one can track the plummeting mental health crisis that Pax will go through in his journey. It is not just an individual experience but also speaks for all those people who are stuck in war, even when they are physically unharmed, mentally they would be spiralling. Following the World Wars and the Vietnam War, there has been a heightened awareness of the condition known as PTSD, which has evolved into a diagnosable disorder affecting soldiers returning from combat.

Check Your Progress

1. What are the political conflicts that led to its sudden escalation in the form of the Iraq war?
2. How significantly can war affect one's mental health? Discuss in reference to Salam Pax’s narrative.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has reported that in the context of armed conflict, a significant proportion of individuals exposed to traumatic events, approximately 10 percent, may experience severe

mental health issues, while another 10 percent might develop behaviour patterns that impede their ability to function effectively. The repercussions often manifest as conditions like depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic problems such as insomnia.

Sugden's research delves into the mental health vulnerabilities of three distinct groups:

1. **Civilians in the Conflict Zone:** This group consists of individuals residing in the targeted homeland, who not only bear the physical brunt of the conflict but are also at risk of enduring substantial mental health challenges due to the ongoing violence and instability.
2. **Soldiers on Both Sides:** Those directly engaged in the conflict, including combatants from opposing sides, are susceptible to a range of mental health issues. The stress, trauma, and moral dilemmas encountered in combat zones can have lasting psychological effects on these individuals.
3. **Media Consumers:** The modern era's rapid dissemination of war-related content through various media platforms, including social media apps, television, radio, and the internet, exposes a broader audience to the traumatic events of war. These consumers may experience indirect but still impactful mental health consequences as they bear witness to the horrors of conflict from a distance.

Pax casually makes passing comments like “what the hell, it’ll either make me feel worse or it’ll make me want to kill myself. Having prepared razor blades for my wrist-slashing activities at three in the morning...” that indicate his mental struggle in the time of turmoil.

Stop to Consider

The term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder first appeared in 1980 in Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) published by the American Psychiatric Association which characterised it as the psychological trauma inflicted on the survivors of armed conflicts like wars. Previously known as “shell shock”, “war neurosis” or “soldier’s heart”, PTSD occurs when a traumatic

incident (such as war, rape, torture, natural disasters, abuse) that is far beyond the range of human emotions to comprehend occurs and leaves the person overwhelmed and unable to function in a normative way anytime they are confronted with the stressor that triggers it.

4.4.2 Profits of War:

G. knows a guy who is selling these Sumerian cylindrical clay objects (they're tiny- 5cm max- but they look like the real thing) and coins from the Abbasid era (various caliphs). Nothing costs more than 20 bucks and he has jars full of these things. He says it is from a place near his village. (Pax, 10)

Pax provides us with vivid, real-life accounts of the myriad activities and challenges that characterised life during wartime. For example, he sheds light on the illicit trade in historical artefacts, including replicas of relics from the Sumerian civilization predating the formation of nation-states, as well as items from the era of the Abbasid dynasty.

During wartime, many individuals may be compelled to part with their valuable possessions, including historically significant artefacts, often at significantly reduced prices, as a means of securing immediate funds. In a war-torn environment, the stability of traditional financial institutions, such as banks, can be uncertain or compromised. As a result, people resort to liquidating their assets in exchange for cash, as it becomes a practical and sometimes necessary way to navigate the challenges of the conflict.

The acquisition of these historical items during a conflict is often seen as an investment, driven by the anticipation that their value will appreciate significantly in the post-war period. This phenomenon underscores the complexities of wartime economies.

War brings upon many devastations on nations and the people. It engages in the biggest erasure of history- material history to be precise, as monuments are bombarded and ancient artefacts are looted during such violent times of chaos. People start hiding their most prized possessions so that, if they or their close relatives survive, their legacies can live on.

There had been several war crimes committed during the Iraq war and US soldiers had been accused of stealing Iraqi history. The war between the two nations can also be looked at from a theological perspective- a fight between Christianity and Islam which further fuelled the war mongering among people.

Stop to Consider

War crimes are the breach of humanitarian rules and regulations set up by the UN that govern armed conflicts. These rules are established to protect the people who are not directly engaged in the war like civilians, medics and prisoners. The international court has jurisdiction over such issues. Both President Bush and Saddam Hussein had been accused of committing war crimes during their engagement in such situations.

4.4.3 Constituting the East- A Discursive Formation:

Foucault talks about the formation of discourses and how when discursive narratives are repeated over and over again, it assumes the position of unquestionable truth in society, which then dominates over other narratives. These discourses are produced by the power structures in place which disseminate the knowledge that they produce through institutions like, as Althusser says, the Ideological State Apparatus and the Repressive State Apparatus.

Stop to Consider

French philosopher Louis Althusser coined the terms ISA and RSA which basically means:

Ideological State Apparatus (ISA): ISA refers to the various institutions and systems in a society, like schools, media, family, and religious institutions, that shape people's beliefs, values, and ideologies. These institutions help maintain the existing social order by influencing how individuals think and perceive the world around them. For example, schools teach children certain values and norms, contributing to the stability of the society's ideology.

Repressive State Apparatus (RSA): RSA refers to the institutions and systems that the state uses to maintain control through force or coercion. These include the police, military, and legal system. The RSA's primary function is to enforce the state's rules and maintain order through the threat or use of force when necessary. It acts as a "repressive" tool to ensure compliance with the state's laws and regulations.

In simple terms, ISAs shape your thoughts and beliefs through education, media, and culture, while RSAs are responsible for maintaining law and order through the police and military, often using force if needed. These two apparatuses work together to keep a society functioning and maintaining its existing power structures.

The state-controlled narratives that shape into discourses therefore need to be looked through a critical lens and put under scrutiny and that is what Salam Pax does exactly in his book. The West constructs the East, or the Orient, in a “dark” light and demonises their practices stating them as barbaric. These are all ways that would allow justifications for the West to be the bringer of light and “liberate” the East from their oppressive lives even if it meant succumbing to violence. The real reason however lies in keeping the power dynamics intact and having the financial and political edge over the other. Pax systematically illustrates and deconstructs these narratives in his blog. Both colonialism and neo-colonialism work under the garb of bringing “civilization” to the apparently “less civilised”.

Pax criticises the American newspapers which have been guilty of publishing articles that seem aimed at further damaging Saddam Hussein's already tarnished reputation. They've written about his supposed "high-cholesterol" diet and his smoking habits, with seemingly no other intention than to make his image even worse in the eyes of the public. These articles don't appear to serve any significant purpose other than to contribute to the negative perception of Saddam Hussein. It is as if they are piling on to an already negative image, and these stories may not necessarily provide any valuable insights or information but rather seem designed to further discredit him.

Pax examines an article in the *Los Angeles Times* that discusses Iraqi customs and the issue of corrupt courts in Iraq. The article raises concerns about the practice of paying "blood money" as a form of compensation, which suggests that the state still follows traditions that might be seen as outdated and in need of a more civilised approach. Pax doesn't take a one-sided stance but rather criticises both Western media, which often portrays Iraq in a negative and "barbaric" manner, and certain inhumane Iraqi customs. He questions why American newspapers are publishing stories about these customs, as their accuracy can only be confirmed by someone with direct knowledge of Iraq.

Movies and art have a significant impact on shaping the beliefs and views of the general public. Often, people consume this content without questioning its underlying messages. This happens on a large scale because not everyone has the time or resources to critically analyse the intentions of the creators behind the scenes. For many, it's just a form of passive entertainment. However, it's essential to realise that films and art actively play a role in influencing how people think.

This influence becomes even more disquieting when it falls into the hands of powerful individuals or groups who consciously use it to manipulate people's thought processes. Salam Pax highlights how American movies, for example, contribute to this by often creating negative characters or villains that fit into preconceived stereotypes of people from certain regions, like the Middle East. These portrayals can reinforce biases and misperceptions, which is why it's essential to be critical consumers of media.

4.4.4 Iraq under Saddam Hussein's Regime:

During Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq, he initially had firm control over the country's institutions. At first, this control might have seemed somewhat liberating, as it brought stability. However, as time passed, Saddam became increasingly paranoid and tightened his grip even further. This meant that his rule became more authoritarian and repressive, leading to a more oppressive environment over time. Until 1991, he was somewhat secular in giving people the right to practise their religious

affiliations but after that out of fear of an uprising, he attacked the Shia population in the country.

Right from the beginning he realised from his own experience of being on the other side, that there must be no opposition party allowed and no dissent must be allowed within the party. For him, the relationship of kinship was more sacred and the ranks of the party depended on that. Pax comments on the news that they will have presidential elections soon that he doesn't know whether to "laugh or cry" because "it is more funny than tragic". By saying so he's commenting on the last 40 years of history when there was democracy only on paper.

The leaders in the Iraqi government under his regime were famously corrupt and would intercept any and all supplies sanctioned for the people. On paper it was a just government but it was just propaganda hammered into the brains of people. Pax says the supporters of Hussein are brainwashed by years and years of propaganda as he says, "it works-you won't discuss something that became a "fact" after having it hammered into your head time after time. You don't think. You have learned all the answers by heart without even knowing it".

Pax talks about the unfair resolution passed by the UN and how they are just looking for a way to invade Iraq anyway. He says if Saddam had chemical weapons, he would most likely bomb his own people referencing the Kurdistan incident.

Stop to Consider

The Kurdish population in Iraq was vehemently persecuted under Saddam's regime as the al-Anfal military campaign exercised what is qualified as genocide according to some European countries. During this time, a village of Kurdish settlement was reportedly poisoned where 5000 people were killed while 10,000 were injured because it was suspected that they were disloyal to the government. As per reports from EUAA, the population face a systematic marginalisation and targeted discrimination.

The media in Iraq was also controlled by the state and one cannot trust the “journalists who fabricate news”. That is why Pax’s voice coming out of such a problem area was a breath of fresh air that showed the real picture of what things were exactly like.

4.5 Form and Narrative Structure of the Text:

The text follows the format of a blog, as it is based on Salam Pax’s blog which had been transformed into a book. It follows a linear chronological pattern starting from 7 September 2002 to 28 June 2003. It doesn’t start like any traditional narrative as the reader is made aware that it follows from a previous blog and ends abruptly. There are several footnotes available that provide the intrinsic details that one must follow to understand certain references in the blog.

Following the structure of a text with the method of close-reading brings several things to the fore and helps in tracing many parallels alongside. If we look in terms of language, some of the vocabulary used in the blog shows the transformation of language at that period of time with Pax using words like “da” instead of “the” and “thru” instead of “through”. The reason for this was that with the emergence of telegram services, words started to become condensed which can be seen if we look at not just literary texts but also study non-literary texts like blogs, in this context, as a part of life writing.

There is no specific organisation of events or ideas because the narrative was dependent on what was happening at the time in reality. It is not a fictional text, or a non-fiction written from memory. It is a direct journalistic documentation of the developments of the war and how it affected the people in Iraq at that point of time. But despite the unorganised manner of the text, one can still observe certain patterns in the text like the shifting mood of the narrator/author and the focalisation of various issues at different times. The author takes up many issues like the problems of Kurdistan, the threats and propagandist posts by western media houses, Saddam’s iron-fist rule of the country throughout the text without a coherent structure.

The mood of the author shifts from witty sarcasm to psychological dampening of emotions as the war carries on and affects his close family and friends. The nonchalance gets replaced with jokes about suicide, which becomes recurrent after a certain point. It shows the psychological effects that war can have on people, even the ones that seem unfettered. The writer doesn't use a depressive tone but instead uses humour as a coping mechanism which becomes apparent as one keeps reading the text.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the narrative style of *The Baghdad Blog* correspond with the larger theme of war?

4.6 Reception of the text:

The reception of the text had been multifaceted to say the least. As the anonymity of the author shrouded the blog with an air of mystery, igniting more curiosity among the people and media, it was the content of the text that baffled people. The brutally honest criticism that Pax writes shocked a lot of people who started questioning his authenticity because the things that he had mentioned in his blog could get him hanged by the state.

There were several speculations floating around online that he was a member of the Ba'ath party who is spewing hatred about the US paramilitary forces instead of looking up to them as a saviour, marking him as an anti-American. Others thought he was a CIA agent who critiqued the government by posing as an Iraqi citizen. These polarities were growing everyday and led to Pax receiving hate mails and threats online. But what both of these failed to recognise was that his scathing remarks weren't confined to just one party over the other. His position in the war was that of peace, which was already established by the pseudonym that he chose as his pen name.

The Guardian calls it "The most vivid account of the Iraq conflict" while Spiegel goes on to say that Salam Pax is "The reliable chronicler

of the chaos". He provided the most authentic narrative to come out of war-torn Iraq in the chaos of contrasting narratives that people recognized and appreciated immediately despite the hate that he was getting from extremists.

Check Your Progress

1. How did the internet and blogging technology change the way information was disseminated during the conflict? Discuss with reference to *The Baghdad Blog*.
2. Trace the chronology of the war narrative through its political context in *The Baghdad Blog*.
3. What insights did Salam Pax provide about the personal experiences of Iraqi citizens during the war that the mainstream media did not cover?
4. How did Salam Pax's blog challenge conventional narratives about the Iraq war, and why is it considered an alternative source of history?
5. Discuss the unconventional narrative of *The Baghdad Blog* including its writing style while stating instances from the text.

4.7 Summing Up:

The Baghdad Blog truly captures the unique voice of Salam Pax who provides a day-to-day grim detail about the lived experience of people caught in war, a phenomenon which is beyond their control. The readability of the book is highly enhanced because of the blogging format and especially his sarcastic and ironic use of wit through language. He subtly hints and refers to many of the injustices that have been part of Iraqi people's life, despite facing continuous threats to his life. He truly embodied the role of being a spokesperson of the Iraqi people during the war and critically exposed the hypocrisy of both sides of the war. He espouses peace and condemns the futility of war which is only profitable for the ones at the top of the power hierarchy.

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