

BLOCK: II

Unit 1: Kate Chopin: *The Awakening*

Unit 2: Kate Chopin: *The Awakening* (Supplementary Unit)

Unit 3: Isabel Allende: *The House of the Spirits* (Background)

Unit 4: Isabel Allende: *The House of the Spirits* (Supplementary Unit)

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UNIT- 1

Kate Chopin: *The Awakening*

Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 The Awakening: An Overview
- 1.4 What Happens in The Awakening
- 1.5 Characters in the Novel
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- 1.7 References and Suggested Readings

1.1. Objectives:

After reading this unit the student will be able to

- *comprehend* the summary of the novel,
- *develop* critical understanding of the novel,
- *identify* important characters in the novel.

1.2 Introduction:

Kate Chopin, the celebrated American novelist and short-story writer, was born Katherine O'Flaherty on 8th February, 1851, in St. Louis, Missouri, United States. She was a novelist and short-story writer known for her interpretation of the culture of New Orleans. Her father was Thomas O'Flaherty who was a successful businessman. He had immigrated to the United States from Galway, Ireland. Her mother was called Eliza Faris who happened to be the second wife of Thomas O'Flaherty. She was a member of the ethnic French community in St. Louis. Her father was Athénaïse Charleville, a Creole gentleman of French-Canadian descent. This background is important to understand the context of Chopin's works.

Stop to Consider

Creole was originally used in the 16th century to refer to locally born individuals of Spanish, Portuguese, or African descent. By the 17th century the word was used to refer to people of African or European descent who had been born in the American and Indian Ocean colonies.

The prime subject of Chopin's writing were the Creole and Cajun people in the South. She wrote her first novel titled *At Fault* in 1890 but it failed to garner much attention. She later won acclaim for her short stories that poignantly crafted the complexities of human life. She wrote more than a hundred short stories in various magazines including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Vogue*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *The Century Magazine* and *The Youth's Companion*. Among her stories "Désirée's Baby" (1893) and "The Story of an Hour" (1894), have been widely anthologized. She also wrote two short story collections titled *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). Chopin wrote two novels: *At Fault* (1890) and *The Awakening* (1899). The latter book continues to remain a testimony of Chopin's prowess as a writer as it tells the story of a woman trapped in the confines of oppressive social norms. After it was rediscovered in the 1950s, critics marveled at the modern sensibilities presented in the narrative. In the present time *The Awakening* is acknowledged as the American version of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) and hailed as a landmark feminist text.

Chopin died 20 August 1904 after suffering a brain hemorrhage.

1.3 An Overview of *The Awakening*:

The Awakening (1899) concerns itself with the ideas of femininity and motherhood against the larger historical backdrop of the American South even as the existing social attitudes were undergoing change at the turn of the century. Originally *The Awakening* was titled *A Solitary Soul*. The novel centered on a young mother as she struggled to realize her personal and sexual emancipation amidst the oppressive environment of American South in the postbellum period. It also explores a woman's

desire to find her true self and live within it that result in friction with her immediate family and friends since her desire is in direct conflict with the prevalent ethics of her time. At the time of its publication the novel was publicly condemned for its vivid portrayal of sexuality and marital infidelity. In the contemporary times, the novel is regarded as a landmark of early feminist fiction.

Stop to Consider

The Awakening has been described as a case study of 19th-century feminism. A central theme in the novel is self-ownership. It signified the right of a woman over her own body and identity. First-wave feminists argued that women could gain freedom only by refusing to allow other people—namely, men—to control their bodies. In the novel Edna Pontellier continues to challenge the expectations that society places on her. She explores relationships outside her marriage and seeks gratification in associations outside of her motherhood.

The story of *The Awakening* takes place in Louisiana in 1890s. The setting is the upper-class Creole society. The protagonist is Edna who lives with her husband Léonce Pontellier and their two children, Etienne and Raoul. The narrative opens with the family vacationing on Grand Isle that was located just off the Louisiana shore near New Orleans. Léonce is reading the newspaper, his concentration broken by a caged parrot that annoyingly repeats stock phrases. They are staying at a *pension*, which is a type of boarding house and each family has their own cottage but dine together. Edna Robert Lebrun are returning from their swim in the Gulf of Mexico. Robert Lebrun is also on vacation in the island. They join Léonce but the latter soon departs for billiards and socializing at the nearby Klein's hotel. A charming young man, Lebrun devotes his time on wooing women, especially the married ones. At the time of the story he devotes his attention to Edna.

Many other families are vacationing at the pension at the time of the story. Another family that is staying at the pension is the Ratignolle family. Edna is a close friend of Madame Ratignolle despite their different approaches to bringing up children. Madame Ratignolle epitomizes the “mother-woman” who devoted her entire life to the care of her husband, children and the household at the cost of her own identity. Another

important character in the novel is Mademoiselle Reisz. She is a pianist who is also vacationing on Grand Isle at the same time. Although Mademoiselle Reisz and Edna offends almost everyone with her brutal assessments of others, she likes Edna, and they become friends. Mademoiselle Reisz's piano performance deeply moves Edna.

As Edna begins to discover her true self, she is surprised by what she finds. The fact that she can exist alone outside her roles of a wife and mother, excites her with possibilities of new discoveries and encounter. Unknowingly, Robert encourages her as she discovers her sensual self. Both soon become infatuated as the vacation comes to an end. Robert develops romantic feelings for Edna but he soon leaves for Mexico to seek his fortune. This move leaves Edna distraught. She had been thinking of him even after her family has returned to New Orleans. The process of self-discovery that has been set in motion after meeting Robert leads her to shun her pretensions.

Edna is distraught by his departure, as she finds herself still fixated on him long after her return to New Orleans with her family. As part of her ongoing journey of self-discovery, she begins to act impulsively to fulfill her needs and desires. Shedding the mask of social pretense, she devotes herself to pursuing her art, spending more time immersed in its pursuit. She sketches and paints instead of focusing on the household. This change in behavior shocks her family especially her husband. Her refusal to follow social conventions confuses him as he is unable to comprehend this new person. He meets Dr. Mandlet who is an old family friend. The latter advises Léonce to leave Edna alone. He must allow her time to come out of her present state of capriciousness. Meanwhile, the friendship between Edna, Mademoiselle Reisz and Madame Ratignolle, who is now pregnant, continues. Robert writes letters to Mademoiselle Reisz and she allows Edna to read them. Interestingly, Edna has an affair with Alcée Arobin who is notorious for his womanizing ways. Deep down, though, she continues to yearn for Robert. When she receives news that he is returning to New Orleans, she is happy of this new development. All this makes Edna and Léonce become more distant. Edna has, by now, become better in her art. She is even selling her art through her teacher and this brings her a small income. Empowered by this she decides to move out of her family home when Léonce and the

children are out of town. She moves into a small rental house nearby and begins to live without any burdens and expectations. One day when she goes to meet Mademoiselle Reisz, she meets Robert who had also come to meet Mademoiselle Reisz. The meeting surprises her. She did not know Robert was in town and what hurts her even more is the realization that he did not seek her out as soon as he had returned. Robert confesses that he had been avoiding her since she was a married woman. He continues to maintain his distance from her over the next few weeks but Edna, who is now deeply in love with Robert, kisses him and forces him to confess his love for her. She tells Robert that she no longer cares for the social codes that prohibit their love. She declares that she is an independent woman, free from the shackles of a prejudiced society and thus she is no longer bound to anyone and is free to live her life the way she chooses. Before she could explain further, she is called away to attend to Madame Ratignolle who has gone into labour. Later Madame Ratignolle admonishes her and asks her to reconsider her actions, especially their effect on her children. Edna is rattled by this. She is disturbed when she realizes that her little boys will be greatly affected if she settles down with another man. She also realizes that until this point she had selfishly thought about no one but herself. Caught in a dilemma she returns to her pigeon house only to find that Robert has left. He leaves her a goodbye note. Edna is shocked into silence. She realizes that things have reached a saturation point. She can no longer go back to her life with her husband. She also realizes that her children will have to live with social stigma of divorce and adultery. Broken and crushed, she decides to end her life. The next morning, she travels to Grand Isle alone. She announces that she is going for a swim but she slowly walks into the water and drowns herself.

1.4 What Happens in *The Awakening*:

The novel begins with Léonce Pontellier who is vacationing on Grand Isle. This is just off the coast of New Orleans. As he reads the newspaper he is annoyed by a caged parrot that repeats stock phrases. Exasperated, he leaves the main building of the boardinghouse and goes to his own cottage. Edna Pontellier is Léonce's wife. She had gone for a swim with her friend Robert Lebrun. They soon return and join Léonce who soon

leaves for a game of billiards. Edna and Robert continue to chat on the porch of the cottage. In the process the reader comes to know of their backgrounds and personalities. Robert had wanted to go to Mexico to seek his fortune but has not been able to; he continues to work in his native New Orleans. Edna tells Robert of her family and their homes in Mississippi and Kentucky. After this Edna gets ready for dinner while Robert plays with her two young boys. In Chapter 3, Léonce returns from Klein's hotel where he had gone to play billiards. He is in a cheerful and talkative mood but discovers that Edna is already asleep. She wakes up when he arrives and he tells her of his time at Klein's but she is not very responsive to his talk. Léonce checks on the boys who were sleeping in the next room and reports to Edna that Raoul has fever. She objects that Raoul was quite alright when he went to bed but her husband compels her to check on their son. Edna is fully awake by now while Léonce goes to sleep. Exhausted, she goes onto the porch and cries. Soon, the mosquitoes there force her back inside to bed. The following morning, Léonce leaves for New Orleans for work. He sends a box of sweets and savories for Edna. She shares this with everyone else at Grand Isle.

In chapter 4 we meet Madame Ratignolle. She is the embodiment of the "mother-women," or the Creole wives who always focus on their husband and children before themselves. Edna's behavior and attitudes are very different from the mother-women. This makes Léonce doubt his wife's commitment to her children. Madame Ratignolle sews winter garments for her children. She refers to her pregnancy without any hesitation. This attitude shocks Edna. She is confused and almost scandalized by mention of any matter pertaining to sex. Edna soon learns that Creole women, unlike her, are open to discussion on sexual matters. Madame Ratignolle continues to sew in Chapter 5 while Edna makes sketches her. Madame Ratignolle claims to feel a faint leading Edna and Robert (who was also present) to quickly fan her. Madame Ratignolle recovers and returns to her cottage. Meanwhile Robert compels Edna to go for their daily swim.

Stop to Consider:

Foreshadowing is an important element in the novel. Through foreshadowing the reader is able to assess Edna's character as well as contextualize her rebelliousness and independent streak in the novel. When Madame Ratignolle warns Robert that Edna may interpret his actions seriously in Chapter VIII, we see how the former is concerned about the eventual turnout of their relationship. This also foreshadows Edna's later romantic relationship with Robert. The many references to the sea, its limitlessness and Edna's swimming episodes foreshadow her suicide.

Chapter 6 foreshadows Edna's death. This chapter establishes the cause of her death as the process of self-discovery that has just begun for Edna. The warm waters of the Gulf further this process as she begins to comprehend the various constraints and expectations that trap her. Chapter 7 further stresses the significance of water as Edna and Madame Ratignolle walk to the beach. Edna confides to Madame Ratignolle events of her past life and infatuation with different men. Their conversation is interrupted by Robert, who approaches them with their children. Etienne and Raoul play in their play tent on the beach, and Edna joins them. In Chapter 8 Madame Ratignolle, who had asked Robert to drop her at the cottage, takes the opportunity of them being alone and asks Robert to leave Edna alone. She tells him not to smother her with his attention. Robert is, of course, offended. He points out that he is not like Alcée Arobin, who is well-known for his womanizing ways. Leaving Madame Ratignolle in her room, Robert joins his mother, who informs him that their friend Montel is in Mexico. She suggests Robert should join him there and pursue business interests. Robert is excited at the prospect but is soon disturbed when his mother announces that Edna is arriving.

Chapter 9 begins with dinner one Saturday night. After dinner the vacationers attend an impromptu musical recital by the children present while the adults dance to Madame Ratignolle's piano playing. Robert tells Edna that Mademoiselle Reisz will, perhaps, perform a piece if Edna requested her. Mademoiselle Reisz, who is generally unwilling to display her talents for free, agrees to perform because she likes Edna.

Her music deeply shakes Edna, and her tearful response pleases Mademoiselle Reisz. After this, at Robert’s suggestion, everyone sets out for a late-night swim. As the group makes its way to the beach in Chapter 10, Edna reflects that of late Robert seems to be avoiding her. During her swim, Edna goes farther from shore than she generally does. Coming back she hurriedly leaves for her cottage, followed by Robert. They sit on the porch, and Edna settles in the porch hammock. Both feel the first stirrings of desire for each other. In Chapter 11, Léonce asks to join him inside the cottage, but she refuses, which irritates Léonce, but he calmly joins her on the porch again. Later, she sleeps, and Léonce finishes his cigar on the porch.

SAQs:

1. Explain the symbolic significance of the sea. (50 words)

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2. How does Chopin highlight the theme of “awakening”? (80 words)

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3. How does the parrot highlight Edna’s situation? (40 words)

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Chapters 12 to 14 are central to the development of Edna's character. She wakes up from a fitful sleep and wishes to attend church. She asks Robert to accompany her. As they ride to Chênrière on the ferry, Robert chats with Mariequita, a Spanish girl who fills him with gossip about a local Spanish man who had run away with another man's wife. Robert shushes her and then talks with Edna. They plan to go to a small nearby island the next day for sightseeing. Edna feels stifled and drowsy in the church and leaves mid-way through the service. Robert takes her to his friend Tonie's house where Edna sleeps till late afternoon. . Robert cooks for Tonie while Tonie's mother is away. Later, they listen to her stories

until dark. Robert borrows Tonie's boat to take him and Edna to Grande Isle. Once home, Edna finds Tonie's youngest child cranky. She puts him to sleep, and Robert helps her put the boy to bed. He then heads for the beach while Tonie sits alone, thinking about her life's slow changes. She also begins to miss Robert.

Chapter 15 begins a few days later, when Edna arrives in the dining hall for dinner, she is shocked to learn that Robert is leaving for Mexico that night. She is upset and she returns alone to her cottage after dinner. Robert stops at her cottage on his way to the dock and Edna chastises him. Robert is neither apologetic nor makes any excuse. He asks her not to be angry with him. As he walks away from her, Edna realizes that she is experiencing a kind of infatuation that she had earlier experienced in her youth. In Chapter 16 Edna spends more time with Madame Lebrun in her attempt to assuage her longing for Robert. She induces her and Léonce into conversation about Robert. She does not seem guilty about her feelings for Robert or talking about him to her husband. She feels entitled to a private life, a hidden emotional self. In a conversation with Madame Ratignolle Edna reveals her idea of the self. She insists that although she would give her life for her children, she would not sacrifice her 'self.' Madame Ratignolle fails to grasp the distinction between the two. Later, Edna encounters Mademoiselle Reisz on her way to the beach for a swim. The latter tells her that Robert had been exceedingly jealous of Victor for a relationship with Mariequita. Mademoiselle Reisz also invites Edna to visit her in the city after they have all returned for the winter.

A few weeks after their return to New Orleans, Edna decides to be out of the house on her reception day. It was a weekly custom that demanded that she stay at home to receive the women who call on her. Her decision incenses Léonce. He insists that this act could affect his business with their husbands. The cook had prepared a poor meal and this further angers Léonce. He accuses her of being lazy and failing to manage the household staff. He leaves to dine at his social club. Unlike earlier times Edna reacts differently to this situation. She finishes her dinner and goes to her room. There she throws her wedding band on the floor and stamps on it and also smashes a vase on the hearth. Chapter 18 opens in the next day. Edna feels that the environment around her

has become hostile. She begins looking at some of her old sketches and selects the better ones to show to Madame Ratignolle. The latter encourages her study drawing with a teacher named Laidpore. At this time Monsieur Ratignolle comes home for lunch. Edna observes the harmony inherent in the Ratignolles' marriage but soon pities them because she feels that they have never experienced passion so busy they were in being the perfect social beings.

SAQs:

1. Why does Robert leave Grand Isle for Mexico? How does Edna react to this news?(50 words)

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2. What is the “at home”? Why does Edna refuse to enact this ritual and what does her refusal signify? (50 words)

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At this stage Edna is completely rebellious. She abandons all her social and household duties to spend time in a small studio on the top floor of their house where she paints contentedly. She also recalls the time spent with Robert and sings the song he sang to her. Her change in attitude and behavior forces Léonce to be concerned about her mental health. Chapter 20 sees Edna in a dark mood. She decides to visit Mademoiselle Reisz but is unable to find her address. Desperate to track her down, she goes to her last known address but then thinks of visiting Madame Lebrun. Here Edna learns that Robert had written letters to his mother but did not mention or inquire about her. Edna procures Mademoiselle Reisz's address from Madame Lebrun. As she leaves Victor notices that Edna seemed different. He hoped it was a change for the better.

In Chapter 21 Edna visits Mademoiselle Reisz, who tells her of Robert's letter that she received. Here Robert spoke of Edna and asked Mademoiselle Reisz to play Chopin's "Impromptu" for her. On

Edna's insistence Mademoiselle Reisz allows her to read the letter. She informs Mademoiselle Reisz that she has begun painting. Edna weeps as she reads the letter as Mademoiselle Reisz plays the Chopin piece. The music together with Robert's letter moves her deeply and she soon leaves.

In Chapter 22 Léonce visits Dr. Mandelet, an old family friend, and discusses Edna's new persona. He reveals that Edna has abandoned her domestic and social duties. She has also become moody and refused to attend her sister's wedding. The doctor suspects that Edna is, perhaps, having an affair with another man but does not share his thoughts with Léonce. Instead, he advises Léonce to leave Edna alone and allow her time for the moodiness to wear out of her system. He assures Léonce to come to dinner and unobtrusively examine her.

Edna's father, the Colonel, comes to visit her in Chapter 23. They spend time at the racetrack and engage in conversations with Mrs. Merriman, Mrs. Highcamp and Alcée Arobin. One night Dr. Mandelet comes to dinner. He is alarmed by Edna's enthusiastic recollection of their day at the races. He becomes worried that Edna is already enamored of Arobin who is notorious for his womanizing ways. In order to warn Edna the doctor tells a story about a married woman who fell in love with another man but later returned to her husband. Edna, in turn, narrates a tale about a couple who were in love. They rowed away one night in a small boat and disappeared in the Baratarian Islands, never to be seen again.

In Chapter 24 Edna's father leaves for home. Edna is glad because she is tired of arguing with him over her refusal to attend the wedding of her sister. Léonce also leaves for an extended business trip to New York, and the children leave for their grandmother's. In a now empty house Edna tastes the first moment of independent solitude. She looks around the house as if she is seeing it for the first time. Edna's art has not progressed as is evident in Chapter 25. She spends her days by being at home or by visiting friends. She spends more time at the racetrack with Arobin and Mrs. Highcamp. Arobin is attracted by her bold and vivacious personality. One afternoon he picks her up to again attend the races.

Mrs. Highcamp is not with him. They go the races and then to Edna's house where they have dinner. Later he shows her a dueling scar on his wrist. Impulsively she grabs his hand but quickly withdraws. Alarmed and confused, she claims to be upset by the sight of the scar. When he warmly kisses her hand while apologizing, she reacts with hostility, alarmed that she is being unfaithful to Robert (but not to Léonce).

Arobin visits Edna that night even as she is exhilarated at the thought of Robert's imminent return. However, she does not reveal the reason for her good mood to Arobin but tells him about Mademoiselle Reisz's strange gesture of feeling her shoulder blades to see if her wings were strong. Mademoiselle Reisz explained that Edna must have strong wings to fly beyond social expectations. Arobin strokes her hair and face as she speaks. He leans forward to kiss her and she responds immediately, pulling him toward her. When Arobin leaves in Chapter 28, Edna feels a blizzard of emotions. She begins to cry but this does not mean that she is ashamed of her act. The intensity of the kiss exhilarates her and her only regret is that it was not with Robert. Chapter 29 begins on the day after the kiss. Edna is busy gathering her things to move out of the house she shares with Léonce. She wishes to move into the "pigeon house" she has rented. Arobin arrives to help her but Edna sends him away. She insists that he wait to see her until the next day's dinner party.

At the dinner party the next day ten guests show up: Arobin, Mademoiselle Reisz, Victor Lebrun, Mrs. Highcamp, Monsieur Ratignolle and a few others. It is Edna's twenty-ninth birthday. The party was a huge success but Edna feels incomplete: she longs for Robert. Later Victor begins to sing the song Robert sang to Edna. She becomes upset and accidentally breaks her wine glass. She puts her hand over Victor's mouth so that he stops singing. The party breaks up soon after. Chapter 31 begins with Arobin helping Edna to lock up the mansion. He walks her to the pigeon house. Edna is visibly distraught and miserable. She misses Robert and feels hopeless. Once inside the mansion, Arobin takes her in his arms and they unite sexually.

SAQs:

1. What steps does Edna take in her plan to leave Léonce? How is her action illustrative of her desire to be independent? (50 words)

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2. What is the pigeon house? Show how it is different from Léonce's house? (40 words)

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Léonce receives Edna's letter informing him of her shift to her own house. He is worried that this may impact his professional reputation. He feels that his clients may think he cannot afford a large house and so he renovates his mansion. He also puts up a notice in the papers announcing the renovations and that the Pontelliers' intend to spend the summer abroad. He does not really think over Edna's decision. To him Edna has left home and not him. Edna spends a week with her children and mother-in-law in the country. She relishes her time with the boys. When she leaves, it is with great regret but by the time she reaches New Orleans the feeling disappears. She now feels once again by the solitude and simplicity of her new life. In Chapters 33 Edna is visited by Madame Ratignolle. She warns the former of the gossip circulating in their circles about her relationship with Arobin. Later that day, Edna waits in Mademoiselle Reisz's apartment for Reisz but Robert appears instead. Both are shocked to see each other so unexpectedly. Edna is hurt when she realizes that he has been in New Orleans for two days but has not sought her out. Robert walks Edna home. He is stunned to find Arobin's photograph among her sketches but she explains that she had been using the photo to sketch Arobin's portrait. Robert tells her his thoughts and feelings while he was in Mexico but feels that she is mocking him. He considers this cruel and they sit silently until dinner is ready.

In Chapter 34, Edna and Robert eat a simple dinner. They deliberately do not speak about their relationship. When Edna discovers a tobacco

pouch gifted by a young woman in Vera Cruz, is she becomes jealous. At his time Arobin arrives. He comments on the remarkable beauty of Vera Cruz women adding fuel to Edna's feelings. Robert leaves but Arobin stays on to read the paper and smoke a cigar. Edna soon sends him away. She thinks over the last few hours spent with Robert with great disappointment. Chapter 35 opens the next morning. Edna is hopeful that she and Robert can overcome the obstacles to their love. Robert does not visit her that day. Edna despairs and this becomes a repeated pattern for the next few days. She too avoids places where she might see him to avoid her own disappointment. Meanwhile, her affair with Arobin continues.

In Chapter 36 Edna encounters Robert accidentally in a deserted garden café. When she confronts him for his absence, he responds emotionally. He calls her cruel for forcing him to divulge his feelings. They chat a while in the café before he walks her home. Once inside the house, she kisses him without warning. He responds by holding her close and admitting his love. Edna tells him that she is now her own woman. She no longer belongs to Léonce. Before she could explain herself she is urgently called away to Madame Ratignolle's house. The latter is in labor and Edna had promised to attend the birth. Robert begs hers to stay with him Edna leaves. She extracts a promise from Robert that he would wait for her to return home. In Chapter 37 Edna reaches Madame Ratignolle's house. Her friend is exhausted from the labor pains. Dr. Mandelet arrives with a midwife. Edna regrets her decision of attending. She is upset by what she sees. Her own experiences of childbirth are unclear; she was drugged with chloroform for the pain. After the child is born Edna prepares to leave and Madame Ratignolle whispers into her ears to think of the children before doing anything drastic.

In the penultimate chapter, Dr. Mandelet walks Edna home. She wonders about what Madame Ratignolle had told her. Her own disillusionment with her life puts her in a pensive mood. The doctor urges her to talk with him, but she refuses. At home, she sits on the porch to regain her composure. She decides to be with Robert that night and reflects on the consequences the next day. Once inside, she finds a goodbye note from Robert. Distraught, she spends a sleepless night on the sofa.

The final chapter of the book takes place in Grand Isle, where the scene shifts. Victor is busy making repairs on the pension during the off-season. He is also flirting with Mariequita. Edna appears suddenly and says that she had come to rest for a while. Victor is surprised by this sudden visit and hurries to manage room for her. She requests fish for dinner and asks for towels, announcing her intention to go for a swim. In reality, she plans to drown herself. She has already decided that suicide was the only way to end her social and moral trauma. She also realised her feelings for Robert would fade someday. On the beach, she sees a bird with a broken wing falling to its own death in the water. She puts on her bathing suit but quickly casts it off. She stands naked on the beach and feels that she is seeing everything for the first time. She enters the water and swims farther and farther out. Her last thought is a vivid recollection of a scene from her childhood.

SAQs:

1. Léonce is very concerned with outward appearances? How do we know this? (40 words)

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2. How does Edna feel when Madame Ratignolle is in the process of giving birth to her child?(50 words)

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3. What is the significance of the setting of the last chapter? (50 words)

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1.5 Characters in the Novel:

Edna Pontellier is the protagonist who is married to Léonce Pontellier. She falls in love with Robert Lebrun and has a brief affair with Alcée Arobin. She belongs to upper class society in New Orleans and is

artistically inclined. She undergoes a significant change in her attitude, character and behavior, as the story progresses. She becomes aware of her real self and the elements that constitute it. She is ambivalent in her expressions. It is not possible to categorize her: she is neither a flawless heroine nor a fallen woman. Her rebellion seems motivated more by a self-centered desire to fulfill her whims and wishes. She is symbolized by the caged green-and-yellow parrot of the opening scene of the novel. Just as the parrot insists, in French, that everyone should go away, Edna too desires solitude. She pushes her husband and former friends away from her life to be alone and engage in self-reflection. She is physically attractive but not the mother-woman who sacrifices her very self for the sake of her husband, children and household. Edna discovers passion and sensuality during their summer vacation on Grand Isle. Her marriage and home lack both qualities. She develops passion for Robert and it becomes her all-consuming occupation. But her devotion to Robert is marred with suspicion as she is prone to be attracted to other men too.

Mademoiselle Reisz's piano performances are crucial to her development. They inflame her need for drama. Her sexually charged affair with Alcée Arobin testifies to this. Despite having feelings for Robert, she begins a relationship with Arobin although she has no romantic feelings for him. She is physically attracted to him that results in her sexual awakening. This is similar to her emotional awakening brought about by Mademoiselle Reisz's piano performances.

Edna seeks to improve her skills as another extension of her self. She abandons her social duties in her quest to become independent. This is reflected in her art. But her art never really develops, given the fact that she paints according to the mood of the day. Edna never considers the consequences of her actions for herself or anyone else. This leads to situations that are awkward and allow people to question and criticize her. Her shift to her new home is one such incident. She does not think about her sons or husband and believes that situation will resolve by themselves. Only Madame Ratignolle's warning forces her to consider the effect of her actions on her sons.

Edna possesses a resilient spirit, one capable of rebellion yet fragile when it comes to enduring it. Her eventual suicide may be interpreted as her means of escape from the moral and social dilemmas that entangled her life.

Léonce Pontellier:

Léonce Pontellier is Edna's husband. He is socially conscious and materialistic. He is unable to perceive his wife's obsession with Robert Lebrun or the fact that she is not satisfied with him. He fails to grasp the reason for her departure when she shifts home. He professional commitments makes him blind to the unhappiness creeping into their lives. He is unable to see that his wife is changing and becoming more assertive. In fact he attributes it to a medical condition. that she has left him when she rents her own house and moves out of his mansion. His intense focus on his business blinds him to the emotional process of growth and self-realization that his wife is undergoing. He considers his wife more of a possession or an employee than a person, and treats her accordingly. When she refuses to meet her visitors on reception day, his reaction is more about the effect her action will have on his business. His goals are financial and social. Progression in life and climbing the social ladder are his prime focus. For Léonce money can buy everything. It can replace love and kindness too. He does follow Dr. Mandelet's advice of leaving Edna alone even though he is disturbed by her behavior. He is not able to understand his wife and wishes she becomes the mother-woman like Madame Ratignolle.

Robert Lebrun:

Robert is Edna's love interest. He considers himself romantic but his actions indicate otherwise. Every summer he leaves his modest job in New Orleans to live with his mother at the pension. Each time he courts a different woman. His attentions are never serious. He is more of a harmless flirt who enjoys being in the company of women, especially married or older women. He is emotionally immature to pursue committed relationship with a woman.

Two years younger than Edna Robert is charming and charismatic. His inexperience is revealed in his tendency to state grand intentions. He,

however, does not follow through on them. His determination to go to Mexico to make his fortune is one such incident. When he realizes that he has become thoroughly infatuated with Edna, he also fears that matters may become serious. Nevertheless, he appeals to Edna's notion of sensuality and desire for imaginative living. He treats her with great chivalry. However, he is not as brave and defiant as Edna. Her new-found power excites him but does not translate into any concrete action in the context of their relationship. This is the reason they never consummate their relationship.

Mademoiselle Reisz:

Mademoiselle Reisz is represented by the mockingbird. The parrot in the opening chapters speaks in a language that is understood by none but the mockingbird on the other side of the door. Her music speak to Edna's soul and awakens her passions which in turn sparks her rebellion. Madame Reisz is a rude and ill-tempered woman. She is not popular but this does not bother her. She is independent and lives life on her own terms. The location of her home isolates her both physically and socially so that she is able to find time for her art and herself. She leads a solitary life without friends or family. Her apartment is dingy and dirty but she has learned to accept the good with the bad. She is the subject of social gossip because of her status as a single woman but she is indifferent to those. She is a serious musician, brave to dare and defy social conventions. She foreshadows Edna's end on the Grand Isle when she speaks of brave birds who fly and the weak ones who die.

SAQs:

1. How does Chopin use the bird/wings imagery in the narrative?
(about 100 words)

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2. Examine the role of music and art in the novel. (about 150 words)

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3. How does the novel highlight the notions of freedom and responsibility? (about 150 words)

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4. What is the role of children in Edna's life? (about 100 words)

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5. Compare and contrast the three female characters in the novel: Edna, Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz. How are they different and how are they alike? (about 300 words)

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6. Comment on Edna's various relationships with the men. How do they add to her growth and self-discovery? (about 150 words)

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7. Why does Mademoiselle Reisz say that it takes courage to be an artist? Do you agree? Is her opinion rooted in her time and her gender? (about 200 words)

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8. Comment on the roles of race and class in the novel. (about 150 words)

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9. Is Edna's act of suicide at the end of the novel an act of bravery or cowardice? Give a reasoned answer. (about 100 words)

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1.6 Summing Up:

The novel, *The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin can be regarded as a classic of early feminist literature. The novel highlights one of the key ideas of first wave feminism that entitled woman to the control and ownership of her body and the right to exercise her free will. Its basic tenet is to deconstruct the idea of considering women as object or property owned by men. Chopin, in her novel, highlights the idea of self-ownership or the right of a woman to choose to give access to her body to men. It focuses on the physical autonomy of women and their right to have control over one's own body. The novel portrays the protagonist's quest to self-discovery and to liberate herself from the shackles of age-old patriarchy's domination and possession of the woman body like a property- first, her father's, then her husband's. The novel explores Edna Pontellier's struggle to free her from these societal norms and establish herself as a free individual through her sexual awakening, one who did not belong to anyone. The novel is about Edna's realization of her body and identity and her choice to give access to her body to the one she chooses to rather than naively conform to the stereotypes dictated by patriarchy to subjugate women.

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UNIT-2
Kate Chopin: *The Awakening*
(Supplementary Unit)

Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Context and a brief analysis of the text, *The Awakening*
- 2.4 The Nineteenth Century: A Socio-cultural Background
- 2.5 Major Themes
 - 2.5.1 Isolation
 - 2.5.2 Identity
 - 2.5.3 Marriage
 - 2.5.4 Position of Women in Society
 - 2.5.5 Awakening
 - 2.5.6 Individuality
- 2.6 Important Motifs
 - 2.6.1 Music
 - 2.6.2 Children
 - 2.6.3 Houses
- 2.7 Major Symbols
 - 2.7.1 Birds
 - 2.7.2 The Sea
 - 2.7.3 Clothing
- 2.8 Summing Up
- 2.9 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 Objectives:

After reading this unit the student will be able to

- *comprehend* the context of the novel,

- *identify* the important themes in the novel,
- *learn* the socio-cultural background of the novel and its contemporary period,
- *understand* the different motifs and symbols in the novel.

2.2 Introduction:

The Awakening by Kate Chopin has been described as a case study of 19th-century feminism. The novel centers on the idea of self-ownership, also known as bodily autonomy, which forms a major theme in the novel. Self-ownership was a key precept of 19th-century feminism which signified a woman's right to have control over her own body and identity. So-called first-wave feminists argued that women could gain their freedom only by refusing to allow men—to exercise control over their bodies. In a time when women were convinced to performed selfless servitude to their husband and family, while forbidding them to address their own pleasures and needs, Edna discovers herself and her true identity.

2.3 Context and a brief *analysis of the text*, *The Awakening*:

The novel revolves around Edna, the protagonist, who feels trapped in her marital life. In *The Awakening*, *Edna* relentlessly pursues authority over her own person and therefore longs for bodily autonomy. Edna resists objectification by her husband, who treats her as his property. She challenges Robert when he suggests that she is not free, implying his ownership over her. To be truly free, her husband must set her free. This is the reason for her decision to never belong to anyone but herself when she shifts to the pigeon house. The thrill of this discovery encourages her to acknowledge her emotional needs and sexual desires.

Edna's story is loaded with symbolism. The sea is the most important symbol in the novel, possibly representing baptism, cleansing and rebirth. In *The Awakening*, Chopin locates the sea as a space of liberation—a space that is outside and away from patriarchal society. For Edna the sea serves as a source of empowerment and a place of refuge. In the beginning, it entices her with its “seductive odor” and “sonorous murmur” speaks to her soul.

Towards the end of the novel the sea welcomes her into a world that is beyond any human restrictions.

Chopin instills the sea with maternal qualities. It acts like the womb that enfolds the body in soft embrace. Edna longs for such comfort but she is uneasy in the water. She dreads being alone in the water. Her first solo swim marks a critical moment in her awakening as she conquers her fears and takes control of her body while learning her first swim. She effectively realizes her independence when she swam far out into the waters, where no woman had ever ventured before.

When Edna comes in contact with the water, she realizes the own location in the minded of the vastness of the universe and of her position within it. As she contemplates her significance (or lack thereof), her thoughts turn to death. Weeks later, when Edna reflects on the experience, she recalls the sense of freedom she felt in the Gulf. With Robert gone and her solitude made plain, she resolves to go back to the sea. In the final scene of the novel, Edna swims into the sea, naked as she came, “and the musky odor of pinks filled the air.”

As the novel progresses, Edna experiences an unspecified sense of malaise and despondency whose source she is unable to specifically pinpoint. Edna’s feeling of being trapped and forced into the narrowly defined roles afforded to women; pursuing the self-fulfillment and self-realization she craves only leads to isolation, further exacerbating her depression. By the novel’s end, Edna has discovered that the role she wants—that of an independent woman—is incongruous with the world’s expectations, which culminates in her suicide.

2.4 The Nineteenth Century: A Socio-cultural Background:

Britain, in the nineteenth century, witnessed great transitions. The agricultural economy was replaced by new industrial advancements. The traditional practices and religious faith was soon challenged by new realities of a mechanized world which also translated into empowerment for the women and the working classes. Literary production gained currency and fiction soon became the favoured genre of writing. This gained further impetus with the new readership. Interestingly, fiction on and by women increased

greatly as a huge number of women writers began writing in the nineteenth century. A few names here would include George Eliot (1819 – 1880), Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870), Charlotte Bronte (1816 – 1855), Jane Austen (1775 – 1817) and William Makepeace Thackeray (1811 – 63) among others. A large number of the novels were serialised in popular magazines and periodicals of the time. The readers played a significant role in influencing the content of the novels based on their preferred subjects. The scale of fiction now produced and the demand for reading material resulted in the mushrooming of several lending libraries. The choice of subject matter was a crucial concern in fiction as most novels offered social commentary and played a key role in guiding people morally. In terms of themes, domestic settings and middle-class aspirations were popular. These were situated in the sphere of the family. Marriage and morality were popular topics but sex was considered taboo. It is no wonder then that the ‘fallen woman’ deserved punishment and ostracization so that others learn that the moral values of a society cannot be compromised with. Towards the end of the century emerged a picture of the ‘New Woman.’ Novels that were concerned with feminist questions began to gain popularity. However, narratives on sexual license and promiscuity were avoided since they seemingly challenged prevalent moral codes. In this context, *The Awakening* transgressed the given codes and its explicit content was not easily accepted.

2.5 Major Themes:

Let us discuss some of the major themes of the novel.

2.5.1 Isolation:

In *The Awakening*, independence and isolation are almost parallel for Edna. In the 1800s, women had limited opportunities for individual expression and independence as age-old traditions coupled with the legal codes restricted women greatly. In Victorian times, women were forbidden to pursue their pleasures and needs. They were confined to performing their domestic duties and serving the family. As Edna discovers herself, she also finds her identity. The thrill of this discovery encourages her to acknowledge her emotional needs and sexual desires. She realizes that her independence is more than just an emotion. During her first swimming experience, she is

surprised to learn of her strengths. When she begins to paint, she realizes that one's creative talent may be a source of pleasure, too. However, she soon faces resistance when she begins to voice her dissatisfaction with her present life. Her husband's constant interference begins to weigh her down, pushing her to leave her family and live alone. As she prepares to move out of her home, Edna realizes there can be no smooth transition to an independent existence, especially for a married woman who is always the subject of social scrutiny.

Robert's passion for Edna is not displayed. He is a man of the world and committed to his role as a husband and father. Moments of emotional expression are alien to him. Thus, when Edna moves out of his home, he is more worried about the local gossip than trying to understand the reason behind her actions. He refuses to betray social conventions, and this is where he indirectly supports Edna in her journey towards herself.

2.5.2 Identity:

When Edna discovers herself, she is released of repressed emotions. As she realises her needs, she begins to paint and learn three new languages. She familiarizes herself with the ways of Creole expression at Grand Isle. These women are confident and speak freely, irrespective of social judgment. Edna is initially shocked by their frankness and open demeanour but soon realizes the liberating possibilities. She recognizes her sexual needs and is not afraid to acknowledge them. This freedom also leads her to express her emotions that were hidden earlier.

Edna begins to express herself through art as seen in Chapter 9. When she hears Mademoiselle Reisz playing the piano, she is deeply moved: "she saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body." The music becomes her calling and Mademoiselle Reisz reminds her that music has been their mode of communication. She notices Edna's agitated state and realizes that Edna is "the only one" at the party who is "worth playing for." As Edna becomes aware of the power of music to express herself and her emotions, she begins to paint fervently, as if she had never painted before. At this point, painting

is no longer a diversion or a means to escape; it becomes a true form of expression.

Edna learns to express the passion she had kept buried for so long so that both Robert and Alcée are unaware of it. As she learns languages, the “vocabulary” allows her to define her needs and desires, and she soon begins to express them. Soon, Edna surpasses her teachers in her usage of new languages and words. For instance, while Adèle assures her that they can be frank with each other, Edna loses no time to apply this idea in other spheres of her life. Through Robert Edna learns the language of sexuality. She wishes to speak this language loudly for all to hear.

As Edna can speak her language, the number of her listeners diminishes because they do not understand her new speech. Her ultimate suicide will perhaps be understood only by those who understand her. When Robert rejects Edna in Chapter 38, she is convinced of her solitude. No language and communication exists between her and Robert now. She is incomprehensible to him. Edna surpasses Robert in the language of sexuality. She becomes more fluent than Robert. At this point, Edna becomes similar to the parrot in Chapter 1. The bird speaks French and “a little Spanish”, but it also speaks “also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mockingbird. . .” The mockingbird whistles “fluty notes” with “maddening persistence,” which are often inarticulate. The bird is similar to Edna’s friends, who seem to resonate Edna’s feelings but are afraid to speak out, constrained by social conventions.

2.5.3 Marriage:

Chopin’s narrative portrays marriage as a trap that contains false promises of happiness for unwitting women. In Chapter 7, the narrator describes Edna’s marriage to Léonce as “purely an accident,” indicating that she was associated with Léonce by circumstances. In describing Edna and Léonce’s courtship, the narrative shows Edna falling for various men before she meets Léonce, but at no point does she prioritize her wifely duties that includes building a home with her husband and having children. Edna wants love, but since society ties love to marriage, by falling in love she becomes saddled with a lifestyle she has not fully bargained for. Edna’s becoming conscious

of herself as an individual, leads her to seeing Adèle, who is happy in her marriage and living in “blind contentment,” happy only because she does not know to ask for more.

The marriages in *The Awakening* depict wives who must suppress their identities and desires to look after their husbands. For instance, Léonce’s first concern when Edna refuses to take visitors is that her refusal may be seen as a snub by one of his business associate’s wives. Edna taking visitors, therefore, does not have any scope of social outlet or social advancement, but rather functions as an extension of Léonce’s business. This pattern continues in Adèle’s marriage to Monsieur Ratignolle, whom the Creole society considers an ideal couple. Adèle and her husband are two halves of a whole where Adèle hangs on Monsieur Ratignolle’s every word and supports his ideas instead of contributing her own. Monsieur Ratignolle attends Edna’s party on behalf of both himself and Adèle, as if his presence is enough to make up for her absence.

2.5.4 Position of Women in Society:

In the late 1800s, women in New Orleans society, had limited opportunities to become anything other than wives and mothers. The social structure was largely built on men and women performing well-defined duties. The upper-class men were to go out and achieve success and provide for their families. Women bore children, ran the household and became devoted wives and mothers.

Edna Pontellier is caught between two extremes of womanhood, represented by Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. Madame Ratignolle is the ideal wife and mother, doing everything expected of her and finding great contentment in it. Mademoiselle Reisz is the opposite. She is neither a wife nor a mother but an artist. Although respected as a talented musician, she pays a price for rejecting societal norms and values. The society largely rejects her, and thus she lives in isolation.

The novel raises one important question—What if someone is located in the middle of the womanhood spectrum—partway between Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz? Edna as a wife and mother, finds little fulfillment in these roles and relationships. She wants to grow as an artist,

but she does not want to give up on romance. She wants the freedom to make her own decisions but she also wants Robert's companionship. She ultimately realizes that society has no place for a woman like her.

2.5.5 Awakening:

The Awakening is structured around a succession of "awakenings", as Edna Pontellier slowly discovers her true feelings and desires. As a character Edna does not change inwardly; instead, she gradually aligns her outer self with her inner self. For example, she does not display dissatisfaction with her marriage and motherhood; she awakens—little by little—to the realization she is already dissatisfied. As she strips away the social conventions that do not serve her true self, she is increasingly emboldened to act on her own wishes.

The sexual awakening in Edna is an important part of her self-discovery when she discovers the stirrings of physical attraction towards Robert, before he leaves for Mexico. When she meets Alcée Arobin, she experiences sexual passion in ways she has not experienced in her marriage. This awakening leads her to initiate a more physical relationship with Robert, though he seems unwilling.

2.5.6 Individuality:

Edna Pontellier is on a journey to establish her identity that is her's alone and exclusive of all her social, marital and maternal associations. Although she shares some qualities with Madame Ratignolle, such as affection for her children, Edna is not the mother-woman who devotes herself fully to marriage and family. Edna also shares similar characteristics with Mademoiselle Reisz, such as the desire to become better at her art and a willingness to be alone most of the time, but she is unwilling to give up on the possibility of true love. She is sexually attracted to Alcée Arobin, but she does not want to be just another woman in his string of conquests. Edna is in love with Robert, and he with her, but she wants to move the relationship into the realm of the physical while he does not. The tragedy here is she can never fully express her developing individuality because of the social conventions that bind both her and Robert. Thus, being true to herself results in solitude she cannot live with.

SAQ:

1. From your reading of the novel, discuss the theme of identity and the position of women in the nineteenth century with reference to the women characters in the novel? (about 350 words)

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2.6 Important Motifs:

Let us discuss some of the important motifs in the novel.

2.6.1 Music:

Throughout *The Awakening*, music and its employment by various characters highlight Edna's ideological alignment in relation to the other characters and the social framework in which she operates. Additionally, her interest in music allows for the flourishing of her art. Edna learns about the power of music when she hears Mademoiselle Reisz. Adèle Ratignolle's music draws Edna out of her social shell and pushes her to explore uncharted territories. For Mademoiselle Reisz, music is her form of artistic expression. The Farival twins, on the other hand, play the piano purely for the entertainment of the people who gather around them. The twins' are associated with the Virgin Mary, and their performances reflect how women in Victorian society are expected to behave to be socially accepted. Their piano playing is not just limited to entertainment but becomes a model for how women should use art. For Victorian women, any use of art as a means of self-exploration and self-articulation is seen as an act of rebellion.

Similarly, Mademoiselle Reisz's music positions her as a nonconformist. She empathizes with Edna's awakening. Edna realizes that her response to music signals her emotional growth. She is able to discern what a particular piece of music to her personally. Instead of understanding herself via random sounds, Edna becomes specific in her musical choices and responses.

2.6.2 Children:

The novel has recurring images of children. Edna is like a child, and in her awakening, she seems to be in the process of being born again, especially when she discovers the world from a fresh perspective. At times, she is self-absorbed and disregarding of others. She often has an unrealistic approach to how her actions may be interpreted or their consequences. Ultimately, it is the thought of her children that leads her to commit suicide. She realizes that her action may result in drastic consequences for her children, who will continue to be socially dependent and affected by their mother's scandal. Unlike her obligation to her husband, Edna's obligation to her husband is irrevocable. Since her children are closely connected to Edna's suicide, her allusions to "the little lives" of her children foreshadow her tragic end.

2.6.3 Houses:

Edna resides in many houses in *The Awakening*. Her many dwellings include the cottages in Grand Isle, Madame Antoine's home on the *Chênrière Caminada*, the big house in New Orleans, and her very own "pigeon house." Each house and her life in it marks her progress. Edna is supposed to be a "mother-woman" on Grand Isle, while in New Orleans, she should be the perfect social hostess. In both these houses, Edna chooses to stay within the "walls" of the traditionally assigned roles and not overstep her line. Later, when she and Robert slip away to the *Chênrière Caminada*, that happens to be their temporary rest in Madame Antoine's house, it symbolizes the shift in Edna's character and perspective. At *Chênrière Caminada*, Edna discovers a new world that is romantic but not altogether foreign to her. Here, the old social structures disappear. Here, she no longer needs to remember the guests on Grand Isle. Here, she can create her own world.

In contrast, Madame Antoine's house is only a temporary shelter. The new world that Edna discovers is a place where she should not remain for long. The "pigeon house" is the only space that allows Edna to be both at "home" and independent. Here, she no longer required to equate herself with the material objects that Léonce had purchased because her new house contained no such possessions. However, the pigeon house will not provide Edna with her expected solutions despite its promise of freedom. While it

makes her independent from the beautiful cage of Léonce's house and gives her with the isolation that enables her to progress in her sexual awakening, she is only cooped again in less extravagant surroundings. As the narrative progresses, Edna's house resembles the structure used for keeping domesticated pigeons. This does not bode well for Edna. Towards the novel's end, Edna has the dual experience of being both a prisoner and in exile—she is “at home” nowhere. Only death can bring her contentment a home offers, i.e. shelter, comfort, respite and privacy.

2.7 Major Symbols:

Let us discuss some of the major symbols in the novel.

2.7.1 Birds:

The caged birds in the novel are representative of Edna's entrapment and women in general. The parrot and the mockingbird symbolize Edna and Madame Reisz respectively. Just like the birds, the movements of these two men are severely restricted. Society does not allow them to fly and seek their dreams. The “winged” women in the novel use their wings to protect and shield but never to fly. This arrested flight in Edna's life can be seen in her attempts to escape her husband and the larger society. Unfortunately, she only ends up in another cage, the pigeon house, which infuses her with a sense of freedom but also restricts her. Edna new home is a step towards her independence, but she is never able to move away from herself and the memories of her former life. Her children continue to be her concern. Mademoiselle Reisz reminds Edna that in order to survive the storms that weather her, she must develop strong wings. Many critics argue that Edna's suicide actually represents her defeat not just her own but also collectively of all those women who ever hope to free themselves of social shackles. Chopin's uses, once again, bird imagery in the concluding pages of the novel: “A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water.” The bird symbolizes Edna. It also symbolizes women in general. Its fall signifies the triumph of convention that Edna's suicide attempted to defy.

2.7.2 The Sea:

The sea is symbolic of freedom and escape. The water's depth reminds Edna of the unfathomable nature of the universe, its deep recesses, and her own smallness in the scheme of things. The waves beckon Edna, seducing her with their welcome. Water is also associated with cleansing and baptism. It symbolises rebirth and signals that her awakening is equal to her rebirth for Edna. It is appropriate that Edna ends her life in the sea. This indicates that the sea is a space of infinite possibilities that envelops everything in its fold. It signifies promise as well as threat. Additionally, it represents the "strength, glory and lonely horror of independence."

2.7.3 Clothing:

Chopin's inclusion of a number of references to clothing or "garments" in the novel, is crucial to the presentation of Edna's societal identity. Clothing represents the outermost layer of a person, or the identity that an individual puts on around other people. Early in the novel, Edna's identity is being Mr. Pontellier's wife. Chopin uses clothing in another metaphor that appears after Edna sees Madame Ratignolle give birth. In the aftermath of an episode, Edna describes her emotions as "a somber, uncomfortable garment, which she had but to loosen to be rid of." This clothing metaphor represents a distinct shift from the earlier one. Whereas Edna initially acknowledges her identity as a housewife who is otherwise useless, she now admits that getting rid of it is almost in reach.

Chopin's use of clothing in the novel's closing scene as Edna strips away her clothes before walking into the ocean is significant. In her final moment of liberation, Edna is able to fully remove the burden of society's expectations and walk away from the woman she used to be. Her lack of clothing also creates an image of purity and rebirth that hints at a new identity waiting to be discovered. Clothes, therefore, symbolically traces the progression of Edna's de-clothing and highlight her rejection of social norms and acceptance of her true self.

Check Your Progress:

Q.1. From your reading of the text, can you find other significant symbols apart from those discussed in this unit?

2.8 Summing Up:

The novel, *The Awakening*, basically traces the journey of the protagonist, Edna, from being a wife trapped in a suffocated marital relationship to a liberated individual and her discovery of the self. In the novel, Edna Pontellier seeks to challenge the stereotypical expectations of the patriarchal society through her understanding of her own self. She tries to break free from the shackles of the conventions of marital relationship and explore life outside of her prescribed roles, as a mother and a wife. Her self-discovery leads her to identify her needs and desires and address her sensual gratification. Kate Chopin, in her novel, attempts to highlight the idea of self-ownership or the right of a woman over her body and her bodily needs. It focuses on the physical autonomy of women and their right to acknowledge and seek sexual liberation as well as to have control over one's own body.

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UNIT- 3

Isabel Allende: *The House of the Spirits* (Background)

Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introducing the Novelist
- 3.3 Works of the Novelist
- 3.4 The House of the Spirits: Background
- 3.5 Plot Summary
- 3.6 Major Characters
- 3.7 Characterization
- 3.8 Summing Up
- 3.9 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives:

This unit aims at introducing the students with acclaimed Latin American writer Isabel Allende and her seminal work *The House of the Spirits*. The main objectives of this unit are to facilitate the learners to:

- *acquaint* themselves with Isabel Allende as a novelist and understand the major stylistic features of her work
- *understand* Allende's position as a Latin American author and the sociopolitical context of her works
- *gain* an in-depth understanding of *The House of the Spirits*, its plot summary and main characters

3.2 Introducing the Novelist:

Isabel Allende is a pioneering Latin American women novelist. She was born on August 2, 1942 in Lima, Peru to Tomas Allende and Francisca Llonca Barros. After the separation of her parents, Allende's mother moved to Santiago, Chile with her children. Allende and her family had to keep moving between Bolivia and Beirut as her stepfather was

appointed as a diplomat. She attended an American School in La Paz, Bolivia and an English private school in Beirut, Lebanon. In 1958, Allende shifted to Chile with her family and was schooled at home for some time. She had spent a lot of her time in reading, especially the works of William Shakespeare.

Allende completed her secondary school in Chile. She got married in 1962 to an engineering student, Miguel Frias. She worked with United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in Santiago, Brussels and also Europe from 1959 to 1965, and it is during this time that Allende began working with fiction, first as a translator of English romance novels. Allende also engaged herself in journalism by joining the editorial team of Paula magazine in 1967. In the years between 1969-1974 she worked with a children's magazine, Mempo. Her hard work and passion gave her a boost in her journalistic career and she soon became the editor of Mempo. From 1970 to 1974 she also tried her hands in television production for a few Chilean news channels. While she was practicing journalism she interviewed Pablo Neruda, and he inspired her to write fiction saying that she had an imaginative mind that was going to bring her more success in creative writing than journalism. Thus, Allende's first book is the result of her compilation of her satirical articles following Neruda's suggestion.

A major turning point in Allende's life, and in the lives of all Chileans, came in 1973 when Augusto Pinochet staged a military coup and became the President of Chile by ousting Salvador Allende. Salvador Allende, who was a dedicated socialist, was also Isabel Allende's uncle and his position put their entire family in danger. Isabel Allende was forced to find a secure place for her mother and stepfather along with other people who were being persecuted by the state for their allegiance to the socialists. Her parents somehow escaped from being assassinated, and Allende herself fled to Venezuela where she ended up spending thirteen years of her life and wrote her first novel, *The House of Spirits*. She also served in a newspaper of national repute, *El Nacional*.

SAQ:

Allende spent most of her career as a journalist. How do you think does it affect the writing of her fiction? (100 words)

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3.3 Works of the Novelist:

Isabel Allende has made noteworthy contributions to the world of fiction. Her debut novel *The House of Spirits* gained popularity immediately after its publication in 1982. Two years later (in 1984) she released her second novel, *The Porcelain Fat Lady. of Love and Shadows* was published in 1985. Other works of fiction by Allende are – *Eva Luna* (1987), *Two Words* (1989), *The Stories of Eva Luna* (1989), *The Infinite Plan* (1991), *Daughter of Fortune* (1999), *Portrait in Sepia* (2000), *City of the Beasts* (2002), *Kingdom of the Golden Dragon* (2004), *Zorro* (2005), *Forest of the Pygmies* (2005), *Ines of My Soul* (2006), *Island Beneath the Sea* (2010), *Maya’s Notebook* (2011), *Ripper* (2014), *The Japanese Lover* (2015), *In the Midst of Winter* (2017), *A Long Petal of the Sea* (2019), *Violetta* (2022), *The Wind Knows My Name* (2023). Among her non-fictional works include: *Paula* (1994), *Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses* (1998), *My Invented Country: A Memoir* (2003), *The Sum of Our Days* (2007), and *The Soul of a Woman* (2021).

Stop to Consider

Magic realism, in art and literature is a technique used to define depictions which blends the real with fantasy. Things which are other realistic are presented in a mythical/magical way. Magic realism, thus blurs the line between fantasy and reality. The term “magic realism” was first coined by a German critic named Franz Roh in his book titled *After Expressionism: Magical Realism*(1925) in order to refer to works of art that combined the elements of realism and the fantastical, mysterious or supernatural. This genre of literature is attributed especially to Latin American authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, George Luis Borges, Isabel Allende, Juan Rulfo and others.

3.4 *The House of the Spirits: Background*

The House of the Spirits was conceptualized when Allende received the news about her dear grandfather being on his death bed. As she was in exile at that time in Venezuela, she was helpless and unable to see him. Therefore, she started writing a letter to him. This letter was written passionately with the hope that her grandfather would survive in spirit if not in body. The letter began with this objective ultimately turned out to be The House of the Spirits. The novel follows four generations of the Trueba family and explores the intersections between the history of the family and the history of Chile, through multitudinous perspectives that explore several intersecting narratives of love and loss. Because of its portrayal of the political situation in Chile, and since the dictator Pinochet was still in power when the book was released, The House of the Spirits was banned in Chile even though the novel never explicitly states its setting as Chile. However, due to its growing popularity in the surrounding Latin American nations, the novel gradually entered the hearts and minds of the Chilean people, and managed to win worldwide recognition for Allende. The use of magical realism in the novel called for comparisons with Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez and contributed much to the discourse surrounding how fiction is to deal with the wrongs of history.

Check Your Progress

1. What inspired Isabel Allende to write her novel *The House of the Spirits*?
2. Briefly discuss the historical background of the writing of *The House of the Spirits*.

3.5 Plot Summary:

The House of the Spirits begins with Severo and Nivea del Valle, a progressive middle-class couple, interested in local politics and respected by their community. Of their several children, Rosa and Clara take center-stage and the novel follows their journeys, which in the case of Rosa is cut short after she is accidentally poisoned. Rosa is defined by her ethereal, “mermaid-like” beauty that terrifies everyone. Despite

her beauty, Rosa manages to attract only one suitor, the ambitious Esteban Trueba, who quickly wins her hand. Unlike Rosa, it is Clara's eccentric personality, and particularly her supernatural powers, including telekinesis, that catches everyone's fancy, and which also convinces the local priest that she possesses demonic powers. Clara's supernatural powers are aided by her eccentric Uncle Marcos, who keeps the entire village entertained with the oddities that he had collected from his travels all over the world. Beloved by everyone, Uncle Marcos dies mysteriously and his body arrives to the del Valle house, along with Barrabas the dog, who soon grows into monstrous proportions and becomes Clara's best friend. Tragedy strikes the del Valle house when Rosa is accidentally killed by a swig of brandy that was meant to be had by Severo, who in the meantime is trying his luck in local politics. Clara, who had predicted a death in family, is the most affected by the death of Rosa, and refuses to speak for nine years, out of regret for not having been able to prevent her dear sister's death, despite having a partial premonition about it.

Esteban Trueba, who at that time was working in a mine, leaves his work upon learning about Rosa's death, and moves to his family's hacienda at Tres Marias in a bid to have a fresh start in life. The Trueba family is in complete contrast to the del Valles; they live in abject poverty and Esteban's mother is bedridden with severe illness while his sister Ferula is cold and distant to her brother, and is defined by her strict religious morals. Trueba pours all his energy into transforming the hacienda into a flourishing enterprise, and in the process emerges as a formidable figure who reigns terror on his tenants. He becomes particularly cruel to the young women in the community, who become victims of his voracious sexual appetite. One of his victims Pancha Garcia bears him a son, Esteban, whom he refuses to acknowledge as his own. In order to solidify his position, he also starts dealing with the local Conservative Party, and starts lobbying for profit. The only semblance of a positive influence during this time in Esteban Trueba's life is Transito Soto, a prostitute, who becomes his lifelong friend.

Meanwhile, Clara who had assumed muteness after the death of Rosa, grows up beautiful but alone, with no other friends besides Barabas. She has a vision and breaks her vow, and declares that she will marry

Esteban Trueba, who also comes back to town to visit his mother on her deathbed. Following the completion of the required mourning for Esteban's mother, he and Clara get married, but their marriage has an ominous start as Barabas is murdered on the day of their engagement party. The disconnect between the couple becomes even clearer when Esteban gifts Clara the remains of Barabas made into a taxidermy carpet, which horrifies Clara. She soon develops a friendship with Ferula, who dotes on her and spoils her, especially when she becomes pregnant with their first child, Blanca. She also becomes involved with the women of the hacienda and starts educating them on feminist principles, just like her mother Nivea did, and much to Esteban's chagrin. Clara becomes pregnant and gives birth to twins, Jaime and Nicholas, and has a fight with Esteban about naming the boys, after which Esteban starts going to Transito Soto again.

Clara's powers continue to grow, and Esteban becomes weary of the people in the hacienda finding out about it and making assumptions about their family. This is evident especially after the death of Severo and Nivea in a brutal car accident, in which Nivea is beheaded and her severed head is lost. Using her powers, Clara is able to track her mother's missing severed head, and she brings it along with her to Tres Marias. The growing closeness between Clara and Ferula also offends him, and it culminates in him banishing her from their household after he finds Ferula in bed with his wife. Clara is heartbroken to have lost her friend but is unable to use her clairvoyant powers to find her, until one day Ferula's apparition appears at her doorstep, convincing Clara that she is dead. Soon enough, they are able to track her and she is found dead.

The Trueba household and the entire community is hit by a massive earthquake that destroys everything in the Tres Marias household, and Esteban is also severely injured. Pedro Garcia, an elder in the village, uses his healing powers and sets all of Esteban's broken bones, and his son Pedro Segundo becomes the foreman of the estate. Clara becomes restless about her divination powers after her inability to foresee the earthquake, and regains trust in her powers when she has a vision about her daughter having an affair with Pedro Tercero Garcia, the son of Pedro Segundo. Pedro Tercero is a dedicated socialist, and his

relationship with Blanca also becomes an educational journey for her, and she begins to question her father and his management of his estate. Pedro Tercero is fired from the estate by Esteban when he discovers him preaching socialism to the other tenants.

Count Jean de Satigny, a foreigner, arrives at the Trueba household as a guest and soon asks for Blanca's hand in marriage. Following his proposal and Blanca's rejection of his proposal, the affair between Pedro Tercero and Blanca is exposed, which makes Esteban livid. The situation worsens when Clara implores to him saying that since he married out of his social status, Blanca also has the right to do so. In a fit of anger, he slaps Clara, who leaves the Trueba household with her kids. An enraged Esteban vows revenge on Pedro Tercero, who is now a fugitive from the state because of radical socialist views. Esteban Garcia, Trueba's illegitimate son from Pancha Garcia, offers to help him, and he helps track Pedro Tercero, who loses three of his fingers but manages to escape in the ensuing altercation, but Esteban refuses to acknowledge his illegitimate son's efforts and refuses him the prize he had earlier promised. Soon, Blanca is discovered to be pregnant with Pedro Tercero's child, and is forced to marry Jean de Satigny, who obliges after Esteban promises a sizeable sum of money as dowry. Blanca is devastated because she is told that Pedro Tercero is dead, but has no option but to agree to the arrangement, and is assured by Clara that her lover is alive and well.

Meanwhile, Clara's two sons, Jaime and Nicolas grow up as contrasting characters. Jaime becomes a doctor and develops a deep sympathy for the poor people of the estate, and like Blanca, becomes aware of the unfair treatment meted out by their father. Jaime also secretly falls in love with his boisterous brother Nicolas' girlfriend, Amanda. The dynamic between the three gets more complicated after Jaime is forced to perform an abortion for Amanda, who becomes pregnant with Nicolas' child. Blanca gives birth to her daughter Alba, and soon leaves her husband after she discover his sexual perversions in a series of photographs. She tells her daughter that her father is dead, and Alba grows believing so, while Blanca secretly resumes her affair with Pedro Tercero.

The Trueba family is shocked to its core after Clara's death on Alba's seventh birthday. Esteban Trueba is devastated and starts physically shrinking, while also gaining popularity within the Conservative party. Nicolas, who returns home after a series of travels and turns into an ascetic, stages a naked protest against the government, which gives Esteban a heart attack. He tries to regain control over his family by offering Nicolas money to leave the country permanently, and also builds a mausoleum for the two great loves of his life- Rosa and Clara. He becomes obsessed with the growing popularity of Marxism, and vows to banish all Marxist elements, unaware that his granddaughter Alba also develops sympathy for the cause, primarily through her relationship with her friend Miguel. She hides her identity as Esteban Trueba's granddaughter but is soon found out, which leaves Miguel upset. They soon reconcile and Miguel seeks Alba's help for assistance with his drug-addled sister, who turns out to be Jaime's lost love Amanda. Jaime in the meantime openly disagrees with his father, and finally leaves his house, frustrated with his bigoted political views. The Marxist candidate wins the election, but things only take a turn for the worse. Pedro Tercero joins the government and proposes marriage to Blanca, who rejects him in a bid to maintain her class status.

Esteban's revenge against the Marxists initially works against him; not only does he lose the respect of his children but also of his tenants. The tenants of the Tres Marias hacienda rise in protest against Esteban and take him hostage, only for him to be rescued by Blanca and Alba. The political situation in the country becomes increasingly unstable, and soon there is a military coup that removes the president from power, and begins a long campaign for the elimination of Marxist elements from society. Jaime is one of the first victims and is killed by the army when he refuses to help them. Esteban offers support to the military regime and is not even fazed by the death of his son, thinking that they would destroy the Marxists but would continue to work democratically. He becomes aware of his naivete soon, and as penance helps Blanca and Pedro Tercero escape the country and go to Canada.

Due to her closeness with Miguel, who becomes a popular leader, Alba is imprisoned by the military regime and taken to a camp. There she

finds out that her main perpetrator is actually Esteban Garcia, who had also earlier tried to molest her, and who takes out all of the anger he had for his father out on her. Alba is raped repeatedly by multiple men, and is on the verge of giving up when she is visited by Clara's apparition, who encourages her to pen down her experiences. Alba also bonds with the other women who have been kept captive like her, and finds hope for survival. Esteban Trueba goes to Transito Soto seeking help in aiding Alba's rescue, and as a result she is soon able to escape. After her escape, Alba starts writing the story of the Trueba family, and Esteban soon dies in her arms. In the meantime, she discovers that she is pregnant, and finds hope in a new beginning.

Check Your Progress

- 1) How is the del Valle family different from the Trueba family? Discuss.
- 2) Critically comment on the rise and subsequent fall of Tres Marias as a hacienda, with focus on Esteban's role in developing it.
- 3) How does Allende in *The House of the Spirits* trace the changes in Chilean society and culture? Elaborate with examples.

3.6 Major Characters:

- **Esteban Trueba**

Esteban Trueba is one of the central characters of *The House of the Spirits*. He is portrayed as an arrogant, ill-tempered man with a misogynist attitude. He is defined by his intense desire to succeed, and overcome the poverty and low social status that he was born in. He rules his hacienda with an iron fist, and thinks that whatever he does for the people is for the best, because they do not know any better. The way he treats his tenants is the same way he treats the women in his life, reflecting an attitude of violence. He assaults many women in the hacienda, and also raises his hand on his wife Clara. The main source of conflict between Esteban and Clara are his conservative views that he refuses to acknowledge her progressive ideas. His coercive control over his family is evident when he forces Blanca to marry Jean de Satigny,

after knowing that she is pregnant with Pedro Tercero's child. But towards the end Esteban changes with experience and the realization that his family members went through misery because of him, especially after Alba's abduction and subsequent assault, dawns upon him. In the end, Esteban Trueba does fulfill his ambition of becoming a rich patron, but at the cost of his entire family. Allende does not portray him as an irredeemable villain, and through the use of his first-person narration helps the reader to understand his position. Esteban Trueba represents the old, conservative patriarchal society that laid the ground for the breakdown of Chilean society, and his coming to terms with his own faults runs parallel with the country's reckoning with its own faults.

- **Clara del Valle Trueba**

Clara is a foresighted woman, as suggested by her name, which means "clear" in native Spanish. The magical realism elements have been blended beautifully in the narrative through her, and her connections with the magical and supernatural world. She develops her powers drawing inspiration from Uncle Marcos' notebooks. Even though the community is suspicious of her abilities, Clara flourishes under the care of her parents Severo and Nivea, who take great pains to "love her unconditionally and accept her as she was", even when she refuses to speak for nine years after the death of Rosa. Besides her clairvoyant powers, Clara is also delineated as a woman who is grounded in reality. This is best understood from her desire to help the underprivileged people in the estate at Tres Marias. Clara's dedication to her community manifests very clearly when she steps forward to help the earthquake-stricken people of Tres Marias. The earthquake also becomes a reminder for her about the limitations of her powers, and it makes her a more practical person. Clara's relationship with Esteban is contentious from the very beginning, even though they do share few infrequent moments of tenderness. She walks out her marriage when Esteban physically assaults her, after a fall-out over Blanca's relationship with Pedro Tercero. They reunite only after Clara's death, when she returns as an apparition to visit Esteban who confides in her everything that he could not say when she was alive.

- **Blanca Trueba**

Blanca inherits the spirit of her mother, which is indicated by her name, which in Spanish means “white” which is similar to Clara’s name which means “clear”. Blanca is free-spirited, sentimental and romantic like her mother, as is clear from her passionate relationship with Pedro Tercero. She, like her mother and grandmother, is also helpful to the poor and needy. Like Clara, she also does not hesitate to walk out of her marriage, when she discovers Jean de Satigny’s terrible secret. As a woman, she does have some practical limitations, which she follows despite her free-spirited nature. Despite not having any interest in Jean de Satigny, and after much coercion from Esteban, she realises she does need to get married in order to secure a safe position for her unborn child. She also finds herself unwilling to fully commit to Pedro Tercero because she is aware of the difference in their class positions, and is also scared of domesticity ruining the romantic nature of their relationship. Following the coup, Blanca puts everything on hold to protect Pedro Tercero, and even reaches out to her father, with whom she has a fraught relationship. In the end, Blanca gets her belated happy ending and is able to escape the regime with her lover.

- **Alba**

Alba’s character is a reservoir of the previous generations of Trueba/del Valle women; she is beautiful like Rosa and even has her green hair, she has an imaginative mind like Clara and her relationship with Jaime mirrors Clara’s relationship with Uncle Marcos, and how he introduced her to new worlds of knowledge, and like Blanca she also has a passionate romance that she does not hesitate to pursue. She also inherits their spirit of helping the needy, but she assumes the most risk in doing so. By associating with Miguel and supporting him by smuggling weapons and hiding fugitives, she breaks the last remaining shred of upper-class social respectability that the Trueba/del Valle women have, and emerges as a true rebel. She however, faces extremely harsh consequences for her rebellion, unlike Blanca and Clara before her. Her imprisonment and assault serve as a reminder of how women’s bodies are treated as stomping grounds by the patriarchal state. Her assault and subsequent

escape also emerge as the healing factor for the entire family; Blanca and Esteban overcome their differences and pool their resources to find Alba. For Esteban, Alba's rescue gives him the final moment of peace, and he dies in her arms peacefully. The unfolding of events following Alba's abduction exposes the real nature of family to the Truebas, and by extension to the readers- families are a means to maintain survival and well-being, beyond all personal conflicts and differences.

- **Pedro Tercero**

Pedro Tercero is a peasant for whom Blanca falls in love, and the son of Pedro Segundo, the overseer of the estate at Tres Marias. He dissatisfied with the system, and the unfair treatment meted out to the workers by Esteban Trueba, fuelled his urge to fight for his rights. He is fully dedicated to the Marxist cause, and does not stop, even after being repeatedly asked by his father to do so, and after Esteban's threats. Even though he has strong political opinions, he does not have political ambitions like Esteban, and has to be coaxed into joining the government by his comrades. He shares Blanca's romantic spirit, defined by his love for music and the guitar, which he continues to play even after Esteban chops off three of his fingers. Despite all odds, Pedro Tercero remains consistent in his love for Blanca and finally they get their reward as they unitedly start living together.

Check Your Progress

- 1) Critically comment on the portrayal of women in *The House of the Spirits*. Do the women change with each passing generation? Discuss.
- 2) Discuss how the struggle between the conservatives and the Marxists in contemporary Chile becomes an internal struggle in the Trueba family.
- 3) Who is Esteban Garcia? What is his significance in the novel?
- 4) Discuss the relationship between Esteban Trueba and Transito Soto. What does their relationship say about the character of Esteban?

3.7 Summing Up:

The House of the Spirits follows the history of four generations of the del Valle-Trueba family, to which the history of Chile runs parallel. Even though Allende never explicitly mentions Chile, the novel is rooted in the complicated history of the South American nation, and is also inspired by her close personal involvement in the same. The book is noted for its rich depiction of the depth of female experience, something that was not to be easily found in Latin American literature of the time. Stylistically, *The House of the Spirits* makes use of magical realism and other postmodern techniques including multiple narratorial voices and metanarrative techniques. The history constructed through the novel is one seeped in violence and portrays the fractured realities of wealth inequality and gender discrimination, which go beyond the South American context and can be applied to several other contexts, which is what adds to the importance of the novel. While portraying a critique of persistent inequalities, Allende also creates space within the narrative for the portrayal of the persistence of resistance to such inequalities. She locates this resistance within the lives of the del Valle/Trueba women, taking a clear feminist stance, starting from Nivea to Alba, who in small ways strive to make the world around them a better place, and that becomes the greatest legacy of their family. The novel ends on an ambiguous note of hope; Alba finds purpose in penning down the events of her family and in her unborn child, but there is no clear indicator of the political and social situation of Chile changing for the better. Nevertheless, what is established unambiguously is the persistence of the rebellious spirit that Alba keeps alive not just through her child, but also through the act of writing down everything that happened. Alba's child is also not given a father, which suggests that the future is in the hands of the mothers and of women in general. Thus, *The House of the Spirits* is a novel that celebrates the act of writing itself and the fighting spirit of womankind, and also explores the intersections between the two.

3.8 References and Suggested Readings:

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UNIT- 4

Isabel Allende : *The House of the Spirits* (Supplementary Unit)

Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 Narrative Style
- 4.4 Major Themes
- 4.5 Critical Perspectives
- 4.6 Glossary
- 4.7 Summing Up
- 4.8 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives:

In this unit the students will be provided with an in-depth analysis of the novel *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende. Additionally, the unit also aims to-

- *introduce* the learners to the main stylistic features of the novel, and how they are incorporated within the structure of the text,
- *provide* an in-depth analysis of the major themes of the novel.

4.2 Introduction:

The House of the Spirits tells the story of the del Valle-Trueba family across four generations, mirroring Chile's history. The novel is known for its deep portrayal of female experiences, which was rare in Latin American literature at the time. The novel depicts a history filled with violence and highlights issues like wealth inequality and gender discrimination, which apply to other contexts beyond South America. This is what makes the novel

significant. While criticizing ongoing inequalities, Allende also shows how the del Valle/Trueba women resist these problems. This feminist perspective begins with Nivea and continues to Alba, both of whom strive to improve the world around them. This becomes their family's greatest legacy.

In the previous section, we discussed about the novelist and the background of the novel, including the plot and characters. Now, let us explore the narrative style and themes of *The House of the Spirits*. I will also touch on how different critical approaches can be used to analyze the novel. These points will give you a variety of perspectives on how to read the text.

4.3 Narrative Style:

Some of the major features of Allende's narrative style as evidenced in *The House of The Spirits* are as follows:

Magical Realism: The term "magical realism" coined by art critic Franz Roh in 1925 and was initially associated with German expressionist art. Italian novelist Massimo Bontempelli in 1927 was the first to use the term in the context of literature and it soon came to be understood as characteristic of modernist fiction. Magical realism reappeared with renewed vigour in literary studies with the growing popularity of Latin American literature, and is today most prominently associated with the same. The term contains a contradiction and signals the blending of two seemingly paradoxical states—the mundane/ordinary/the real and the extraordinary/magical. In her book *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narratives*, Wendy B. Faris identifies five different characteristics of magical realism, which she terms as- 1) the irreducible element, 2) the phenomenal world, 3) the merging realms, 4) the unsettling doubt; and 5) the disruptions of time, space, and identity. *The House of the Spirits* contains each of these five characteristics. The first, "irreducible element" or absurd, unexplainable element is introduced in the novel through Barrabás, the dog, who grows into seemingly impossible proportions to a point where he resembles a horse more than a dog. Perhaps the most dominant irreducible element in the text is the clairvoyant powers of one of the novel's major characters, Clara, which feature as a major driving force for the plot of the novel. Barrabàs the dog and Clara's magical powers are rarely questioned

by the other characters as Faris notes that the “irreducible elements are well assimilated into the realistic textual environment, rarely causing any comment by narrators or characters, who model such an acceptance for their readers”. The second element, the phenomenal world, is the realism part of magical realism, and is simply put the setting for all the magical elements. The phenomenal world is described in intricate realistic detail, which creates a strong contrast with the whimsical spirit of the magical elements.

In *The House of The Spirits*, the phenomenal world as described by Faris is evident from the very beginning through Nivea and Severo Del Valle and their investment in the contemporary Chilean politics. Besides the larger developments of the Chilean state, the novel also explores in detail different aspects of Chilean life, for instance class relations as depicted in *Tres Marias*, which add realistic depth to the phenomenal world of the novel. The third characteristic of magical realism according to Faris is “unsettling doubts”, which essentially refers to how readers respond to magical realism’s underlying components, particularly the irreducible elements and the merging realms. The readers might hesitate to believe some of the narratives, sometimes due to cultural dissimilarity but also due to a general atmosphere of unnaturalness. The task of the writer is to anticipate the doubts and suspicions of the reader, and then to guide them out of it. Allende’s narration in *The House of the Spirits* achieves this very skilfully. For example, when Nivea pulls Clara’s braids which causes Chara to move a saltcellar, because the extraordinary event is typical of the characters’ life, Nivea’s lack of surprise enables the readers to accept it. However, Nivea also expresses doubt about her daughter’s powers, and it is only her unconditional love for her child that helps her overcome her anxieties. By showing Nivea’s struggle, Allende validates the reader’s doubts, and also helps them overcome them. The fourth characteristic, the merging realms is the way the magical world and real world coalesce into one another. Clara’s ability to talk and communicate with the spirits is an example of merging realms in *The House of the Spirits*. Clara is able to converse with the spirits and vice versa as she entered her youth, and as mentioned earlier people raise doubts about her powers. Her presence fills the Trueba household with whispering spirits. Many years after her death, when Alba and her socialist comrades use the Trueba household to smuggle refugees, Allende again invokes this image of

the whispering ghosts, except this time the reader knows that the spirits in question are actually the refugees. In this way, Clara's world of spirits and the phenomenal world of the Chilean nation merge, and Allende establishes both as equally valid and real. The disruption of identity is the last characteristic that Faris put forward and it is perhaps the most apparent in *The House of The Spirits*. The world of fantasy is channel for the women in the novel to assert their place, and thus is used by Allende as a way to let the subaltern speak, or in the case of Clara, speak to spirits. But this magical world is not an escapist fantasy, it does not prevent Clara from getting assaulted by Esteban and neither does it help Alba to escape her rapists. The function of the magical elements is for the characters to show who they are, and to celebrate who they are; Clara would be helping the women in the hacienda even without her magical powers (just like her mother did) but her magical powers make her better equipped to help them.

Stop to Consider:

The prevalence of the use of magical realism in Latin American literature beginning from the 1970s onwards has also been associated with the growing political instability of the region. Many countries in the continent, including Chile, went through periods of political unrest that upended the very social fabric of the place, and the realistic model of fiction was deemed inadequate to portray the experience of the situation. Magical realism with its combination of contrasts emerged like a possible model of depicting unstable realities that defying the rational logic of realistic fiction.

Multiple Narrators: The plot of *The House of the Spirits* switches between three narratorial voices- the first is the unnamed first person "I" narrator, the second is the omniscient third person narrator that is able to relay what each character is feeling, and the third narratorial voice is that of Esteban Trueba. In the epilogue to the novel, it is revealed that the first unnamed narrator is actually Alba who pieces together the story from Clara's notebooks, which was foreshadowed in the opening paragraph of the novel itself. The choice of Esteban Trueba as a principal narrator seems an unlikely

choice, since the novel focuses so heavily on portraying the experiences of the several generations of the women of the Trueba family. In such a case, Trueba as a man, and especially as a man who in many ways is the perpetrator of most of the violence that the women face, seems like an unlikely choice for a reliable narratorial voice. However, he is also the only character in the novel that has some form of a relationship with all the women—as a fiancé to Rosa, as a husband to Clara, father to Blanca and grandfather to Alba. His first-person account also adds more complexity to his character and helps the reader to see him as more than just a straightforward villain.

Autobiography/Biography: Most of the narrative in *The House of the Spirits* incorporates the style of autobiography and biography, and jumps from focusing on one character to another. This occurs at several levels in the text. Firstly, the first-person narrative voice of Esteban Trueba with its deeply personal anecdotes is written in the form of a diary or a journal. Secondly, life writing also features as a theme within the text, as many characters within the text indulge in recording their personal, which later emerge as important plot points. Clara’s notebooks are the best example of this, as it records her thoughts and becomes an inspiration for Alba to write her own story. Allende, in an interview with Nina Buckless for the Fictions Writers Review, has explained that her novel was based on her personal life, stating, “when I wrote *The House of Spirits* I told the story of a family, and I was also telling the story of a country. . . when I finished the book, I realized that’s what happens with history. Our personal stories are determined by the circumstances in which we live”. So in a way the novel is also Allende’s autobiography where she incorporates the biographies of different people who have left an impression on her.

Stop to Consider

Diaries, journals and other kinds of life writing are valuable sources in the study of periods of historical unrest, especially when official records are clearly unreliable. Pinochet’s military regime in Chile exercised its censorship laws to their full extent, and made sure that the ground realities of the situation was kept far away from media

Metanarrative: Metanarrative is a popular postmodern narrative technique that explores the art of storytelling itself, and which creates a narrative about narratives. The act of writing is central to the plot of *The House of the Spirits* and it becomes a way for Allende to comment on her writing process as well. For example, towards the end of the novel when an imprisoned Alba tries to pen down her experiences as a mode of survival, Allende notes:

“Alba tried to obey her grandmother, but as soon as she began to take notes with her mind, the doghouse filled with all the characters of her story, who rushed in, shoved each other out of the way to wrap her in their anecdotes, their vices, and their virtues, trampled on her intention to compose a documentary, and threw her testimony to the floor, pressing, insisting, and egging her on” (Allende 437).

It has been mentioned that Allende was inspired to write the novel by people in her own family and the way their lives became intertwined with the affairs of the Chilean state. Alba’s words read in this context can also read as the writer’s comments on her own writing process, which makes it a metanarrative comment on the construction of the novel. Even besides this, the novel puts significant emphasis on the act of writing as a means of survival and as a means of capturing alternate histories and preserving one’s culture.

SAQ:

How do you think does Allende’s personal experiences affect her choice of narrative techniques for *The House of the Spirits*? (60 words)

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Foreshadowing: Foreshadowing is the technique of suggesting future events or setting up an explanation of later developments. Time in *The House of the Spirits* does not follow a pattern of linear progression, but instead keeps going back and forth between the present and the past, and foreshadowing

emerges as an important technique of hinting the fate of characters. For instance, in her introduction to Uncle Marcos in the first chapter of the novel, the writer notes:

“Forty years later his great nephew Nicolas, whom Marcos did not live to see, unearthed the desire to fly that had always existed in the men of his line”(15).

The reader has not met Nicolas yet, and yet this sentence serves as a hint to his role in the narrative, and also provides hints about the fate of Uncle Marcos. Through foreshadowing, Allende constantly reminds her readers that every single event in the novel has significance that transcends the limits of time, creating a web of entanglements that the reader must unravel with great care. Foreshadowing in the novel also happens on two levels- Allende as the writer foreshadows the fate of characters and events by dropping hints, and Clara the character also uses her clairvoyant powers to foreshadow several events in the novel. The main function behind using foreshadowing as a narrative technique is that it constantly reminds the readers of the inevitability of fate. The arbitrary fate of the characters’ lives mirrors the arbitrary nature of the political violence that surrounds their lives.

SAQ:

Despite Clara’s foreshadowing, why aren’t the characters able to avoid most of the bad things that happen to them? Discuss. (80 words)

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Check Your Progress:

- 1) Discuss Allende’s use of magical realism in *The House of the Spirits*.
- 2) Who are the primary narrators of *The House of the Spirits*? What role does each narratorial voice have?
- 3) What is a metanarrative? Discuss in the context of *The House of the Spirits*.

4.4 Major Themes:

Some of the major themes explored in *The House of the Spirits* are discussed in the following sections:

Family: *The House of the Spirits* explores varied familial bonds, between mothers and daughters, between husbands and wives, between brothers and sisters and so on. The overall nature of familial ties is complex and multifaceted. The family is the site of love as we see in the close bonds between the del Valle children, and also between Clara and her daughter. But the family can also become a site of violence as we see in the case of Esteban and Clara, and later between Esteban and Blanca. To begin with, the lives of the family members remain intertwined across generations, and this intertwined nature is inevitable. The fate of the Trueba family is also intertwined with the fate of the Chilean state, more directly through characters like Esteban Trueba, but also tangentially through Nivea, Clara and Alba's political participation. That the fate of the family is tied to the fate of Chile is established very early on in the novel with the accidental death of Rosa, who is poisoned by wine that was meant to be consumed by Severo. The mirrored fates of the family and state establishes the family as an important institution that contains within itself different kinds of social meaning. The patriarchal society that the novel depicts makes a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate family, and in the end, it is the illegitimate family that Esteban Trueba cruelly discards that comes back to haunt them in the form of Esteban Garcia and hurt his legitimate family i.e. Alba. The epilogue to the novel paints a picture of reconciliation through Alba's writing, that brings together the several generations of the Trueba family despite their recurring conflicts and disagreements. The importance of family is established through the recurring symbol of the house, which signifies the intersections of two things- identity and space. The del Valle house in the beginning of the novel is one of unfettered imagination where Clara and Nana perform tricks without anyone stopping them, and where also Uncle Marcos displays his collectibles. The carnivalesque space of the del Valle household is contrasted with the suffocating atmosphere of the Trueba household that is characterise by the presence of Esteban's ailing mother. The house at Tres Marias is borne out of Esteban's efforts to carve out of his own space in the world, but it is cold and mechanical without the presence of Clara. It is Clara who

breathes life into “the big house on the corner”, infusing it with the eccentric spirit of her girlhood home, and slowly turns into a place of magical spirits. Many years after the death of Clara, Alba revives the spirit of the house by turning it into a safe space for refugees fleeing the military coup. It similarly also becomes a refuge for Amanda during her recovery. The house is just a vehicle for the family to extend itself to the outside world, because a family is only as good as it treats the world around itself, and it is Esteban Trueba’s failure to acknowledge this that ultimately becomes the cause of his loneliness. The events of the novel are set forward with the del Valle family in church where Clara’s clairvoyant powers are labelled as “demonic”. This scene also introduces the patron saint of the village, San Sebastian, who is also the patron saint of the plague infected. As the novel progresses, the choice of San Sebastian appears more deliberate, as the story is interspersed with different kinds of plagues, some literal like the ants, and some metaphorical like the plague of fascism. Catholicism’s obsessive focus on sinfulness and repentance is epitomized in the figure of Father Restrepo. Esteban Trueba’s sister Ferula also serves as a figurehead of Catholic repression. The del Valle family under Severo, despite attending church, is far from religious, Severo being labelled an atheist. Their deviation from the Catholic norm also establishes the family as deviant and as a possible site of resistance. But they still participate in church because of its social significance in the social lives of the people. Religion emerges as the bridge that traces the private lives of the del Valle and Trueba families with the public life of the Chilean state.

Stop to Consider:

The kind of family setup that Allende has portrayed in the novel is very different from one that might be found in a novel rooted in Western individualism. The way the family members are enmeshed in each other’s lives suggests a more community-centric approach to life that is more commonly found in postcolonial societies.

Spirits/ghosts and Memory: Clara’s clairvoyant powers, Rosa’s own spirit-like existence, Nana’s gypsy tricks all form the majority of the magical

realist elements in the novel. It is important to note here that it is only the female characters in the novel who seem to understand the nature of the spirit realm, while the men remain excluded. The spirits in the novel function like a family heirloom that get passed on from one generation to another like a set of collective memories for the family. The notion of a spirit-like existence is whimsical in the case of Clara, but also takes a more morbid form in certain other cases. Esteban Trueba is haunted by the spirit of his mother which is an expression of his guilt of being absent from the family. Ferula too assumes a spirit-like existence as she is forced to repress her desire for Clara and commit herself to a life of penitence. When Blanca discovers Jean de Satigny's horrific sexual perversions through the photographs, she notes how spirit-like the appearance of the servants in the photographs is. In each of these cases, the darkness evoked contains memories of something repressed, something that is too uncomfortable for the family to discuss in the open, and which can only be processed through ghostly apparitions. Towards the end of the novel and as the state of the Chilean republic deteriorates, the spirits of the del Valle house disappear and are replaced by a different kind of spirit- the spirit of resistance. Alba embodies this spirit and through her the reader is also acquainted with an entire community of women who show a similar zeal to survive. As Allende writes:

“It was then I understood that the days of Colonel Garcia and all those like him are numbered, because they have not been able to destroy the spirit of these women” (453).

This remains the most lasting image of spirit in the novel, and it contains within itself the memories of all the Trueba women, and also those of the people whose lives they touched, both in and out of the family, and their sacrifices that led up to that moment.

Women's Rights: It has been mentioned briefly that Allende has been credited for introducing a feminine perspective onto Latin American literature, and this is evident in *The House of the Spirits*, wherein she uses the major female characters to raise several pertinent questions about women's rights. We see the fight for women's rights traverse across generations, and with each passing generation the fight assumes a different character. Nivea del Valle is a dedicated suffragette and Allende shows how dedicatedly she

works in her community to raise awareness. Clara, although a more mystical being with clairvoyant powers, inherits her mother's passion for women's issues and works with similar passion with the women of the hacienda. Unlike her mother, Clara finds herself in a difficult marriage with Esteban Trueba and her walking out on her husband after he raises his hand on her is a major plot point that also makes an important feminist statement. Blanca and Alba too are outspoken feminists, who do not fear standing up for what is right. With each passing generation, the politics of feminism as practiced by the Trueba women becomes more violent and extremist; Nivea and Clara exhibit a more moderate reformist approach, while Blanca and Alba take a more radical, intersectional stance. With each passing generation the violence experienced by the women also escalates, culminating in the violent rape and abduction of Alba. But it is this pit of despair that launches the resistance that immortalizes the story of the Trueba family as Alba starts penning down a history of the family, and of Chile at large, as mentioned in the epilogue to the novel. Besides these primary characters, Allende also raises many other feminist issues through minor female characters- Ferula is a warning against religious dogmatism and the sexual repression of women, Amanda's story is an important reminder of the lack of safeguards for women's reproductive health. The necessity for women's rights is also emblemized through the ways in which the female characters clash with the patriarch Esteban Trueba. The only woman Esteban displays respect for is the non-traditional Tránsito Soto, a prostitute turned successful businesswoman, who he provides significant financial aid to. Overall, he treats women like property, especially his female tenants, who are sexually exploited by him and also are not given fair wages. He opposes Nivea del Valle's struggle for suffrage, and is similarly worried when his wife Clara displays the same feminist spirit and gets involved in teaching the hacienda's workers about women's rights. Clara is not bothered by her husband's expectations, however, and defies him at different points, and even turns his house into a hub for her activities, from holding spiritualist sessions to providing relief to the poor. Blanca also defies her father, continues to pursue her relationship with Pedro Tercero, despite Esteban's rejection of the same. The aging Esteban softens significantly by the time his granddaughter Alba grows up; his death in her arms becomes the symbolic end of his patriarchal

attitudes under the influence of women in his life. The inclusion of Esteban's first person narrative voice also humanizes him, and reminds the reader that the struggle for gender equality is not one of neat binary oppositions.

Stop to Consider:

What were the main ideas behind the suffragette movement? To learn more about the suffragette movement, you may refer to the unit titled "The Woman Question and Gender Studies" in your first semester SLMs (Paper-1016).

Class relations and conflict: As a novel that describes a military coup that overthrows a socialist government, class conflict in *The House of the Spirits* is very clearly discussed in a grand political scale. Allende introduces the issue of class in the novel at a much smaller scale by contrasting the del Valle and Trueba families- the former is an upper middle-class family with all the material comforts of life, while the latter is caught in a desperate cycle of poverty. Esteban Trueba's intense desire for upward social mobility defines not just his story in the novel, but also impacts the action of the entire novel. He moves to Tres Marias and renovates the hacienda there in order to create for himself a better, and a more respectable, livelihood. From the very beginning, Esteban Trueba reveals a deep desire to overcome his poverty, and we see that in his desire to taste a cup of exotic Vietnamese coffee. But he does not succeed in acquiring his other goal- marrying Rosa. His idea of winning over Rosa is also moderated by his desire to improve his class position as he promises her that he will provide her with a good life and goes off to secure that in isolation, an idea that becomes an obsession for him. Throughout his life Esteban reveals a deep mistrust of the working class, and views them as lazy and ineffectual, despite coming from a poor, working class background. Trueba's role as a class traitor is further solidified when he rejects the claim of his bastard son Esteban Garcia, and especially when he supports the fascist cause against the socialists. Trueba is punished for his internalized hatred of his own class when his own family, Blanca and Jaime refuse to support him and join the socialists. It has been mentioned earlier that the del Valle family came from an upper middle-class background

with progressive ideals, which Jaime and Blanca seem to inherit. But they also represent a sense of frivolity that keeps them away from truly understanding the reality of class struggle. This is best exemplified in the character of Uncle Marcos who uses the knowledge of poor, uneducated indigenous people to create a show. The class struggle in the novel is also moderated through the language of colonialism. In his effort to assume his desired class position Esteban Trueba models himself as a colonizer, and his attitudes towards his tenants also reflects the same. The colonial subtext can also be traced in the ambitions of Uncle Marcos, Nicolas and Jean de Satigny. Uncle Marcos travels to faraway lands to extract materials for his shows, and while Nicolas portrays a spiritual ambition, his ultimate goal is social validation, and which ends up reducing him to a caricature. Jean de Satigny is a foreigner himself who derives perverse pleasure out of the objectification of the colonized subject. The inclusion of a colonial subtext is not accidental, as the main driving force behind colonialism is the accumulation of wealth, power and a higher class position.

Stop to Consider:

What are the main ideas behind socialism?

Check Your Progress:

- 1) Discuss how the female characters in *The House of the Spirits* fight for their rights as equal citizens.
- 2) How does Esteban Trueba feature as the centre of the class conflict in *The House of the Spirits*?
- 3) What does *The House of the Spirits* convey about the role of family?

4.5 Critical Perspectives:

***The House of the Spirits* as a Postcolonial Novel:**

Latin American novels are usually not found at the centre of postcolonial discourse, which the major focus being on writings emerging out of Asian and African contexts. One of the many reasons why this happens is because

the colonisation of Latin America, done mostly by Spain and Portugal, happened in the pre-modern and pre-industrial era. Nevertheless, the fact remains that most of Latin America, including Chile, lost their culture under the infringement of foreign invaders. Spanish which was the language of the colonizer became the dominant language of the region and the indigenous people of the region became marginalised. This is referenced within the novel itself when we see multiple references to “Indians” who are depicted as savages, and the dell Valles and Truebas try to distance themselves from them. Postcolonialism asserts that political freedom from the colonizer does not guarantee complete independence, and that several neocolonial forces that exist in the contemporary world work to achieve similar colonial aspirations but in more insidious ways. In *The House of the Spirits*, what is not clearly described, but what is hinted at is that the Pinochet dictatorship was able to succeed because it got help from the American government which was embroiled in the Cold War at that time, and was dedicatedly trying to squash socialism. This subtext in the novel makes it an important document that records the persistence of oppressive power dynamics in our contemporary world. Moreover, Allende never refers to Chile or Pinochet or Salvador Allende by name in the novel, and this suggests a kind of universality and reminds the reader that what happens in the novel could happen in any similar context.

The House of the Spirits as a Feminist Novel:

In earlier sections, we have already discussed how the novel portrays a history of the women’s movement in Chile, and we have also seen how women’s issues form a major theme in the novel. It is not that Allende just simply portrays the lives of women and depicts the problems of women, but she also offers solutions, and the nature of the solution that she offers is perhaps the biggest feminist sentiment of the novel. To put it simply, Allende focuses on the importance of community for sustaining the women’s movement. We see this manifest first with Nivea and Clara, and then later Blanca, who do their best to become a part of a community in order to realise their own individual ambitions. Alba, the last generation, who is imprisoned takes to writing and preserving the words of her forefathers, thereby also creating an alternate access to a community, one that transcends

space and time i.e. the act of storytelling itself. Moreover, Allende emphasizes the importance of understanding the intersections between class, gender and the state. The final assault of Alba and her subsequent resistance is also a manifestation of this intersection; women are inevitably the collateral damage in any conflict.

***The House of the Spirits* as a Postmodern Novel:**

Postmodern novels try to define rules of realistic fiction, and challenge the norm of linearity and unified form. This manifests clearly in the narrative style of *The House of the Spirits* in the writer's use of multiple narrators, the use of foreshadowing as a plot device, and most importantly, in her use of Magical realism. Despite an overall sense of play, the novel also conveys a deep sense of destiny and fate, thereby painting an entangled web of contradictions. All of these contradictions and contrasts coexist through the power of storytelling and writing, which is also featured as a metanarrative within the novel, further solidifying its postmodern character.

4.6 Glossary:

- **Latin America-** Latin America is a collective region of the Americas where Romance languages—languages derived from Latin—are predominantly spoken. The term was coined in France in the mid-19th century to refer to regions in the Americas that were ruled by the Spanish, Portuguese, and French empires. The term does not have a precise definition, but it is “commonly used to describe South America, Central America, Mexico, and the islands of the Caribbean”.
- **Phenomenal-** perceptible by the senses or through immediate experience.
- **Hacienda-** The term hacienda is imprecise, but usually refers to landed estates of significant size. The hacienda system of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, New Granada, and Peru was an economic system of large land holdings

- **Postmodernism-** in Western philosophy, a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power
- **Neocolonialism-** it is the continuation or reimposition of imperialist rule by a state over another nominally independent state. This is the continuation of colonial representations and realities which remain after formal colonisation has come to an end.

4.7 Summing Up:

Allende in her construction of *The House of the Spirits* combines several stylistic devices which are prominently found in postmodern fiction. The novel oscillates between the narrative perspective of a third person omniscient narrator and the first person narratorial voice of Esteban Trueba, which helps in adding depth to his character. The novel also incorporates a metanarrative that celebrates the art of writing itself, through the character of Alba, who pens down the history of her family and her country, much like Allende tells the intertwined tales of her country and her family in *The House of the Spirits*. The metanarrative also locates the act of writing within Alba's feminist resistance, against all odds, and thus also keeps alive the struggles of all of all the women who came before. Besides being an important moment in the portrayal of the Latin American women's experiences, *The House of the Spirits* also explores several other themes significant to the region and its history, such as class struggle, family and religion. Every chapter in the novel is pregnant with history, and in summation the novel can be called a fine introduction to the history and culture of twentieth century Chile.

4.8 References and Suggested Readings:

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UNIT- 5

Shirin Ebadi: *Iran Awakening* (Background)

Unit Structure:

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Significance of Women's Writing
- 5.3 Introducing the Author
- 5.4 Background of the Author's Works
- 5.5 Introduction to *Iran Awakening*
- 5.6 Critical Reception
- 5.7 Summing Up
- 5.8 References and Suggested Readings

5.1 Objectives:

This unit focuses upon introducing the Iranian lawyer, human rights activist, and Nobel Laureate, Shirin Ebadi's works. Her works throw light on the impact of political and religious fundamentalism on the lives of the masses and how she fought against the system to uphold justice.

This unit will enable you to:

- *understand* the significance of writing as a form of resistance,
- *assess* how political milieu of a nation impacts the quality of life of its citizens,
- *explore* the themes of female emancipation, resistance, human rights, etc.,
- *observe* the writing style of the memoir.

5.2 Significance of Women's Writing:

Historically, women's systematic oppression in various societies have created hurdles in their process of getting access to education and other opportunities at par with men. One of their greatest battles had been with regards to gaining opportunities for publishing their works openly

and their scopes were often limited. Despite these challenges, many women writers managed to make their voices heard, often using pseudonyms or publishing anonymously. Some notable early women writers include Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, and the Brontë sisters. Women's writing explores issues related to gender inequality, discrimination and women's rights. Women have made substantial contributions to fiction, with authors like Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gaining recognition for their novels that explore a wide range of themes like race and identity. Autobiographical accounts and memoirs have been popular forms of women's writing through which they share their personal experiences. The historical events and their political and personal repercussions are presented from their point of view. Some popular examples of such writings are memoirs like *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion, *Becoming* by Michelle Obama and others. All these works have played the role in making women's voices more prominent by highlighted their indispensable roles as agents of change in the society.

Women's writing covers varied experiences and perceptions of women from different backgrounds, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and social classes. The writings have contributed towards promoting their distinctive voices to the world of literature, politics and history. The evolution of women's writing has shown how it has expanded gradually over the years to capture and reflect upon the changing status and roles of women in society. Women's writing plays a vital role in offering valuable perspectives on the feminine experience.

Stop to Consider

Intersectionality in Women's writing:

Intersectionality emphasises upon the diverse experiences of women and the unique challenges that they need to tackle amidst the intersecting identities. Shirin Ebadi's identity as an Iranian Muslim women who established herself as a successful judge in a

predominantly patriarchal society, breaks the pattern of one-dimensional stereotype and societal expectations from women in such societies. Her memoir, apart from delineating her life experiences also plays a role in highlighting the need for a more holistic understanding of women's lives. Intersectionality serves as an instrument to explore and comment upon the larger social and political issues of the times. Such works often serve as a form of activism which actively advocate for positive changes in the society and the justice delivery system, especially for those who experience multiple forms of discrimination.

5.3 Introducing the Author:

Before beginning with the text of *Iran Awakening*, it is important to know about its author thoroughly. This will help us situate the author in the relevant socio-political context in which she worked. Shirin Ebadi is an Iranian lawyer, former judge, and human rights activist who gained international recognition for her efforts to promote human rights and democracy in Iran. Shirin Ebadi was born on June 21, 1947, in Hamadan, Iran. She was a student of law at the University of Tehran. She later took up the position of a judge, and was one of the first women to have been conferred the position in Iran. Ebadi continued her career as a distinguished judge till the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979, also known as the Islamic Revolution, was a momentous event in the history of Iran when far-reaching changes took place in the Iranian society. The monarchical system of governance under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was overthrown and an Islamic Republic came up in its place, which was led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The former regime followed a strategy of modernization and secularization, but this had caused great social and economic disparities and the rural areas of Iran which were still very much rooted in their traditional values, resisted it. The Shiite clergy which was led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, vehemently opposed the Shah's rule. Khomeini used his sermons and writings to criticize the regime and mobilize the masses for its overthrow. In January 1978, the protests had started gaining momentum across Iran. It received widespread support from the various

sections of the society. The absence and eventual exile of the Shah brought about a good opportunity for the protestors to usurp power. The Iranians voted in a national referendum in April 1979 in which the majority supporting the establishment of an Islamic Republic won. This led to the abolition of monarchy officially in Iran.

These developments led to widespread political and social changes in the country. Iran was officially declared an Islamic Republic on April 1, 1979, and Ayatollah Khomeini became its Leader. Under the aegis of the new government, various Islamic reforms were implemented which included reforms in the legal system, education system, and women's rights. Its adoption of anti-Western foreign policy created more scopes for radical fundamentalism which denied equal opportunities to women, tolerance towards people of other sects and downgrading of the education system. The change in the political landscape brought on by the Iranian Revolution of 1979 had a profound impact on the lives of the people, especially those who were committed towards upholding human rights like Shirin Ebadi. The revolution and the subsequent establishment of an Islamic Republic caused Ebadi's removal from her judicial position due to her gender and the new government's policies. After she was removed from the judiciary, she continued her legal career as an outspoken advocate for human rights, with more emphasis upon women's and children's rights, and the rights of political dissenters and worked actively during the 1990s. She worked relentlessly to highlight human rights abuses in Iran and represented clients who were victims of government tyranny. She founded a human rights center that focussed upon the need to bring about legal reforms and facilitated public debate around the Islamic Republic's discriminatory laws. She spent nearly a month in prison in 1999 for her activities which included defending some of the country's most prominent prisoners of conscience, that is, a person who is imprisoned for holding religious or political opinions which the state authority does not tolerate. She was working for several years at the center of Iran's grassroots women's movement.

Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 for her courageous and untiring efforts to promote human rights and democracy in Iran. She was the first Iranian and the first Muslim woman to receive

the Nobel Peace Prize. In 2006, Shirin Ebadi co-authored a memoir titled *Iran Awakening* with Azadeh Moaveni. The book provides insights into her childhood years in Tehran, her career as a lawyer, and her dedication to human rights in Iran, especially during the post-revolutionary period. She was forced into exile due to increasing death threats and persecution in Iran since 2009. She has continued her advocacy from abroad and remains a prominent voice for human rights in Iran and globally.

Shirin Ebadi's determined efforts to uphold human rights of the oppressed have earned her international acclaim and recognition. She continues to be a beacon of hope in the community of global human rights activists and a symbol of courage and resilience in the face of political oppression.

Stop to Consider

Chronology of Important Events in the life of Shirin Ebadi:

June 21, 1947: Shirin Ebadi was born in Hamadan, Iran.

Late 1960s: She studied law at the University of Tehran and became one of the first women in Iran to become a judge.

1979: The Iranian Revolution took place, leading to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. As a result of the revolution, Ebadi was dismissed from her position as a judge.

1980s: Shirin Ebadi became a human rights lawyer, advocating for the rights of women, children, and political dissidents in Iran.

2000: She was awarded the Rafto Prize for Human Rights for her dedication to human rights advocacy.

2003: Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her continued efforts to promote human rights and democracy in Iran. She was the first Iranian and the first Muslim woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

2004: She established the Center for the Defenders of Human Rights, an organization dedicated to advocating for human rights in Iran.

2009: Shirin Ebadi went into exile due to increasing threats and persecution in Iran. She settled in the United Kingdom.

2011: She published her memoir, "The Golden Cage: Three Brothers, Three Choices, One Destiny," which reflected upon her life, her work, and her experiences.

2019: Shirin Ebadi continues her human rights advocacy and speaks out against human rights abuses in Iran and around the world.

5.4 Background of the Author's Works:

The literary works by Shirin Ebadi are mostly political in nature. The literary works produced by her include books and articles which are mostly focused on human rights, democracy, and her experiences as an advocate. Her works reveal her expertise in the general subjects related to law and the themes she explores are focussed upon the oppression of women, children and the oppressed classes. Some of her notable works have been discussed in the following sections:

Shirin Ebadi's memoir titled *Iran Awakening*, published in 2006 and co-authored with Azadeh Moaveni, provides a detailed account of Shirin Ebadi's unconventional childhood in Tehran in a simple family, her experiences during the Iranian Revolution, her work as a lawyer, and her determined efforts as a human rights activist in Iran. The impact of the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran was not only felt upon her career but also her family-life, which she elaborately describes in the book. She sometimes even rooted her arguments to defend human rights in the religious texts to refute the radical interpretations of the Koran. She vividly describes the case of the family of Zahra Kazemi who was an Iranian-Canadian journalist. She faced brutalities at the hands of the state-sponsored forces. Ebadi fought relentlessly for giving her justice. She also fought the cases of the dissenting intellectuals who too were persecuted by the brutal regime.

In her 2016 memoir *Until We are Free: My Fight for Human Rights in Iran* Ebadi reveals her harrowing experiences while fighting for human rights in Iran. She discusses her activism, her work with various advocacy organizations, and the challenges she has encountered. The persecution

faced by Ebadi in Iran after the establishment of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini intensified further after the rise of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad as the leader. Under his strict regime, not only were Ebadi's phones wiretapped but spies too were sent to follow her. Her family, colleagues and other acquaintances were threatened and harassed. Ebadi received death threats and her daughter was detained. Despite these incidents, Ebadi remained determined to serve justice to the oppressed people of her nation. The memoir is written in the form of a novel and the narrative structure is similar to that of a detective novel.

The book *The Golden Cage: Three brothers, Three choices, One destiny* by Ebadi tells the story of three brothers whose lives were intricately intertwined with the Iranian history. Abbas, the oldest brother was a soldier under the Shah. The second brother named Javad, was a communist activist and the youngest one, Ali was a supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution and his vision for establishing an Islamic Republic. How their lives were affected by the drastic events that shaped the twentieth century Iranian history such as the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, and the executions of political and religious dissenters.

Ebadi's activism also was carried out through the critical articles she wrote such as, "The Role of NGOs in Promoting Human Rights in Iran". It was published in 2002 and in it she discusses the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in advancing human rights in Iran and the challenges they face in a country where civil society organizations often operate under stringent rules imposed by the government.

Another notable publication by Ebadi is "An Introduction to the International Human Rights Regime", published in 2007. In this publication, Ebadi provides an overview of the international human rights framework and its significance in advocating for the rights of individuals and communities.

In another significant article titled, "Democracy and Human Rights in Islam" published in 2013, Ebadi explores the compatibility of democracy and human rights with Islamic principles. She argues that these values can coexist and discusses the need for a more democratic and human rights-focused approach in the Muslim world.

In the article, “Refugee Rights in Iran”, published in 2008, Ebadi discusses the rights of the refugees to guarantee their protection in Iran. It highlights the challenges faced by the refugees, particularly Afghan refugees, and the need to bring about changes in policies pertaining to their protection.

5.5 Introduction to *Iran Awakening*:

Before delving into the reading of the book *Iran Awakening* by Shirin Ebadi, a closer look at the prevailing socio-political conditions of Iran will be helpful in grasping the themes in a more comprehensive manner. The Iranian Revolution had impacted human rights in general and women’s rights in particular. It had a great impact on the status and rights of women and the gender roles in Iran. The revolution initially aimed at addressing various societal and political issues but the rigid rules imposed by the regime to bring about changes in the society had adverse consequences for women's rights.

After the Iranian Revolution, the Islamic Republic disseminated a conservative interpretation of Islamic law and cultural norms in Iran. This led to the formulation and implementation of policies that restricted the rights of women. For example, women had to abide by the strict dress codes and modesty laws and women's participation in certain professions and public spaces was restricted or overtly regulated. Women had difficulty in having access to certain occupations and career opportunities as certain jobs were reserved only for men, particularly the professions involving leadership positions. One of the most evident changes was the enforcement of hijab (headscarf) as a compulsory attire for women in public. Hijab was seen as a symbol of modesty according to the Islamic values, but it largely curtailed women's freedom to have control over how they dressed. Changes were made to family and marriage laws that often put women at a disadvantage. For example, the legal age for marriage was lowered for girls and men were given more powers in divorce proceedings. This made it more difficult for women to seek divorce or obtain custody of their children. Despite initial concerns that women's access to education would be severely restricted, there were still opportunities for women to pursue higher

education. However, the curriculum was reformed to reflect the conservative values of the new Islamic Republic government. The Iranian society has witnessed years of tumultuous protests. Many women continue to demand greater freedom and equality in the society. The cultural, legal and political factors have affected the status of women in Iran since long and it has been a complex and evolving issue which persists till today. Women's rights activists within Iran and around the world continue to advocate for greater gender equality and the protection of women's rights.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 also had a significant impact on human rights in Iran, and these effects have continued to shape the human rights landscape in the country. The Islamic Republic of Iran established a system in which religious leaders dominated the government. This led to adverse effects upon the human rights of the people, as the government pursued a policy of implementation of the rigidly fundamental Islamic law (Sharia) that, at times, led to restrictions upon the freedom of the individuals. The Iranian government has been criticized for the repression of religious and political freedoms, mostly for the religious minorities and political dissenters. Non-Muslim religious communities, such as Baha'is, have faced oppression and discrimination. The press had been severely restricted and regulated. Censorship and government control over media curtailed freedom of expression. Those who had been critics of the government, like journalists, and activists have faced threats, arrests, and imprisonment.

The widespread changes in Iran's legal system have led to human rights concerns. The Islamic law moulded the legal system's course. It had been criticized for issues such as the punishment for apostasy or renunciation of one's belief in Islam, the use of corporal punishment, and discrimination against certain minority sects. Religious minorities, such as Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, have faced varying levels of discrimination and restrictions on their religious practices. Mistreatment and torture of prisoners have been a major human rights concern. Instances of abuse and bleak conditions in prisons have been highlighted and documented by several human rights organizations. The establishment and operation of Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil

society groups often face strict government regulations and limitations, which made it difficult for them to advocate for human rights and bring about social change. The government has sometimes suppressed freedom of assembly, leading to the suppression of protests and demonstrations. Iran's strict government policies and laws have been a cause of tension in its international relations with other countries and international organizations. In the sphere of international diplomacy, questions have been raised over Iran's lack of enthusiasm to address the human rights abuse meted upon its citizens. Thus, human rights continue to be a significant issue of concern in Iran and a topic of international dialogue and diplomacy.

The intelligentsia of Iran played a major role in highlighting the problems that were inherent in the repressive methods of governance of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Intellectuals have traditionally been the vanguards for promoting ideas, critical thinking, and intellectual discourse. They have contributed to the progress of society through dissemination of knowledge, and being actively engaged with the politics of Iran and its relationship with rest of the world. They have been instrumental in advocating for various political causes, including the struggle for democracy, human rights, and social justice in the form of their association with political movements and parties. They often made use of literature, poetry, philosophy, and the arts to promote their liberal ideals. For instance, works like *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi, *Guards of the Imam: Role of the Revolutionary Guards in Iran* by Hossein Alaei, *Letters to My Torturer* by Houshang Asadi, throw light upon the human rights abuse and the challenges faced by the intellectuals of Iranian society who dared to question the Islamic Republic regime.

Many Iranian intellectuals and scholars have played key roles in the country's education system. They have been involved in teaching, research, and the development of curricula. A significant number of Iranian intellectuals live in diaspora communities outside of Iran. They continue to influence Iranian affairs, provide critical perspectives on the country, and engage in transnational activities. The Iranian government has at times repressed intellectual and academic freedoms, leading to

the exile or imprisonment of intellectuals who challenge the government's policies. This has led to a complex relationship between the state and intellectuals. Iranian intellectuals have often been at the forefront of various social movements, including the Green Movement of 2009, which called for political reform and democratic change. Some intellectuals have played a role in preserving Iran's cultural heritage, including language, traditions, and historical narratives. Iranian intellectuals have influenced political thought and ideology in the country. They have contributed to the development of various political ideologies, including both secular and religious ones. Intellectuals have been engaged in critical thinking and debate on various issues, including religion, identity, nationalism, and democracy. They have questioned prevailing norms and values, often sparking important discussions. Shirin Ebadi is one of the strongest voices among them and the incidents from her life delineated in *Iran Awakening* are a testimony of her courage and dedication to the welfare of her fellow-countrymen.

Iran Awakening by Shirin Ebadi recounts her life experiences such as her childhood in Tehran, her life as a student of law, the fomenting of the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath, and her journey of fighting for justice to the moment of receiving the Nobel Prize. Ebadi provides a glimpse of the legal system of Iran and how it underwent drastic transformation under the Islamic Republic regime. Ebadi's commitment to provide justice to those who had been wronged by the radical government clerics and the challenges that the path included have been vividly described in the book with the help of some of the famous cases taken up by her such as the case of Zahra Kazemi. Ebadi's love for her heritage and nation made her stay back in Iran despite the persecution that she faced for being outspoken against the excessive repression brought about by the outmoded interpretation of the Islamic laws. However, she had to take the tough decision of sending her daughter abroad to Canada for her future prospects, the scope of which seemed bleak in her own country, Iran.

Shirin Ebadi also enumerates the instances in which she had to fight the patriarchal norms of the Iranian society to secure her place as a distinguished lawyer in Iran. She achieved great success as a female lawyer and eventually went on to become the first female judge in Iran.

However, the advent of the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran led to her demotion as a mere clerk as the state did not deem it fit for women to take up leadership positions. Ebadi also provides details about her relationships with the people around her. Her evolving relationship with her husband, who was fairly progressive has been recounted by her. The impact that the imbalanced power-relation dictated by the Sharia laws upon her marriage to has been delineated by her. She explores the political reasons that led people to accept the new regime such as the attack of Iraq on Iran. The imposition of censorship and regulation of press had impact on her life as well. She recounts her experience of burning the books from her library which the Islamic Republic considered objectionable because of their political contents.

The gradual flexibility brought about in its governance laws by the Islamic regime too has been described her Ebadi. Girls were given greater opportunities in the sphere of education with some adjustments in the school syllabi. The families with traditional outlook too found it more acceptable to send their daughters in institutions that were offering religious teachings. Women were again allowed to practise law but the system was still highly regulated. Ebadi mostly took up pro bono cases, or the cases that involved representing clients voluntarily for serving those people justice who had suffered from human rights abuse at the hands of the repressive government officials. In order to fight the cases and deliver justice to those who had been wronged by the state, she even resorted to books on Islamic jurisprudence which highlight the ethos of egalitarianism in Islam. The expectations of social changes under the subsequent President Mohammad Khatami who was elected in 1997, have been described by her as a period of hope for the people of Iran. But this change of leadership did not bring about much change as the President is conferred with limited political powers in Iran. However, she does not mention much about the repressive rule under the leadership of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad who was known for his eccentric ways.

In the prologue to *Iran Awakening*, she recounts her traumatic experience of discovering the fact that she was on the hit list of the government's intelligence department that wanted to eliminate all those individuals who

threatened the state’s authority. She expresses her shock and the inability to comprehend the reasons for the hatred that she received from the government officials. Ebadi writes about her experience of imprisonment and her experience of receiving the news of her winning the Nobel Prize. She blends both the personal and political experiences in the memoir and end the book with description of her arrival at the Tehran airport. She does not merely present an indictment of the Islamic Republic regime but also highlights the certain good systematic changes brought about by it. It differed from the other Islamic states in its approach towards ensuring relatively better opportunities for its citizens. Ebadi also explores the reasons behind the rise of the Islamic Republic. The impact of the political moves by the West, particularly by the United States of America had great implications on it. She mingles both candid and formal tones to reflect upon the tumultuous times that she lived through in Iran. The language employed by her is simple yet effective in relaying the experiences of living in an uncertain situation.

SAQ:

- ◆ Give some examples of memoirs written by women writers which are centered upon political events. (50 words)
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- ◆ How do political events influence the literary works produced by the writers who lived through those events? (60 words)
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5.6 Critical Reception:

Iran Awakening received international acclaim because of the earnest efforts of Shirin Ebadi to straightforwardly portray the transformation that the Iranian society underwent during the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Her winning of the Nobel Prize in 2003 brought significant international recognition to her work and her memoir. The book, *Iran Awakening* mostly received

positive reviews for its representation of the historical political events through the eyes of an eminent female writer and a human rights activist. It has been well-received for its subjective and commanding narrative, its advocacy for human rights and democracy, and its contribution to the broader discourse on the role of women in activism, specifically in Iran. The book has played a significant role in raising awareness about the challenges faced by human rights activists in Iran and the importance of the struggle for justice and human rights.

The vivid language used in the memoir helps the readers to remain engaged with the events that Ebadi portrays in the book. It was praised for its straightforward language which displayed clarity and accessibility, enabling the wider readership to understand the complex issues she addresses in the book. The book has been hailed by many critics and readers to be both highly informative as well as inspirational. Ebadi's life and her dedication to human rights activism serve as a source of inspiration for those interested in social justice and activism. The book has been described as “an inspiring account” of Ebadi’s courage to question and fight the excesses of the Islamic Republic regime by speaking out against the violation of human rights and imposition of rigid Islamic laws on its citizens. The memoir, in the form of a personal narrative, provides readers insights into the complex cultural, historical and political backdrop of Iran.

Vali Nasr of *The New Republic* describes Ebadi’s retelling of the sufferings of those whom she represented in the legal sphere as poignant. However, her recounting of the experiences from her personal life lack the poignancy. Some critics also pointed that the book does not provide a comprehensive view of the challenges that the people had to face under the radical Islamic Republic regime. The account has been described as an honest and solemn reflection of the events shaping the history of Iran by Omid Nikfarjam of *New Statesman*. Ebadi has been praised by Laura Secor of *The New York Times Book Review* for interestingly presenting the strategies used by her to represent her clients and the complexities of the trials they were involved in.

Check Your Progress

- Write a short note on the significance of women's writing.
- How do memoirs serve as important source of historical knowledge?
- Make a note on the literary contributions of Shirin Ebadi.

5.7 Summing Up:

This unit looks at the significance of women's writing and its strong ties with the concept of intersectionality. It presents a detailed background of the acclaimed advocate and human rights activist, Shirin Ebadi. The chronology of significant life events of Ebadi too have been enumerated. Ebadi's contributions in the fields of literature, human rights activism, and justice delivery have been presented. How Ebadi's literary works reflect the impact of the complex political events in Iran on the personal and the professional lives of the individuals have been described. The unit also presents concise summary of the contents of her memoir *Iran Awakening*. The critical reception of the book by various prominent journalists and general readers has been delineated.

5.8 References and Suggested Readings:

Ebadi, Shirin. and Azadeh Moaveni. *Iran Awakening: From Prison to Peace Prize: One Woman's Struggles at the Crossroads of History*. New York, Random House. 2007.

Keith, Amy L. "Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope." *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 2, spring-summer 2007.

Warren, David. "Book review: Iran Awakening by Shirin Ebadi and Azadeh Moaveni". *Commentary*, Oct. 2006.

UNIT- 6

Shirin Ebadi: *Iran Awakening* (Reading the Text)

Unit Structure:

- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 Introduction
- 6.3 Sources
- 6.4 Reading of the Text
- 6.5 Summing Up
- 6.6 References and Suggested Readings

6.1. Objectives:

This unit aims at familiarising you with with the sources of the book *Iran Awakening* by Shirin Ebadi. It also provides a detailed reading of the text of the book by Ebadi. After reading this unit you will be able to:

- *observe* how individual lives are intricately connected with political events taking place around them.
- *analyse* the writing style of Shirin Ebadi's memoir.
- *explore* the different themes embedded in the text of *Iran Awakening* by Ebadi.
- *assess* how memoirs serve as a significant genre within the domain of women's writing.

6.2 Introduction:

Shirin Ebadi, the Nobel laureate and the renowned human rights activist and lawyer presents her struggles in her memoir, *Iran Awakening*. The narrative offers a first-hand account of her life, experiences, and her perspective on the Iranian Revolution. The book provides readers with insightful perspective of the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath. The book emphasizes the importance of human rights and democracy in Iran and highlights the challenges and dangers faced by those working in the field of human rights. Critics noted that the book serves as a call

to action for those concerned with these issues. The account provides valuable insights into the cultural and historical context of Iran. Critics noted that the book contributes to a deeper understanding of the country's complex political and social history. The book takes readers on a journey through the important events and milestones in Shirin Ebadi's life. The book offers a glimpse into the process of political and social transformation of Iran over the past few decades. It is an authentic account of resilience, courage, and unwavering commitment to justice and human rights.

The memoir is a reflection on Shirin Ebadi's personal journey, from her early years in Iran to her ground-breaking career as a lawyer and judge. It explores her experiences of growing up in Iran and the impact of the Iranian Revolution on her life. Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in the year 2003 for her determined efforts for the promotion of human rights and reformation in the legal system in Iran. The book discusses the significance of this recognition and its impact on her work.

6.3 Sources:

Shirin Ebadi's book *Iran Awakening* is mostly based on the author's own personal experiences. However, she made extensive use of other primary and secondary sources to present her personal account of the political events in Iran and its effects in a more accurate manner. Some of the significant sources used by Ebadi for further elucidating the events are *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* by Ervand Abrahamian, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* by Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *The Persian Sphinx: Amir Abbas Hoveyda and the Riddle of the Iranian Revolution* by Abbas Milani, *Women, Work, and Ideology in Post-revolutionary Iran* by Valentine Moghadam, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* by Roy Mottahedeh and others. She also used personal interviews of prominent scholar and political personalities as a source material for her book. Examples of some of the important interviews used in the book are the interviews of Farhad Behbahani, Parastou Forouhar and of Muhammad Sahimi. The reputation of *Iran Awakening* as a highly inspirational as well as an

informative memoir rests on the credibility and reliability of the literary and personal sources of information and insights of those who lived through the times that Ebadi describes in her book.

Shirin Ebadi clearly states the nature of her memoir as “a personal recollection” of the various events and cases that she was involved in and how they had an impact on her life. She clarifies that the book does not intend to provide any kind of political analysis and hence should not be treated as a political memoir.

SAQ

1. What are the major themes that women’s writings deal with in general? (50 words)

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2. Cite examples of some biographies that highlight the challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies. (60 words)

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.....

6.4 Reading of the Text:

Prologue:

In the prologue to *Iran Awakening*, Shirin Ebadi acquaints the readers with a trying period of her life in the year 2000. She was deep into the investigation of brutal murders of intellectuals of Iran for which the state too was responsible. It was the first time since the establishment of the Islamic Republic that the state had accepted its role in facilitating the killings. She vividly describes the tense circumstances in which they had to carry out the study for the investigation. While scouring the files containing graphic descriptions of the murders committed in the name of religion, she stumbles across her own name in the hit-list of the persons to be killed next. She describes her shock and terror along with the inability to understand the reason behind the unfounded hatred that certain groups within the state had for people like her.

Chapter 1: A Tehran Girlhood:

irin Ebadi takes the readers on a journey through her childhood days in Hamedan and then in Tehran. She begins her memoir with a nostalgic tone where she vividly sketches her carefree and innocent childhood days during the summer of 1953 with her family. She describes the day when the then Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was overthrown in a coup d'état. Ebadi very quickly shifts the tone of her narrative from a personal to a more formal one. The chapter unfolds with a brief description of her childhood memories and we find glimpses of such memories scattered across the chapter but it is mostly dominated by the description of the political events taking place in Iran.

Ebadi does not follow any chronological structure in the narrative. She elucidates the reasons why the overthrowing of the Mossadegh government had great implications upon the Iranian society. He was deemed by both the secular and religious Iranians as a national hero who had transformed Iran through unprecedented moves like the nationalisation of Iran's oil industry and demands for a freer press. His "secular sensibilities" and effective diplomatic policies were also responsible for his victory as a democratically elected Prime Minister in 1953. Ebadi then takes the readers many decades back to throw light on the political history of Iran. The establishment of modern constitutional monarchy after the formulation of the Iranian constitution in 1906, conferred limited powers to the monarchy. Under the popular and prudent monarch Reza Shah, many nation-building policies had been adopted. However, after the occupation of Iran by British and Russian forces during the World War II, the shah had to give up the throne in favour of his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The new ruler had shifted most of the powers to the elected representatives and this continued till the coup d'état of 1953. The coup was facilitated by the shah because of his sense of vulnerability caused by the meteoric rise in the popularity of Mossadegh and the support and planning provided by the U.S under Kermit Roosevelt. The sensible Iranians were disappointed by the

meddling of the U.S into their political affairs which led to the annihilation of the productive governance put in place by Mossadegh, who languished in his exile eventually. It also had an impact upon her family as her father lost his job and could never secure any higher administrative position because he had been a long-term supporter of Mossadegh.

Ebadi describes the unconventional household she grew up in under the aegis of her father's liberal outlook and gentle manners. Unlike in other families, there were no gendered discriminatory practices followed by her parents in the upbringing of her siblings. She alludes to various traditional elements of her culture while narrating the story of her parents, her relationship with them and with her siblings. She draws the character sketches of her mother and grandmother as ambitious women. Her memories of the childhood house in

Tehran in a spacious house with a beautiful garden have been vividly described by her. How she experiences spiritual epiphany one day, while praying in the attic for her mother's well-being who often suffered from sickness too has been described by her in details.

Chapter 2: Discovering Justice

Shirin Ebadi delineates her entry into the field of law, right from her student days at Tehran University to her appointment as a judge. She describes the politically-charged atmosphere of the university campus and how it gave her a "fleeting sense of agency" (17). She describes the visible features of modernity like women wearing mini-skirts, men and women studying in the same campus and students voicing their protests. She gives the readers a glimpse of the important developments of the 1960s and 1970s. She became a judge in the year 1970 and remained dedicated to serving justice despite the various lapses within the legal system of Iran under the shah's rule.

Stop to Consider :

Patriarchy and Political challengesEbadi mentions that the conservative interpretations of Islamic law often puts women in disadvantageous positions. The Iranian legal system puts various legal restrictions, such as in the areas of family law, divorce, child

custody, and inheritance, which is rooted in Islamic principles. Despite allowing women to take up higher professional positions, patriarchy dominated the Iranian society. The belief that the husband should be of superior status than the wife, made it difficult for Ebadi's suitors to pursue a relationship with her. However, she eventually met Javad Tavassolian who despite growing up in a conservative family was fine with Ebadi's professional success. They got married after few months of getting to know each other. As a married woman, Ebadi was fully responsible for household responsibilities and she had accepted this compromise as her husband had supported her career, which was not always the case with other women.

Ebadi again shifts from her personal stories to the ones about the rising interference of the government in the judicial affairs. This eventually led people to act upon the commands of Ayatollah Khomeini, who had been voicing his protests against the shah's rule. Ebadi too had taken part in his call for removal of ministers from their offices. When one of the senior judges noticed Ebadi among the protestors, he expressed his shock by asking her the reason behind her support for the protest as it might eventually result in her losing the job she cherished so much. Ebadi replied by stating, "I'd rather be a free Iranian than an enslaved attorney," (34)

Ebadi mingles personal information with the historical information while describing the circumstances during the coup d'état staged by Khomeini. She observes how he used the "religious emotionalism" of the general public to take over power from the Prime Minister. It was only after a month that she realized the victory of the revolution was actually the start of the end of her career.

Chapter 3: The Bitter Taste of Revolution

In this chapter, Shirin Ebadi depicts the drastic transformation of the Iranian society under the stringent laws passed by Ayatollah Khomeini. The narrative begins abruptly by referring to the "head-scarf invitation". Ebadi terms this as the forewarning of the fact that under the new regime women's rights will suffer tremendously. This proved to be true when Khomeini declared Iran as an Islamic Republic which would function according to the Islamic laws. There were rumours that since Islam did

not permit women to become judges, Ebadi might lose her position. She, however, thought that they would not strip her of her position. If they did so, that would mean women's participation in the governance system was going to end completely. Ebadi recounts how her fears actually came true when after her refusal to take the transfer to the investigative department led to her demotion as court assistant in the same court which she had earlier presided as a judge.

Ebadi not only presents the history of the uneasy relationship between U.S and Iran but also records her own observations in her narrative. In November 1979, a young radical group of followers of Khomeini held Americans in their embassy as hostages. What startled Ebadi more than the complete disregard of the group for the Vienna Conventions on Consular Relations was America's reaction to the situation. Instead of taking any solid measures for freeing its own citizens, it froze Iranian assets in America. The siege of the embassy was even celebrated by Khomeini as a "second revolution", which no one dared to protest publicly. Ebadi also expresses the reasons why the educated Iranians felt there was some kind of secret back-door mutual contract in place between the officials of America and Iran, who only appeared to be hostile to each other.

Ebadi very intimately recounts the harrowing experience of losing her judgeship in 1980. She was six months pregnant at the moment and was not even offered to sit while she was being cruelly downgraded from her earlier position as a judge. The callous attitude of the purging committee became further evident when they unreasonably reproached her for applying for maternity leave. Ebadi registered her protests in her own small ways, like not carrying on with the tasks given to her while working in the office. The final blow to women's rights came when the imposition of Islamic penal code was made official. Ebadi knew the extent to which it would curtail women's rights. Anyone who opposed the law was deemed to be an enemy of Islam. Ebadi enumerates the ways in which the new system was going to directly affect her life. In order to do away with the inequality that the new system had brought about in her relationship with her husband, she decided to get a post-

nuptial agreement signed by her husband. These would grant her the right to divorce her husband and to have custody of their future children in the event of separation. Ebadi's despairing and bleak tone mellows down a little when she delineates her journey of motherhood after giving birth to her first-child, Negar.

Ebadi's despair returns when she discusses the arbitrary nature of the laws passed almost every day. The former revolutionaries whom Ebadi had supported earlier would defer attending to the problems faced by women due to curtailing of their rights. All her hopes were lost when on September 1980, Saddam Hussain invaded Iran.

Chapter 4: Iran at War

This chapter provides detailed description of the circumstances that led to the Iraq invasion of Iran and how it made violence and death a common occurrence in the lives of the Iranians. Ebadi mostly documents the developments such as the rising prices due to the war, Khomeini's urge to spread his Shia revolution, the airstrikes and the battle between the forces of Iran and Iraq. Despite the truce offered by Saddam Hussein, Iran still witnessed upheaval due to the regular confrontations between Mojahedin-e Khalgh Organization (MKO) and Ayatollah Khomeini's emerging regime. The MKO was inspired from the guerrilla movements of Cuba and South America and was active since the 1960s. Unlike its model, it did not base itself upon secular leftist ideologies but on a militant reading of Islamic principles. It was led by the prominent sociologist Shariati, who played a big role in radicalization of the Iranian youth. He propagated the view that all the modern-day problems could be solved by following Islamic principles. However, with the rise of Khomeini, the MKO's prominence faded but it re-launched itself in 1981 with the aim to overthrow the new leadership.

Ebadi recounts the incident of burning down her books which might be considered as objectionable by the authorities. This act was motivated by the fears of execution by the firing-squad which targeted the counterrevolutionaries with leftist leanings. The extent of the uncertainty and fear that engulfed their lives has been described further through the

figure of her adolescent brother-in-law, Fuad. Fuad was an active member of MKO and despite living cautiously, was eventually arrested by the police and faced immense torture at their hands. Ebadi's language deftly captures her disillusionment with the authorities and the powerful urge of humans to survive despite the bleakness of the times.

Chapter 5 : War of the Cities

Like the earlier chapters, this chapter too begins with a personal anecdote from Shirin Ebadi's everyday life. She recounts how she would often forget her head-scarf which was made compulsory by the regime. By doing so, she often drew attention of the people around her. She expresses her anguish caused by side-lining of the question of women's rights because of the graver issues at hand such as censorship, persecution and execution of those who opposed the new regime and the extension of the war with Iraq. This long period of gloom was illuminated by the birth of Ebadi's second child Nargess. She describes her moments of peace and togetherness with her children and family amidst the political turmoil around her. Her retirement from her post allowed her to spend more time with her family and to contemplate ways to contribute more meaningfully to her society, unlike some of her friends who had become mouthpiece of the tyrannical government.

She describes her family's financial difficulties due to closing of her husband's firm on the false accusation of it being run by the Communists. Her family had to cut down on expenses such as eating out which her daughters loved very much. Upon finding them sad about not being able to eat at a restaurant, Ebadi made a little dining corner like that of a restaurant. By this she tried to instil in her daughters the idea that they could create opportunities out of "what they had to work with" (76).

The transitions between the descriptions of Ebadi's personal life and the political history of Iran appear disjointed because of the difference in tone that she employs. While discussing her personal life, she makes use of a more informal, contemplative and intimate tone of narration. But in her descriptions of the historical events, she uses a more objective

and formal tone. Although her own thought processes too appear in those descriptive passages. For instance, she expresses her despair while describing Saddam Hussein's full-fledged use of chemical weapons on the Iranian soldiers and the entire international community not condemning his heinous acts, which eventually made any Iranians flee their native land. Ebadi's passionate entreaties to her colleagues, friends and family-members to not leave their country were all unsuccessful. She roughly estimates that around four to five million Iranians had left over the past two decades. It was not only the lack of opportunity to fully develop oneself that was instigating such large-scale brain-drain, but also the fear of separation and death of the peoples' loved ones. However, Shirin Ebadi remained firm in her stance of not leaving Iran, despite the worsening condition of the country. The loud noises of the fighter planes and missiles hitting the cities had become the backdrop of their lives. After eight long years of the war and loss of more than half a million lives, Iran and Iraq accepted United Nations Security Council cease-fire resolution. The extent to which the people felt relieved after witnessing years of destruction and death was indescribable. However, the relief was short-lived as MKO sent seven thousand fighters to weaken Iran and eventually bring down the current government with the help of Iraq. This development made things worse for those who had been earlier convicted for their association with MKO such as Fuad, Ebadi's young brother-in-law.

Ebadi recounts how one day her family was apprised of Fuad's execution, for being indirectly involved in the attacks. The absurdity of the incident struck Ebadi immensely as she could clearly see that Fuad was wrongly accused and it would have been impossible for a youth who had been languishing in prison for so many years to have the ability to establish contacts across the borders. She mentions the deceitful nature of the trials that ordered such executions. This was the turning point in her life that made her embark on a life-long fight for securing human rights in her country. Ebadi emerges as a self-aware narrator who interacts with the readers and tells them that she thinks it is important to know more about the war as it has had direct impact upon the present

politics in Iran. After the war people understood the devious ways in which America operates to garner undue profits in the garb of being an epitome of democracy and liberty. It was the American satellite photos and weapons that enabled Iraq to ravage Iran. She elaborates America's callousness further by presenting statistical data of the losses incurred by both Iran and Iraq during the war while the western countries made huge profits out of it.

Chapter 6: Strange Times, My Darling

The deterioration of Iran's governance system after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini has been described vividly by Shirin Ebadi in this chapter. The dramatic nature of the immediate aftermath of Khomeini's death in which his fanatic supporters tried stealing his remains and the police repression that followed has been captured. The anarchy had started taking toll on people's private lives. The new leadership tried to exercise its control by intruding in

people's lives through new social restrictions. It formed a morality police named komiteh which enforced the restrictions stringently. Ebadi makes use of humour to capture the absurdity of those times. She mentions how since the war it was the first time that the government had finally started paying attention to the formerly neglected issues like not allowing any one to date or watch inappropriate television shows. The brunt of the komiteh was more severely borne by the women of Iran, including Ebadi herself. She recalls those times when women were not allowed to go out unaccompanied by their male relatives or to wear any make-up. Ebadi was herself arrested once on the accusation of bad hejabi or for violating the custom of hejab. She was taken to the police headquarters where an illiterate young girl of eighteen read out to them some words of Hazrat-e Fatemeh with the intention of enlightening them on the importance of hejab. The excessive prying upon the activities of its citizens, especially women was mainly to create a climate of fear and uncertainty through which the amateur leaders tried to feel powerful.

Ebadi reflects upon the lack of awareness of people about the significance of electoral processes. Most of the people voted out of their zealous religious sentiments. During the early nineties when the people slowly started understanding the process of election, a new law came up which

gave an unelected clerical body called the Guardian Council to actively interfere in both Parliamentary and Presidential elections. This did not allow the Iranians to freely choose their representatives. There would be such cases where the candidate who represented a particular place had visited the place just once or twice in his career.

The earlier belief of the conservative families that educating their daughters in universities would corrupt them was no longer viable as the public spaces were strictly segregated. Women could attend university in hejab and the lunch tables in the cafeterias were strictly segregated between males and females. The curriculum too had incorporated the traditional Islamic teachings which made it a trend for the families to send their daughters to the universities. Ebadi notes that despite the number of women enrolling in higher education was increasing, it did not mean people had also started taking up the issues of women's rights and spreading feminist awareness. This often resulted in familial tensions as the educated girls were still expected to obey their father's or a male elder's commands in decisions regarding their lives. She illustrates this with the help of an example of her neighbour's daughters.

Ebadi hails the increasing number of female students in universities as a great feat for an Islamic Middle Eastern country. However, the rising number of educated females did not lead to increasing presence of women in the workforce because of the government's inability to create more jobs and its traditionalist bent of mind which engaged women only in those areas where their employment

served their short-term purpose. This led to women's unemployment rate shooting up to three times higher. While discussing the frustration and angst of the educated women in the stifling milieu of Iran, Ebadi alludes to the cases of women committing suicide in protest. The nature of the suicides showcased that the act was not just about ending their repressed lives. This "tragic exhibitionism" was a potent method of registering their protest and highlighting their plight to the global community. In the current context of the women's protests in Iran, this issue has become all the more relevant.

With the passage of time, people realised how the repressive laws by the government had deterred the country's progress. The need to bring

about gradual changes in the system was felt by many and reforms started taking place. Women were allowed to practice law in 1992. But soon after Ebadi started practicing after getting her licence from the Iranian Bar Association, she realised that the legal system was filled with corruption. The system could not deliver justice fairly and would often resort to back-door methods like bribing to resolve the cases. It was then that Ebadi decided to work without a fee and represent only pro bono cases to highlight the injustice meted out on women by the theocratic government of the country. Ebadi highlights the importance of telling stories as a way of attracting people's attention to the injustices taking place in her country. She draws her purpose from the revolution's principle of fighting against zolm or oppression.

Chapter 7: From the Living Room to the Courtroom

The core part of Shirin Ebadi's memoir starts from here where she delineates the real stories of the people who had wretchedly suffered under the theocratic regime's repressive system. Ebadi's activism starts when she decided to take up cases that showed the Islamic regime's inappropriate interpretation of the Koran was leading to unjust laws impacting people's lives adversely. One such case that highlighted this was that of the rape and murder of the nine year old Leila whose family had to lose all their possessions in order to get justice. Under the Islamic law, the family of the murdered person has the option to choose between legal punishment and financial compensation which is also referred to as 'blood money'. The Iranian code states that the value of a woman's life is half of that of a man's. Therefore, while punishing the culprits of Leila, the court declared that the life of nine year-old Leila was worth much less than the lives of the two convicts and hence her family had to pay thousands of dollars to carry out the executions. In the Iranian societies, a family could save its honour only by executing the ones who violated the chastity of their women. This led Leila's family to sell all its belongings and hopelessly fight for justice. Ebadi tried her best to help the family get justice but it was all in vain because of the rigid laws followed by the legal system. However, this case threw light on the importance of media in highlighting the flaws inherent in the Iranian legal system.

Ebadi began her journey as an activist by publishing an article on women's inferior status imposed by the Iranian legal code. Despite the risk of being persecuted for questioning the system, Ebadi kept enlarging her activism by taking up more such cases. She also describes her domestic life in which she had to carry out most of the works. From raising her daughters to running the household, she did everything while carrying on with her legal works. She describes her urge to instil in her daughters her "sensitivity to justice" and the need to "push boundaries". (121) Ebadi's fight for women's custody rights and against child abuse garnered world-wide attention and made her famous, which eventually led her to bring about reforms in the legal system of the country.

Chapter 8: Terror and the Republic

Ebadi describes the macabre details about the Islamic regime's attempt at silencing its critics through fear. How there had been an attempt to throw a bus carrying scholars and writers down a cliff, several incidents of prominent writers and journalists being abducted and brutally killed and the regime's attempts at saving its international image has been delineated in this chapter. Ebadi herself had been a critic of the regime and had faced the intrusion of the regime's surveillance system in her private as well as professional life. It was during the investigation of the brutal killings of the prominent intellectuals Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar, and a series of other such murders, that Ebadi came across her own name in the hit-list of those whose murders had been sanctioned by the regime. Despite the shock and fear it caused in her, Ebadi kept working on the case and eventually held the regime accountable for its acts. Although it did not result in any reforms in the laws, it forced the Islamic Republic regime to inhibit its brutal extra-judicial killings.

Chapter 9: An Experiment in Hope

Ebadi, mingles her subjective and objective worldview to describe the changes taking place in the Iranian society under the new leadership of Mohammad Khatami, who won the Presidential election of 1997. Initially people hailed him as the forbearer of Islamic democracy and freedom. However, once the freedom allowed the dissenters to present their need for drastic reforms in the Iranian society, there was a crackdown by the government. Khatami was complicit in the process which disillusioned

people further. Ebadi also describes how her relationship with her daughters was different from their relationship with their father. Being a mother in a politically unstable society had increased Ebadi's responsibilities as a mother. She would try to educate her daughters on how to avoid being a pawn in the political processes. She captures the impact of the changing views of the people about the political tactics being played out in Iran which she substantiates further in the succeeding chapters.

Chapter 10: A Conscientious Prisoner

In this chapter Ebadi presents her harrowing experiences after she was wrongly arrested for trying to bring justice to the young poet and intellectual Ezzat Ebrahimnezhad, who was brutally killed by the paramilitary forces deployed by the government. Ebadi had offered her services for free and had collaborated with an ex-paramilitary who wanted to expose the gruesome nature of their work sponsored by the government. This eventually led to Ebadi's arrest for the attempt to malign the image of the Islamic Republic. Ebadi reflects upon people's inability to comprehend that a woman too could be a prisoner of conscience, that is, a person who has been imprisoned for going against the predominant worldview of the state. She also mentions those people who had been kind to her in prison for her children's rights activism. She vividly describes her frustration, hopes and eventual release from the jail and her life afterwards. The arrest also helped her strengthen her international reputation as an activist.

Chapter 11: In the Shadows of Reform

The waves of reforms in the rigid rules of the Islamic Republic could be felt surging through Iran during the early 2000s. Ebadi describes the birthday celebration of her daughter Negar to show how the milieu around them had slowly become more peaceful. The morality police still operated but had stopped being a constant nuisance in their lives. When the leadership realised that global isolation and system's excessive interference in the private lives of the people were doing it more harm, a lot of rules were relaxed. Women could occasionally choose to wear slippers and dresses with bright colours. People could go to cafes and enjoy open concerts in parks or gardens. Ebadi credits these changes

to the relentless protests staged by the young generations. The internet too had helped young people to establish effective networks.

Ebadi recounts how despite her initial reservations, she allows her daughter, Negar to pursue her higher studies in Canada. The pangs of separation that she faced as a mother and her subsequent preoccupation with her work as a human rights activist has been delineated by her in this chapter. She discusses in details the struggle of the newly elected female MPs of Iran in securing basic office equipment and furniture. Ebadi's collaboration with them to draft a bill on family laws and the hurdles that they faced in tabling the law before the Parliament too has been portrayed in great details. In order to justify the bill's compliance with the Islamic laws, Ebadi takes recourse to religious texts like *Shahr-e Lomeh*, the Shia textbook of jurisprudence. The challenges that she faced as a lawyer while representing activists like Akbar Ganji and the photojournalist, Zahra Kazemi and her friend Ziba, have been scrupulously narrated by her. Ebadi's dedication to her work is revealed from the fact that even after the announcement of her winning the Nobel Prize, she kept working on the case of Ziba to showcase the world the extent of injustice that was meted out wrongfully to the political dissenters in Iranian prisons.

Chapter 12: The Nobel Prize

Ebadi lovingly recollects the September of 2003 when she had been to Paris with her younger daughter for a seminar. She had faced some opposition from the Iranian embassy as they feared she would try to taint the Islamic Republic's image in the seminar. However, the organizers remained steadfast in their decision and Ebadi participated in the seminar. It was during this visit to Paris when she was informed about her winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Ebadi gives a detailed description of the sudden surge in her popularity and the rush of various emotions she experienced within her being. The Nobel Prize did not simply mean a magnificent personal achievement for her. It represented a victory of her principles as a women human rights advocate who proudly represented the legacy of her culture and religion as an Iranian. She had been true to her conviction that the Koran should be interpreted in a manner that

propagated equality and democracy and that reforms must be brought about in a peaceful manner. The tone of the narrative shows her overwhelming emotions upon receiving immense love, support and reverence of those who idolised her and also the ones who had formerly opposed her.

In the epilogue of the book, Ebadi details the challenges she faced in publishing the book. She clarifies that this book is a personal recollection of the significant political events and how they had an impact upon her life.

Check Your Progress

1. Write a short note on the writing style of Shirin Ebadi in *Iran Awakening*.
2. Describe the influence of the Iranian Revolution on the rights of the women in Iran.
3. How can you correlate the impact of the Iranian Revolution with the current political developments in Iran?

6.5 Summing Up:

Shirin Ebadi's *Iran Awakening* is a gripping tale of courage, perseverance, strength, and resilience. She vividly portrays the struggle of being a woman in the patriarchal society, especially the struggle against the socio-political administrative system. The memoir illustrates an evocative picture of her childhood and her experiences in a traditional Tehran family, her faith and religious beliefs, her marital life and motherhood, as well as her life as a lawyer and the tenacious battle she had to fight against an oppressive regime. She became the first female judge in the country, but was soon demoted to the position of a clerk in the same courtroom she previously presided over as the judge. However, she valiantly fought for her rights as a human rights lawyer, as well as became the voice of justice for the women and children and represented controversial politically charged cases that most lawyers were afraid to

speaking about. The memoir also illuminates on the ideals of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Shirin Ebadi became the voice of justice and equity, not only for the natives of Iran, but also became a light-bearer for all, across the world.

6.6 References and Suggested Readings:

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