

BLOCK: II

Unit 1 : A.K. Ramanujan: (Introducing the Author)

Unit 2 : A.K. Ramanujan: Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay

Unit 3 : Aijaz Ahmad: Introducing the Author

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UNIT- 1

A.K. Ramanujan: (Introducing the Author)

Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introducing the Author
- 1.3 Ramanujan as a Diasporic Writer
- 1.4 Ramanujan as a Poet
- 1.5 Ramanujan as a Translator
- 1.6 Ramanujan as a Folklorist
- 1.7 Ramanujan as an Essayist
- 1.8 Summing Up
- 1.9 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 Objectives:

In this unit, you will be introduced to A.K Ramanujan as a multifaceted writer. You will also get an overview of his contribution as an expatriate. This unit is designed to offer you a wider understanding of A.K Ramanujan's expertise and significance as a poet, translator, folklorist and an essayist. After going through the unit, you will be able to–

- *understand* A.K Ramanujan's contribution to Indian English literature as an expatriate,
- *comprehend* Ramanujan's wide range of expertise in diverse fields,
- *understand* his distinctive style as an essayist,
- *develop* an overall critical appreciation of A.K. Ramanujan as a multitalented writer and thinker.

1.2 Introducing the Author:

Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan was born in Mysore in 1929 into a Tamil brahmin family. Ramanujan received a B.A with honours in English Literature from Mysore University in 1949 and that same year he took a teaching job in English in Kerala. Shortly after his father's death in

1950, Ramanujan moved to another teaching position in Dharwar, Karnataka. Even in those early days he was developing a reputation as a brilliant lecturer. People travelled miles to take his classes. His early love was Shakespeare but in 1957 he developed a new interest in linguistics. He enrolled at the Deccan College in Poona, in a programme supported by the Rockefeller Foundation where the staff consisted of the most eminent linguists in India as well as specialists from the US and Europe. In 1958, he came to America on a Fullbright grant, to continue his study in linguistics at Indiana University. He did his Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1963 on the generative grammar of Kannada. He stayed back in the United States of America where he was offered a teaching assignment by the University of Chicago in 1962 and he eventually became Professor in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations.

A.K. Ramanujan earned his reputation as a globally acclaimed Indo-Anglian poet. Some of his published collections include the *Striders* (1966), *Selected Poems* (1976), *Second Sight* (1986) in English and *Hokkulalli Huvilla* (1969), *Mattu Itara Padyagalalu* (1977) in Kannada. His poems have also been included in a number of anthologies and textbooks to be taught in various Indian institutions. Besides being a talented poet, he also made his contribution as a translator, folklorist and linguist. Ramanujan's upbringing provided the foundation for his huge body of writing. Brought up in a tri-lingual environment, English-Tamil-Kannada, he found himself at home in all the three languages and later contributed to each literary tradition. He referred to them as 'downstairs', 'upstairs, and 'outside the house'. Tamil was the language of his family, the language he spoke with his mother downstairs; Kannada was the language of Mysore i.e., language outside the house; and English was referred as upstairs, the language he spoke with his father upstairs in the library (Daniels-Ramanujan and Harrison 54). His father, Attipat Asuri Krishnaswami, was a Professor of Mathematics at Mysore University and an astronomer. Ramanujan's mother was an orthodox Brahmin woman of her time and a typical housewife. She was well read in Tamil and Kannada and at times Ramanujan's father translated the plays of Shakespeare into Tamil for his mother. His father wryly termed him "intellectually promiscuous" for his varied interest in literature.

philosophy, anthropology and zoology (Dimmock and K Ramanujan xvi). His knowledge in diverse disciplines was very well reflected in his literary and critical works.

Ramanujan's sudden death in 1993, at the age of sixty-four, came as a shock to many. However, he earned much acclaim in his lifetime for his contributions to literature both in India and US. *The Indian Express* honoured him as a “Well known Kannada poet-litterateur and eminent translator” and *The Statesman* admired him as a “Well-known Kannada litterateur, poet and critic” (Agarwal 73). He also received the highest honour the Padma Shri award of the Government of India in 1976 for his contribution to Indian English literature, a MacArthur Fellowship in 1983, and election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

1.3 Ramanujan as a Diasporic writer:

A.K. Ramanujan is a diasporic poet, an Indian expatriate living in America. His poetry is loaded with nostalgia for his lost motherland that is expressed with the critical faculty developed by the Western enlightenment. Therefore, his poetry is considered to be a curious combination of Eastern wisdom and Western skepticism. His colleagues, Susanne and Lindy Rudolph, credited him as both “transnational and subnational, capable of the most sophisticated universalism even while remaining rooted in microhumanity, his regional culture” (qtd. in Agarwal). A. K. Ramanujan is an expatriate who spent the last thirty years of his life in Chicago yet he was always connected to his roots. His association with India never suffered a setback and being away from it he developed a better understanding about his country and its culture. Citing the example of his first major work of translation, *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology*, Dimmock and Ramanujan observe that this collection demonstrates his ability to stay extremely loyal to the Indian qualities of the literature and still make it clear and fascinating to Westerners (“Introduction” xvii). His works are characterized by the tension between the specifically Indian and the more generally human. Doniger believes that his typically witty, self-deprecating, and much-quoted remark about being the hyphen in 'Indo-American' offers too simple a key to his unique genius as an

Indologist. He did indeed combine the very best of both worlds: he was the consummate insider in India, and his Indian sensitivity and experience lent his work a freshness, a depth, and solidity that those of us who first met India on the printed page could only envy ('Introduction' 4). However, he refrained from considering himself as an exile or an expatriate. Answering in an interview to a question about his status as an exile, Ramanujan states thus:

“No. An exile is a person who has been thrown out of his country. I'm not one. I have come to this country voluntarily. ... I don't even call myself an expatriate, because I've done a lot of work on India since coming to this country. I've done it more comfortably here than I could even have done it in India. For instance, in the Chicago Regenstein Library, there are books in Kannada and Tamil which probably only I will read. ... And the other interesting thing is that one can be an internal alien in India, as one goes from one province to another” (Daniels-Ramanujan and Harrison 52-53).

As a writer, Ramanujan was never away from home in essence even if he was literally abroad. Territorial distance could not take away his Indian sensibility but gave him scope to delve deeper into India's past. Swain observes that this sense of belongingness comes from Ramanujan's involvement in Indian culture and literature through his translations and rewriting of the folktales (157). Folktales are universal in nature and Ramanujan found in Indian folktales resemblance with western tales of Cinderella and Oedipus. His choice for preferring the translation of folktales over the Sanskrit texts was the fact that folktales were written in mother tongue and, for him, the mother tongues represent “a democratic, anti-hierarchic, from-the-ground-up view of India” (Daniels-Ramanujan and Harrison 55). Explaining the significance of folktales, Ramanujan states in his interview:

I for one need folklore as an Indian studying India. It pervades my childhood, my community. It's the symbolic parts of the non-literate parts of me and my culture (qtd. in Swain 162).

He was thus able to fuse the Indian culture in which he was born and that shaped his personality with the Western culture in which he evolved further in his mature years.

Stop to Consider:

The term “diaspora” was derived from the Greek diaspeirein (“dia” meaning “through, across” and “speirein” meaning “to scatter”). Originally associated with the Jewish diaspora, the term was later used to refer to other diasporas, and in particular the Armenian diaspora. Despite their relocation to a new land, diasporas maintain a strong bond with their homelands; diasporas are therefore often associated with nostalgia, a mood largely reflected in their cultural productions, particularly in film and literature. In the 21st century, in the context of global economic migrations, terror migration, and environmental migrations, the emphasis is gradually shifting from issues of identity and belonging to the pragmatics of survival and relocation; and the field increasingly intersects not only with contiguous disciplines in the humanities but with contiguous areas of scholarship like gender studies, queer studies, disability studies etc. As a branch of study, diaspora studies is a field of scholarship that has developed at the crossroads of cultural and literary studies, the social sciences, history, and political science since the late 1970s, at a time when Western nations started to take stock of the magnitude of migrations, both present and anticipated. Sometimes considered as an offshoot of postcolonial studies, the field of diaspora studies shares a similar interest in questions of political and epistemic domination, subalternity, race, gender, language, and identity. In the 1990s, the emphasis was largely on issues of identity and belonging; since then, the field of diaspora studies has developed considerably in terms of both literary output and scholarship (Kral).

1.4 Ramanujan as a Poet:

As a poet, Ramanujan has to his credit four volumes of poems in English published in his lifetime namely *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Selected Poems* (1976), and *Second Sight* (1986), along with several

other poems published posthumously such as in *Collected Poems* (1995). Other than writing originally in English, he also translated poems from Tamil and Kannada into English. As an expatriate, his poetry deals with issues of home, nostalgia, identity, family, quest for self, etc. As such, memory plays an important and creative role in his poetry. According to M.K. Naik, the driving force behind much of Ramanujan's poetry is not emotion recollected in tranquility but "recollection emotionalized in un-tranquil moments" (210). As he writes from his personal experience, the subjects of joint family, childhood, relationship etc. surface in many of his love poems like 'Love Poem for a Wife!'. Familial relationships form an important part of his poetry as he borrows from his past and brings them (father, grandfather, sister, mother, wife, and cousin) alive in his poems. Issues of home, loss and belongingness are common in the works of diasporic writers. However, even after staying away from his nation, Ramanujan was fully conscious of his cultural roots and his Hindu heritage. A large section of his poetry is born out of his Hindu outlook as he negotiates with his religious identity. In the poem 'Small- Scale Reflections on a Great House' he writes: "I must seek and will find/My particular hell in my Hindu mind". At times he is also seen juxtaposing the ancient Hindu ethos with that of its modern counterpart in poems like 'Some Indian uses of History on a Rainy Day'. In his poetry Ramanujan represents his Indian sensibility and scholarship but also draws on the techniques acquired from his western orientation. Trivedi is of the opinion that Ramanujan's poetry derives its depth and viscosity from this mingling in his mind of western fustiness and oriental fallacy (116). Therefore, there is a curious blend of conservatism and modernity in his poems.

Ramanujan's craftsmanship as a poet has earned him great reputation in India as well as abroad. He is widely read and taught in the institutions across the world. He is known for his precision with words as he employs them carefully and economically in his poems. Despite writing in a foreign language, he displays an unflinching sense of rhythm and strong imagery in his well-constructed verses. Repetition and variation are significant features of Ramanujan's style not only as a poet but also as a thinker, teacher and essayist. Poems like 'A Snake', 'A River', and 'The Last of the Princess' exemplify his use of the technique of repetition. Through

his original and unique style of poetry Ramanujan gave a new direction to Indo- Anglican poetry. Taking the best from the literary traditions of the Indian and Western worlds, he has gifted Indian English Literature a new kind of poetry which is the hallmark of originality, sophistication and artistry.

1.5 Ramanujan as a Translator:

Ramanujan's contribution as a translator not only brought him fame but also gave Tamil and Kannada literature its own place in world literature. He published collections like *Fifteen Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1965), a fuller translation of love poems from the *Kuruntokai*, *The Interior Landscape* (1967) and *Poems of Love and War: From the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil* (1985) which received positive and enthusiastic reviews. He employed the phrase 'the interior landscape' to suggest the richness of Tamil love poetry with its close association of romantic moods and situations to the physical milieu and environment (Venkatachalapathy 1571). His contribution to his other mother tongue, Kannada, is also very significant. Apart from two collections of poetry and a novel in Kannada, he has also translated the radical poetry of the Virasaiva saints in *Speaking of Siva* (1973) that brought together Ramanujan's translations of more than 200 vacanas or "sayings" by four major bhaktas or saint-poets in the "countercultural" Virasaiva religious tradition in Kannada, from the early centuries of this millennium (Dharwadker "A. K. Ramanujan" 279). U.R Ananthamurthy's acclaimed novel *Samskara* also appeared in Ramanujan's sensitive English translation as *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* which was made into an award-winning film in 1970. Between the mid-1960s and the early 1990s he also translated, either independently or with collaborators, various types of twentieth-century Indian texts. For example, translation of modern Malayalam poems in collaboration with K. M. George in *Indian Poetry Today* (1980); translation of modern Telugu poems with V. Narayana Rao, as well as other modern Kannada and Tamil poems that he translated independently. According to Venkatachalapathy, Ramanujan's translations contributed to the shift in foreign scholarship on India from Indology, with its exclusive emphasis on 'the Great

Tradition' as exemplified in Sanskrit, towards other aspects of India's plural traditions (1571). His translations not only ensured greater readership but also rightfully represented the element of multiculturalism in India reflected in its indigenous forms of literature. In this way he also contributed to the South Asian Languages programme at the University of Chicago.

At the time of his death, Ramanujan was rehearsing Girish Karnad's Kannada play, *Naga-mandala* but he also left behind several unfinished translated works. For example, the draft manuscripts from the 1970s of a selection of "prose poems" by the Tamil poet Subramania Bharati and some poems by post-Independence Kannada poets are some of his unfinished works.

1.6 Ramanujan as a Folklorist:

Apart from his literary accomplishments, A.K. Ramanujan was also an acclaimed folklorist. His contribution to Indian folklore comes in the form of books having critical essays on Indian folklore like *Another Harmony*, edited with Stuart Blackburn, and *Folktales from India*, a retelling of Indian folktales in his unique style. However, his interest in folklore was given a concrete shape by Professor Edwin Kirkland of the University of Florida under whose influence Ramanujan published his first articles in *Southern Folklore Quarterly*. Kirkland also encouraged Ramanujan to enroll himself at Indiana University to study linguistics and folklore where he later developed a life-long passion and love for folklore.

In one of his interviews, Ramanujan states that his work in folklore represents the world of women and children. His preoccupation has been to represent India through his folktales expressed, both oral and written, in the mother tongues which are told by women, by the non-literate part of the population (Daniels-Ramanujan and Harrison 55-56). The folktales were told to him by his grandmother or cook while feeding him in his childhood, and he carried these memories with him to represent the significance of the Indian tradition of introducing folktales to children in their formative years. His engagement with the oral tradition and folklore of India shows his commitment and interest towards his cultural roots as he uncovers them in the narratives. His research in this

field has brought forth the rich variety of myths, epics, folktales and other narratives embedded in the oral culture of India. He mentions that as a folklorist his agenda was to diversify the notions of Indian civilization, to take it away from the purely Brahmanical view of Indian civilization, to replace the hierarchical system with a more democratic one (Daniels-Ramanujan and Harrison 55). That is why he never translated the Vedas but only folktales written in mother tongues. During the final phase of his life Ramanujan also tried to complete one of his longest-term projects, *A Flowering Tree and Other Kannada Folktales*, a large collection of orally narrated stories that he had recorded, transcribed, and translated over three decades of fieldwork in Karnataka (Dharwadker "A. K. Ramanujan" 280). Folklore had always been part of South Asian studies but Ramanujan was one of the first modern scholars of India who looked at folklore as a field of inquiry in its own right.

Check Your Progress:

1. What role does Ramanujan play as a translator in upholding India before the world?
2. Discuss Ramanujan's significance in Indian English literature as an expatriate.
3. What are Ramanujan's contributions as a folklorist? Why did he choose that profession?

1.7 Ramanujan as an Essayist:

As an academician, he published a number of scholarly papers, which appeared in various edited volumes and journals. His "Indian Oedipus", "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" etc. are among his more acclaimed essays. Ramanujan's style of writing was quite engaging: "An apt tale in the beginning, a metaphor mixed to make his point, a newly-coined phrase, quotations skillfully woven" (Venkatachalapathy 1571). His distinctive style of writing includes a self-effacing quality whereby he presents a wide array of ideas without imposing his thoughts on his readers. According to Dharwadker, this sort of apparently self-effacing critical intertextuality was central to his scholarly practice because he believed that literary and cultural texts can 'speak for themselves', and

speak especially effectively when they are unfamiliar or have been cunningly 'defamiliarised' ('Preface' *Collected Essays* x). This is also reflected in the epigraph of the essay "Is there an Indian way of thinking: An informal essay" where Ramanujan refers to Walter Benjamin's style of "hiding behind a phalanx of quotations which, like highwaymen, would ambush the passing reader and rob him of his convictions" (1). This is for Ramanujan the style for writing an ideal critical essay. Dharwadker also agrees that Ramanujan constructed an essay as an 'anthology of quotations' echoing Roland Barthes's notion of a text as a 'tissue of citations', particularly in the second half of his career. Therefore, the essays that appeared towards the latter half of his career were like a series of pretexts, meta-texts, counter-texts, and inter-texts interacting variously with each other ('Preface' *Collected Essays* x). His essays are inter-textual in nature as they are interspersed with texts from other genres of writing like poems or short-stories. The texts quoted are always coherent to the main idea in the essay and function as examples to clarify the central meaning to its readers.

His essays are broadly classified into four categories, namely General Essays on Classical Literature and Culture, Essays on Classical Literatures, Essays on Bhakti and Modern Poetry, and Essays on Folklore. Ramanujan's general essays on classical literature and culture testify to his contribution to Indology and a vindication of the scholarly abilities of the Indians that had not been recognized until then by the American Indological establishments. The essays bring forth his cultural rootedness, his scholarship and understanding of Indian as well as Western knowledge systems. His essays on classical literature can be broadly categorized into three classes of material: the two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, both in Sanskrit as well as other languages; high-classical Sanskrit drama and late-classical Sanskrit poetics; and classical Tamil poetry in along with its grammar, poetics and history. In his essays on the epics, Ramanujan argues against the dominant Orientalist view that the *Mahabharata* acquires a definite structure by employing the principle of repetition. He states that the process of repetition is crucial to the generation of the structure and should not be misunderstood as the recurrence of the same static elements. Rather, it is a process by which various elements reappear in

intricate mutual relations and sequences, at multiple levels of signification and meaning, with crucial discursive variations or differences (Dharwadker *Collected Essays* 128). Again, his essays on bhakti are said to have the characteristics of the sharp 'cutting edge' of bhakti, studied primarily in the Kannada free-verse 'utterances' (vacanas) of the Vira Saiva saints; the yearning for and celebration of the ultimate connection with god, studied most intensively in the Tamil Vaisnava hymns of Nammalvar; and, the development of a typology of bhakti saints as they are presented in a wide range of stories in many languages (263). Ramanujan's essays on folklore have played a crucial role in upholding the Indian civilization as context-sensitive and pluralistic and freeing it from the dichotomy of 'Great and Little Traditions' to include texts written in other languages also.

Self-Assessment Questions:

1. Mention the significant characteristics of Ramanujan's essays.
(in 60 words)

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2. Mention the different categories into which Ramanujan's essays are divided. What does it reflect about Ramanujan's scholarship as an essayist?(in 80 words)

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1.8 Summing Up:

Through the above discussion an attempt has been made to familiarize you with the multifarious contributions of A.K Ramanujan. His role as a poet, translator, folklorist and essayist is pivotal in shaping modern Indian literature and also for rightfully representing India to a global readership. Though an expatriate, he was never disconnected to his nation. Rather he treated the distance as an opportunity for a deeper understanding of his cultural roots along with its significance in the modern world. He did

not consider himself an exile or an expatriate because of the large amount of work and research he did on India which he doubts would have been possible being in India. He gave us both an insider's and outsider's views on the issues concerning Indian society and literature. His works were universal in appeal for he had the expertise to incorporate the best from both the cultures, East and West, into his writing. In his poems he explored the issues of memory, home, nostalgia, identity, family, quest for self etc. Irony and humour characterized his works in general.

As a translator, his contribution has been instrumental in placing Tamil and Kannada literature on the map of world literature. He translated poems, both ancient and modern, novels and other twentieth century texts as well. His translations introduced various aspects of India's plural traditions that marked the shift in foreign scholarship on India from Indology to other aspects. Along with translation, his retelling of the Indian folktales was pivotal in introducing to the world the rich heritage of ancient Indian civilization. His interest in folklore developed when he was outside India and soon it became an essential element of his identity. As a folklorist, Ramanujan's contribution to Indian English literature is immense as he brought forth the rich variety of myths, epics, folktales and other narratives embedded in the oral culture of India. Other than creative writing, Ramanujan's contribution to Indian English literature has been in the form of his essays. In his essays, he presents his critical understanding of classical literature and culture, bhakti and modern poetry, and folklore. Therefore, his essays are testimonies of his intense scholarship and cognitive abilities shaped by his Indian heritage and western associations. With this in view, you will now be able to delve into the essay "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay".

1.9 References and Suggested Readings:

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UNIT- 2

A.K. Ramanujan: Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay

Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 The Context
 - 2.3.1 Indian English Literature
 - 2.3.2 A.K. Ramanujan's contribution to Indian English Literature
- 2.4 Style of the essay
- 2.5 Reading the text
- 2.6 Critical Reception
- 2.7 Summing Up
- 2.8 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 Objectives:

In this unit, you will be introduced to an essay written by A.K Ramanujan. You will also get an overview of Indian English literature and Ramanujan's contribution to the intellectual climate of his time. This unit is designed to offer you a critical understanding of the prescribed text to comprehend the significance of the prose works of A.K Ramanujan. After going through the unit you will be able to-

- *understand* the significance of the prose works of A.K. Ramanujan,
- *know* the style of the essay,
- *analyze* the themes and critical ideas in the essay,
- *comprehend* Ramanujan's position as an essayist.

2.2 Introduction:

Ramanujan's essays on South Asian language and culture are testimonies of his intense scholarship. His essays on literature and culture exemplify a wide range of experience and creative reflections. Most of these essays were either delivered as lectures to audiences in the United States, Europe, and India or presented as research papers at numerous conferences. His scholarly interests ranged from folklore, linguistics, the history of religions, anthropology, and literary studies, covering several South Asian, British, American, and European discursive tradition. He had published many of his essays in scholarly journals and edited books since the 1950s but due to his sudden death many works remained unfinished. The unfinished pieces were given a final shape by the reworking and rewriting of Molly Daniels-Ramanujan in collaboration with a number of Ramanujan's friends, colleagues, and associates in 1993.

We have already mentioned in the previous unit the four broad areas into which Ahmad's essays can be grouped. The essay under study titled "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay" falls under the category of general essays on Classical Literature and Culture. It was originally written as a paper for a 'Workshop on the Hindu Person', held at the University of Chicago in 1980 and was circulated in typescript among his students and colleagues throughout the 1980s. This cultural essay later appeared in social anthropologist, McKim Marriott's *India through Hindu Categories* (1990). In this essay Ramanujan explains cultural philosophies and the inconsistencies in context-sensitive Indian psychology. It also deliberates on the difference between Indian and Western ways of thinking mapping the journey from ancient context-sensitive system to the modern context-free system.

2.3 The Context:

2.3.1 Indian English Literature:

Indian English Literature, also referred to as Indian Writing in English, emerged as a result of British encounter with India. M.K. Naik defines Indian English Literature as literature written originally in English by

authors Indian by birth, ancestry or nationality. It is the distinctive literary phenomenon that emerges when an Indian sensibility tries to express itself originally in English (2-3). Often confused with Indo-Anglican literature or Indo-English Literature, its history dates back to the writings of Henry Derozio and Michael Madhusudan Dutt, followed by Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, R.K Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Toru Dutt, Mahatma Gandhi and many more till the present time. Its many branches include writings from the Indian diaspora, postcolonial literature etc. Indian English Literature encompasses a wide variety of genres like poetry, fiction, drama, non-fictional prose, autobiographies and criticism.

2.3.2 A.K. Ramanujan's contribution to Indian English Literature:

A.K. Ramanujan is a diasporic writer, an Indian expatriate living in America. His contribution to Indian English Literature comes from his poetry, folklore, translations, and scholarly work. As an expatriate he writes from his Indian sensibility along with the critical aptitude developed from his western education. Like Rabindranath Tagore, Ramanujan takes the best from the cultures of both East and West that presents a wider view of critical understanding. Being away from his homeland was his vantage point for going deep into India's past to study its traditional belief system and compare with the modern developments to understand its relevance in the present time. Along with the cultural essays, his translations of Tamil and Kannada poetry fostered greater appreciation of the global audience towards the rich diversity of Indian literary traditions. His works, particularly the essays, are great contributions to South Asian Studies and Cultural Studies. He was in fact instrumental in shaping the South Asian Studies program at the University of Chicago during his term there. His interdisciplinary approach and insightful analyses have contributed immensely to the study of Indian and cross-cultural studies. His exploration of syncretic traditions, as a result of the diverse influences, within the Indian cultural landscape enhances the study of cultural hybridity and coexistence. "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay" is a perfect example of this cultural

exchange. He explores the questions of identity and representation with a global sense that challenges traditional notions and offers a platform to discuss the ways in which cultural identities are formed.

A.K. Ramanujan also played a significant role in the development of modern Indian English literature. As a distinctive voice of Indian English writing, he fuses traditional Indian cultural elements with modern literary forms. His style of blending the traditional with the contemporary offers a scope for the representation of diverse voices in the broader literary spectrum. He thus set an example for future generation of writers about the ways in which one could explore one's cultural roots while engaging with global literary trends.

2.4 Style of the Essay:

Ramanujan's essays document his remarkable knowledge in the field of literature, culture and music. His essays are interspersed with references from Indian folklore and epic as well as from the writings of the western philosophers and writers. His methodology was influenced by de Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Freud, Jung, Chomsky, and Derrida but he was not bound by any one of them for he would borrow and blend the disparate ideas according to his necessity. His thought was never doctrinaire, for he believed strongly that doctrines blinded the observer to the text.

All of his works paid a keen attention to detail, for he had the gift of connecting the minutiae of life and the world to larger learned concepts (Dimock and K Ramanujan xvii). This distinctive scholarly style of writing also enabled him to move effortlessly between different genres of writing. In fact, his essays are interspersed with poetic compositions written by him, either in English or in translation, and those of other poets. For example, in "Is there an Indian way of thinking?" he reproduces lines from four poems out of which three are his compositions and the other one extracted from T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland'. As a result, his essays become highly inter-textual as he weaves different stories and poems into his essays. In the 'Preface' to *The Collected Essays* of A.K. Ramanujan, editor Vinay Dharwadker states:

Ramanujan designed and wrote his essays so that they would work upon his readers as much by allusion, echo, and suggestion, as by the force of explicit argument. While each piece was structured simply so that it never strayed far from its stated theme. It was also surrounded by a field of multiple resonances, leading the reader outward in several directions at once. This 'ripple effect' was a function of Ramanujan's poetic style as a writer of critical prose in which wit, irony, humour and polyphony enabled him to condense several perspectives or insights into a few aphoristic phrases. It was also the result of his pursuit of obliqueness or indirection-the classical Sanskrit device of vakrokti, 'crooked speech'-under the mask of lightness and simplicity. Ramanujan, in fact, constructed an essay much like a poem, which shows more than it tells, suggests more than it reveals, and echoes more than it acknowledges (ix-xi).

Therefore, his essays are compact and multi-layered offering his readers a wider perspective of the issues. However, these concepts and ideas were written in a fairly conversational style in a jargonfree language that made his essays accessible to a larger audience.

Self-Assessment Questions:

1. What is Ramanujan’s contribution to Indian English literature?(80 words)

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2. What is the distinctive style of writing in Ramanujan’s prose works? (60 words)

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2.5 Reading the Text:

A.K. Ramanujan’s essay titled “Is there an Indian way of thinking? An informal essay” opens with an epigraph that sets the theme of ambiguity at the start. Referring to the Stanislavskian exercise for actors, Ramanujan

places the question, 'Is there an Indian way of thinking?' before his reader, and offers four possible interpretations of this central question by stressing on the keywords — 'is', 'an', 'Indian' and 'thinking'. The answers to each of these variations of the question are equally varied—there was an Indian way of thinking but there isn't anymore; there is no single Indian way of thinking; there is nothing inherently Indian about this way of thinking but Indian way influences everything that enters the country and makes it its own and therefore there is an Indian way of thinking; and that India's un-thinking ways are either lamented or celebrated. By addressing these questions, Ramanujan tries to show how India is perceived differently by different people in various contexts.

Ramanujan cites the example of his father to discuss the element of 'inconsistency' and the inherent hypocrisy in Indian thinking. In fact he dedicates the essay to his father whose lifestyle, he believes, had inspired him to write it. His father's attire was a combination of Indian and Western accessories. He would wear polished leather shoes to the university but when he entered the inner quarters of his house he followed the Indian custom of leaving his shoes outside. His father represented the quality of the Indians to effectively integrate the best of other cultures without giving up Indian values and beliefs. His father was a mathematician and an astronomer while simultaneously being a Sanskrit scholar and an expert astrologer. Ramanujan, influenced by Russell's scientific attitude, looked for consistency in his father but was disappointed. His father's explanation of this inconsistency would be that the brain has two lobes and hence can appreciate opposites without difficulty. Dimock and K Ramanujan opine that a partial acceptance of his father gave Ramanujan an invaluable open-mindedness. As a youth, Ramanujan was perplexed by his father's seemingly paradoxical belief in both astrology and astronomy: how could one man blend the rational and irrational in this way? However, he was not so unlike his father: he had his own way of blending paradoxes between the East and the West, between seemingly unrelated things (xv-xvi). Like his father Ramanujan also exhibited the quality of adopting the best of other cultures without losing his Indian values.

Ramanujan states that, unlike his father, the Englishmen and the ‘modern’ (intellectual) Indians have always been perturbed by the inconsistency and hypocrisy in the Indian character. To explain it further he takes the example of the use of the words karma and talaividi. The notion of ‘karma’ can be found in the text of the Hindus, Indians, Buddhists and Jains but Ramanujan did not find it mentioned anywhere in the two thousand Kannada folk tales that had been collected by him and others and were ironically written by Buddhists and Jains. Furthermore, Sheryl Daniel found that the two words were interchangeably used in her Tamil village whereas their meanings were completely different:

The two notions are inconsistent with each other. Karma implies the self’s past determining the present, an iron chain of cause and consequence, an ethic of responsibility. Talaividi is one’s fate inscribed arbitrarily at one’s birth on one’s forehead; the inscription has no relation to one’s prior actions... (44)

Some thinkers also observe that these inconsistencies are an early stage of cultural evolution and Indians are yet to develop a tendency for objective facts. Henry Kissinger, the American diplomat and politician believed that countries like India have pre-Newtonian cultures believing that “the world is almost completely internal to the observer” (44). V.S. Naipaul quotes the eminent Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar to mark the difference between Indian and Western concept of the inner and outer selves. For Indians, outer objects were intimately related to the self and therefore “the Indian ‘ego’ is underdeveloped” and the “grasp of reality is relatively tenuous” (Kakar in Ramanujan 44). Ramanujan then quotes a passage from E.M. Foster’s *A Passage to India* where the character Mrs. Moore muses on the relations between inside and outside in India. Commenting on the intrusive nature of animals and insects in India, she muses that, “no Indian animal has any sense of an interior. Bats, rats, birds, insects will as soon nest inside the house as out, it is to them a natural growth of the eternal jungle...” (45). Mrs. Moore’s character was shocked by the invasive behaviour of animals and insects in India but this was not surprising for Indians. V.S. Naipaul refers to Indian’s

inability to distinguish between self and non-self as a “defect of vision” whereas for Zimmer, the German philosopher and essayist, it is “vision itself” (45). Zimmer appreciates the lack of ego in the Indian psyche and regrets the “ego-centric tenacity” of the West (45). Unlike the West, Indians do not give undue importance to the place of man in the larger scheme of affairs.

This drives Ramanujan to state that Indians lack universality in their way of thinking. Comparing the Indian and the Western ways of thinking, Ramanujan observes that Western philosophy is rooted in Immanuel Kant’s concept of universal truths and generalization whereas Indian philosophy is rooted in Manu’s caste-oriented, context specific principles. Every aspect of life in India is determined by the context in which an individual and a situation are located. Even truth-telling is not unconditional. Moral judgements are universal according to Judeo/Christian ethics but for Manu they are contextual. Manu even lays down the characteristic traits of each caste division. Hence, in India, bravery is the peculiar characteristic quality of the Kshatriya caste whereas in Western context it can be the quality of any individual who demonstrates it. Manu believes that the righteousness of an action is dependent upon the caste of the individual. Similarly, the punishment for offences and crimes committed are also dictated and influenced by the caste identity of the offender. Thus, in opposition to Hegel’s or Kant’s system of universalism, Manu puts forward his system of particularism. Sheryl Daniel’s observation on the context-specific system is that Indians carry a “tool-box of ideas” that they use without logic and therefore anything can go into their ‘bricolage’ (47). On other hand, Geertz is of the opinion that unlike rational religions, traditional religions focus on particular aspects and are opportunistic in their outlook.

Stop to Consider:

Bricolage:

In *The Savage Mind* (1962), the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss used the word bricolage to describe the characteristic patterns of mythological thought. Bricolage is the skill of using whatever is at hand and recombining them to create something new.

Levi-Strauss compares the working of the bricoleur and the engineer. The bricoleur, who is the “savage mind”, works with his hands in devious ways, puts pre-existing things together in new ways, and makes do with whatever is at hand. The working of the bricoleur is parallel to the construction of mythological narratives. As opposed to the bricoleur, the engineer, who is the “scientific mind”, is a true craftsman in that he deals with projects in entirety, taking into account the availability of materials, and creating new tools. Drawing a parallel, Levi-Strauss argues that mythology functions more like the bricoleur, whereas modern western science works more like an engineer (Mambrol).

In the fourth section of the essay, Ramanujan uses the grammarian’s model to understand the Indian way of thinking. He explains that there are two kinds of grammatical rules: the context-free and the context-sensitive. Almost all language rules are context-sensitive and the Indian culture also prefers the context-sensitive practices and tradition. According to Manu, the people of different caste, district, guild and family have different dharma. To elaborate on the context-sensitive nature of dharma, Ramanujan refers to Baudhayana’s explanation of the various differences between the practices of the Brahmins of the Northern and Southern India. In North India, the practices are to sell wood, drink spirits, make sea voyages whereas Southern practices are to eat with one’s wife, to eat food prepared the previous day, marry the daughter of paternal/maternal aunt. As such, the northern ways would be considered inappropriate in Southern India and vice versa.

Ramanujan further highlights that unlike Plato’s context-free discussion of beauty in his Symposium, Indian texts are context-sensitive. The Nadisastra is one such example which offers you your personal history. Texts may be anonymous or not dated but they will certainly have their context. For example, the Indian epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are also context oriented and composed in a story-within-story format. One story becomes the context for the other. In the

Mahabharata, when Yudhisthira repents his weakness for gambling that caused the exile of the Pandavas, a sage visits him and tells him the story of Nala and Damyanti. Yudhisthira realises that Nala's story of gambling away his kingdom, losing his wife, going into exile and finally, reuniting with his family after regaining everything, resembles his own life. Yudhisthira learns that his journey has only reached midway. In this way, the context-sensitive inner story gives meaning to the outer story. According to the West, these texts lack Aristotelian unity but Ramanujan asserts that they are composed on the basis of coherence between various modes (tale, poem etc) and coherence is the essential purpose of the Indian text. He also quotes one of his poems to exemplify the context-oriented style of Tamil dramatic monologues as well.

The discussion then shifts to the confluence of the interior landscape with the exterior landscape in Indian culture and literature as evident in the *akam* or love poetry. Ramanujan observes that Levi-Strauss's concept of the nature-culture opposition does not apply to Tamil poems or Upanishads. Instead, they are intertwined to each other:

In such a metonymic view of man in nature— man in context—he is continuous with the context he is in. In Peircean semiotic terms, these are not symbolic devices, but indexical signs—the signifier and the signified belong in the same context (50).

Furthermore, Ramanujan explains that the container-contained nature of relationship exists in almost everything in India. For example, in the hierarchical caste system, every higher caste encompasses the lower ones. The Kshatriya is distinctly different from but includes the Vaisya within it and similarly the Brahmana encompass the Kshatriya. In his words, “the microcosm is both within and like the macrocosm” (51). Even the Kantian imperatives, space and time, is not uniform in India but have varying qualities. For example, the soil of a village affects the character of its people and houses are attributed with human personality. Time is also either auspicious or inauspicious like Kaliyuga which is considered to be a negative phase that signals the advent of everything bad.

Stop to Consider:

Peirce's concept of sign:

According to Charles Peirce's tripartite model, the sign is a unity of what is represented (the object), how it is represented (the representamen) and how it is interpreted (the interpretant). The interaction between the representamen, the object and the interpretant is referred to by Peirce as 'semeiosis'. He then classified three types of signs- Symbol/symbolic, Icon/iconic, Index/indexical. Symbolic signs such as language are (at least) highly conventional; iconic signs always involve some degree of conventionality; indexical signs direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion. The Symbol/symbolic is a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional. The Icon/iconic is a mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified (being similar in possessing some of its qualities): e.g. a portrait, a cartoon etc. Index/indexical is a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified (regardless of intention): e.g. 'natural signs' (smoke, thunder, footprints), pointers (a pointing 'index' finger, a directional signpost) etc. (Chandler 29-37)

Ramanujan points out a similar kind of contextual sensitiveness in musical elements and medical matters. Even Indian classical music is dependent on time, place and mood. The musical instruments have their caste properties—it is to be crafted by a certain caste on an auspicious day and with a certain material for it is believed that the material that they are crafted out of influence the quality of the music. Similarly, Zimmerman highlights the fact that in Indian medical texts the physiology of the body is given precedence, rather than the anatomy. Refuting Kissinger's claim about Indians' inability to think in abstract terms, Ramanujan refers to cognitive anthropologist Richard Shweder's study of American and Oriya adults based on the descriptive phrases used by them. An American would describe an individual as good or bad whereas an Indian would describe the person based on the particular context. Alan Roland, the

psychoanalyst observes that, unlike modern Americans, Indians do not go through the phase of separation/individuation from the parental family and hence family becomes an important part of our self. Communication in India is made according to the context of the person and the situation. In other words, Indian culture and lifestyle is context sensitive and caste driven. In fact all streams of Indian philosophy like Hindu, Jaina and Buddhist are largely context sensitive with a few exceptions of universals.

According to Ramanujan, the grammar of a language is the most context-sensitive system and the model of thinking in many Hindu texts. Frits Staal, the eminent Vedic scholar and philosopher, has said that as Euclid is indispensable to European thought, so is Pannini to Indian grammar. Even Kamasutra, the Indian epic of love, is a grammar of love that talks of the different types of human bodies and character types and their inherent response to various emotions and scents. Thus, in such a world, meaning formation is also contextual.

Self-Assessment Questions:

1. In the essay Ramanujan highlights the inconsistency in the Indian character. Explain with examples. (100 words)

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2. How is the Indian way of thinking different from the West? (100 words)

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3. How does Ramanujan present his arguments on the context-sensitive nature of Indian culture? (80 words)

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Western societies with their egalitarian democratic ideals and Protestant Christianity have traditionally been context-free. But there are counter-currents in every society. Likewise, Indian society which is highly

context-sensitive aims to move into a context free situation. For example, while kama, artha and dharma are all contextual, moksa is release from all relations/contexts. Ramanujan also refers to the Indian concept of Bhakti that “defies all contextual structures” (54). It rejects the context of gender, caste, class, age, custom and tradition. Indian arts and sciences are not concerned about the contradictory notions of the unique and the universal that dominates Western thought and philosophy, art and polity. Western belief systems in India are always modified under the context-sensitive patterns to suit Indian way of thinking.

Ramanujan concludes the essay by sharing his observations on the advent of modernization in India as a shift from the context-sensitive to the context-free system. Caste system had always been at the root of the context-sensitive system but with the development in printing, knowledge became accessible to all people irrespective of their caste. It heralded the beginning of an egalitarian society where caste, religion, creed and sex were deemed irrelevant by the Indian Constitution. However, the change was gradual as age old customs could not be erased in a day. Similarly, music was no more time-bound and the ragas could be heard at all hours and seasons. However, cultural borrowings continued to be modified to fit into the prevailing system. For example, borrowings of the West from India would be modified to fit their context-free system like T.S Eliot’s use of the ‘Da Da Da’ passage from *Brhadaranyaka* to signify individualization and universalization in ‘The Wasteland’. Likewise, Indian borrowings from the West would be converted to fit their context-sensitive system. For example, the culmination of Indian English Language, a modification of English language to fit into Sanskrit slots and become part of Indian multiple diglossia. In India, modern sciences and technologies borrowed from the West coexist with its older religious ways. Ramanujan concludes by referring to Buddha’s ironic comments on the context-free systems to highlight that each of these cultures, be it context-sensitive or context-free, are ultimately biased.

2.6 Critical Reception:

A.K. Ramanujan’s essays appeared posthumously in two anthologies titled *Uncollected Poems and Prose* and *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*. “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal

Essay” is included in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*. His essays are multi-layered that bring forth his observations and his scholarship on Indian literature and culture. His essays were very well received for it offered a wide array of critical input on issues ranging from the ancient to the modern. Appreciating the multidimensional quality of his essays, Rabindra K. Swain states that when a poet turns to prose he produces astounding works like *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, which is ‘part Indology, part treatise on folklore, part theory of translation’. According to Swain, Ramanujan often resorted to humour to drive a point home. He might be deep in his discourse on profound themes yet within that ambit he would bring in an anecdote or an instance that substantiates his stand, without diluting the somber mood. This was an effective method of presenting one’s standpoints convincingly to the readers (167-168). *The Collected Essays* has been successful in presenting the large repertoire of Ramanujan’s prose works with insightful introductions that contextualize his works in a larger way.

His essays introduce newer perspectives into the existing canon of critical thought and with a self-effacing attitude it engages the reader to participate in critical thinking to form his/her worldview. He mentions towards the end of the essay that the purpose behind writing the essay was to present the issues before his readers and not to evaluate them. Through the intersection of multiple ideas, he offers the food for thought to his readers initiating a new outlook to already existing systems. Therefore, Wendy Doniger, as his friend and colleague, opines that no one who has been exposed to the man or to his work will ever look at India or many other things in the same way again (Dimock and K Ramanujan xviii). His essays have been instrumental in providing an understanding of the Indian cultural realities and its intersection in the global literary landscape. Without being judgmental, they offer us an insider as well as outsider point of view.

As a multitalented writer, Ramanujan received much acclaim and won accolades both in India as well as US. *The Indian Express* honoured him as a “Well known Kannada poet-litterateur and eminent translator” and *The Statesman* admired him as a “Well-known Kannada litterateur, poet and critic” (Agarwal 73). He also received the highest honour the

Padma Shri award of the Government of India in 1976 for his contribution to Indian English literature, a MacArthur Fellowship in 1983, and election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Check Your Progress

1. What do you understand by the 'self-effacing' quality in Ramanujan's works?
2. Comment on the critical acclaim achieved by Ramanujan as an essayist.

2.7 Summing Up:

Through the above discussion an attempt has been made to explain you the critical ideas explored in the essay. Simultaneously, an attempt has also been made to familiarize you with the prose style in Ramanujan's essays and an understanding towards his contribution as an essayist.

“Is There an Indian way of Thinking?” is one of the cultural essays of Ramanujan where he explores the inconsistencies in the Indian way of thinking. Citing his father as an example, Ramanujan explains that inconsistency and hypocrisy are part of the Indian character. While Englishmen and modern Indians are perturbed by it, others find it to be a way of life. He then goes on to talk about the lack of universality in the Indian cognitive system because of its context specific principles derived from Manu's caste-oriented belief system. Ramanujan explores the context-sensitive system prevalent in the Indian way of thinking and living and compares it with the context-free system of the West. Unlike western philosophy, Indian philosophy is rooted in Manu's caste-oriented and context-sensitive principles. Ramanujan uses a variety of examples and references to understand and distinguish between the Western and the Indian ways of thinking. This also highlights his supreme knowledge about his nation's culture and heritage which remained unaffected during his stay in the foreign land. He concludes the essay by sharing his observations on the advent of modernization in India as a shift from the context-sensitive to the context-free system. He explains

that cultural borrowings always undergo modification to fit into the target cognitive structure. Therefore, each of these cultures, be it context-sensitive or context-free, are ultimately biased.

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UNIT- 3

Aijaz Ahmad: Introducing the Author

Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Aijaz Ahmad's Background
 - 3.3.1 Early Life and Education
 - 3.3.2 Academic and intellectual trajectory
- 3.4 Aijaz Ahmad's Works and Intellectual Context
 - 3.4.1 Works
 - 3.4.2 Intellectual and Political Context
 - 3.4.3 Key Theoretical Frameworks and Debates Shaping Ahmad's Scholarship
 - 3.4.4 Ahmad's Engagement with Marxism and Postcolonial Theory
- 3.5 Key Concepts and Themes in Ahmad's Writing
 - 3.5.1 Major Themes and Concepts Addressed in Ahmad's Work
 - 3.5.2 Ahmad's Contributions to Literary Theory, Cultural Studies, and Political Economy
- 3.6 Summing Up
- 3.7 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives:

In this unit, you will be introduced to the Marxist thinker, literary theorist and political commentator Aijaz Ahmad. Here you will get an overview of Ahmad's life and his works. Moreover, this unit will help you

- *gain* an understanding of Aijaz Ahmad's background and contributions to the field,
- *explore* the intellectual context in which Aijaz Ahmad's work emerged,

- *analyze* key concepts and themes in Ahmad's writings,
- *appreciate* Ahmad's impact on literary and cultural studies.

3.2 Introduction:

Aijaz Ahmad (1941 – 2022) occupies a prominent place in the landscape of literary and cultural studies, renowned for his incisive analysis and Marxist approach to understanding the complexities of contemporary society and politics. In this section, we provide an introductory overview of Ahmad's life, work, and contributions to the field of political and literary studies.

Ahmad embodied multiple roles: a literary critic, poet, and translator; a notable figure from the last generation of Indo-Pak revolutionary thinkers; and a towering intellectual deeply immersed in both the aesthetic and revolutionary aspects of Marxism, drawing from both Western and Eastern traditions. Additionally, he was deeply rooted in the literary landscape of Urdu, Hindi, and Hindustani literature in North and Central India. Furthermore, he distinguished himself as one of the preeminent political essayists of contemporary times.

As a Marxist scholar, Aijaz Ahmad demonstrated a comprehensive mastery spanning various academic disciplines including literature, literary criticism, history, philosophy, politics, and political economy. In his political analyses, he skillfully integrated his understanding of the broader contemporary context, illuminating the significance of each individual event within the larger framework of our times.

The breadth of Aijaz Ahmad's intellectual engagement spanning over five decades traverses the significant fault lines of our time. His work delves into crucial issues including imperialism, nationalism, liberalism, fascism, Hindutva, Islamism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism, global literature, Urdu literature, state dynamics, intermediate classes, and the political landscapes of the United States and the Indo-Pak region. His prolific output, which includes numerous essays, lectures, translations, and interviews, published across various platforms such as edited volumes (Verso, Left Word Books, and others), scholarly journals

(*Socialist Register*, *Social Text*, and *New Left Review*), magazines (*Frontline*), e-zines/web portals (*Newslick*), timely interventions (*Social Scientist*, *Economic and Political Weekly*) reflects both daunting productivity and inspiring insight. With at least five books in Urdu and numerous translations of seminal Marxist texts to his credit, Aijaz Ahmad makes formidable contributions. Consequently, attempting to synthesize or pass judgment on his body of work proves challenging, given its vast and multifaceted nature.

3.3 Aijaz Ahmad's Background:

3.3.1 Early Life and Education:

Aijaz Ahmad, born into a prosperous landed family of Uttar Pradesh in 1941 that migrated to Pakistan at the time of the Partition, experienced the upheavals of displacement firsthand. Despite this, his early exposure to radical literature, shared by his father, broadened his understanding of the world beyond the confines of the doab region of the Indo-Gangetic Plain and the capitalist system. Growing up in Muzaffarnagar, British India, Aijaz Ahmad immersed himself in extensive reading, nurturing aspirations for internationalism and socialism from an early age. His subsequent visit to his ancestral village, where he was embraced warmly by the common people despite being a stranger to them, further reinforced his sense of connection and solidified his commitment to social and political ideals.

Aijaz Ahmad pursued his education in Lahore, Pakistan, following his family's migration post-Partition in 1947-48. However, his academic endeavors extended far beyond the confines of college classrooms, encompassing vibrant intellectual exchanges in cafés and active participation in political organizations. In these informal settings, Aijaz engaged with prominent figures in Urdu literature, who not only imparted knowledge of poetic expression but also instilled in him a nuanced understanding of political ideologies. Additionally, his involvement in political parties provided him with a profound exposure to Marxist thought, igniting a lifelong fascination with its comprehensive worldview. Immersed in the fervor of leftist political activism in Pakistan, Aijaz's prominence drew the attention of authorities, prompting his departure

to New York City, United States, in search of greater academic and personal freedom. This pivotal transition marked the beginning of a new chapter in his intellectual journey, characterized by academic rigor and an unwavering commitment to the pursuit of knowledge.

3.3.2 Academic and Intellectual Trajectory:

After his departure from Pakistan, Aijaz Ahmad embarked on an illustrious academic journey spanning various universities in the United States and Canada. Notably, he contributed significantly to the intellectual landscape at York University in Toronto, renowned for fostering innovative and non-conventional thinking. Following his extensive tenure abroad, Aijaz returned to India, where he established himself for over two decades. During this period, he held esteemed positions such as Professorial Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Visiting Professor at the Centre for Political Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, and occupied the prestigious Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan Chair at Jamia Milia Islamia. Aijaz's scholarly influence extended beyond academia as he became a regular contributor to esteemed publications like the fortnightly *Frontline*, as well as journals advocating leftist perspectives such as *Social Scientist* and *The Marxist*. Moreover, he played a pivotal role in the founding of Leftword Books and maintained a close association with the publishing venture from its inception, with many of his later works finding a home within its pages. This multifaceted engagement with academia, publishing, and intellectual discourse underscored Aijaz's enduring commitment to advancing progressive thought and critical inquiry.

In the vibrant milieu of New York City, Aijaz Ahmad's dual passions for poetry and politics flourished. He fervently shared his profound love for Urdu poetry with esteemed poets of the time, including Adrienne Rich, William Stafford, and W.S. Merwin, engaging them in recitations of the works of Ghalib while fostering enriching discussions over wine. This innovative intersection of poetry and dialogue culminated in Aijaz's first work, *Ghazals of Ghalib* (1971), marking his initial foray into literary scholarship. Concurrently, Aijaz collaborated with Feroz Ahmad to establish "Pakistan Forum", a bold journal dedicated to documenting

the human rights violations and political upheavals in South Asia. With a sharp focus on exposing the atrocities under the military dictatorship of Yahya Khan (1969-1971) and exploring the potential for civilian governance under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977), Aijaz's contributions delved into the complexities of South Asian politics. Notably, his writings extensively addressed the insurgencies in East Pakistan (which later became Bangladesh in 1972) and in Baluchistan, offering critical insights into regional dynamics. During this period, Aijaz also commenced his commentary on South Asian politics for esteemed socialist publications such as *Monthly Review*, initiating a longstanding collaboration that endured for several decades.

In the 1980s, Aijaz Ahmad returned to India and established himself in Delhi, where he engaged in teaching at several colleges, notably at Jawaharlal Nehru University. During this phase, Aijaz adopted a critical approach that yielded significant contributions across three distinct domains of study. Firstly, he focused on postmodernism and postcolonialism, offering insightful analyses on these intellectual currents. Secondly, he dedicated his attention to examining the intersections of Hindutva ideology and the processes of liberalization unfolding in India. Lastly, Aijaz explored the new world order centered around the United States and US-driven globalization. In this period, Aijaz Ahmad's reading of Gramsci informed his observation that "every country gets the fascism it deserves." This insight shed light on the emergence of Hindutva, particularly in the tumultuous period surrounding the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992. Aijaz's analysis resonated with a generation in India grappling with the rapid expansion of liberalization and the ascent of Hindutva ideology. Through his clear prose, he elucidated the nature of the rise of the Indian hard right, providing clarity amidst widespread confusion. Many of Aijaz's writings from this period, featured in collections like *Lineages of the Present: Political Essays* (Tulika, 1996), outlined the growth of the hard right in precise theoretical and historical terms. Ahmad's writings emphasized the intrinsic harshness embedded within our culture, rooted in the the profound inequalities perpetuated by the caste system and patriarchal hierarchy. His aphorism about "every country getting the fascism it deserves" underscored the imperative to go into the underlying roots of Hindutva. Aijaz argued that

to comprehend the rise of political Hindu right-wing ideology, one must grasp the foundation of this “hard culture”, which has been exercised by the brutalization of labor through privatization agendas. These insights were delivered as lectures across India during times of profound political uncertainty, remain essential readings.

During the final decade of his life, Aijaz Ahmad meticulously studied the writings of the hard right. These comprehensive readings formed the basis of his Wellek Lectures, delivered at the University of California (Irvine) in 2017. Left Word Books will compile and publish these lectures, offering insights into Aijaz's meticulous analysis of right-wing ideologies.

Aijaz taught at universities in India, Canada, and the United States, as well as lectured from the Philippines to Mexico. Towards the end of his life, he became a Senior Fellow at Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, where he advised a new generation of intellectuals on the boundlessness of Marxism. During the last years of his life, when he had faced problems in his visa renewal during the first term of BJP's reign in India, he accepted an invitation from the University of California, Irvine, to take up the Chair in Comparative Literature that had been occupied earlier by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. He never came back after (to India) and died on 9th March, 2022 at Irvine, California.

Self-Assessment Question

Write a short note on Aijaz Ahmad's intellectual journey. (80 words)

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3.4 Aijaz Ahmad's Works and Intellectual Context:

3.4.1 Works:

1. In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures (Verso and Tulika, 1992)

Drawing from his deep appreciation of culture and literature, Aijaz Ahmad developed a penetrating analysis of how Third World cultures

were often superficially evaluated by metropolitan universities. This exploration extended to a robust critique of postmodernism and postcolonialism, wherein he closely examined the works of leading thinkers like Fredric Jameson and Edward Said. Aijaz's scrutiny, in essays such as "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory", Literary Theory and 'Third World Literature'" and "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said", revealed a fundamental disconnection from Marxist principles at the core of postmodern and postcolonial thought. His engagement with these ideas was influenced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's influential book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), which interpreted the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci as a postmodern thinker. It is in this context that Aijaz began his close reading of Gramsci's work. These writings were published in Aijaz's classic book, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (Verso and Tulika, 1992). This book had a profound impact on scholars worldwide, offering a sophisticated defense of Marxism at a time when it faced increasing scrutiny. *In Theory* not only provided valuable insights into Marxist theory but also served as a guide for an entire generation about how to think about and write theory. Through this book and subsequent essays published in *Monthly Review*, Aijaz articulated an important defense of the Marxist tradition, emphasizing its indispensable role in understanding and critiquing the capitalist system and its impact on humanity. He reiterated that to reject Marx is to reject the most powerful set of tools that have been produced to explore the capitalist system and its grip on humanity.

2. *A World To Win: Essays on the Communist Manifesto* - with Irfan Habib and Prabhat Patnaik (LeftWord Books, 1999)

Edited, with an introduction, by Prakash Karat, this volume contains essays by three of India's foremost Marxist scholars, Aijaz Ahmad, Irfan Habib and Prabhat Patnaik, who explain the relevance of the *Manifesto* in terms of Marxist theory and praxis. The volume also contains the complete text of *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Preface to the English Edition of 1888 by Frederick Engels, and a note on the publishing history of the *Manifesto* in India.

3. *Lineages of the Present: Ideological and Political Genealogies of Contemporary South Asia* (Verso, 2001)

He has written extensively on South Asian politics and culture in this book offering nuanced insight into the politics and history of contemporary South Asia.

4. *On Communalism and Globalization - Offensives of the Far Right* (Three Essays Collective, Delhi, 2002)

In three celebrated lectures, extensively re-worked since they were delivered first, Aijaz Ahmad discusses the progress of neo-imperialism and the increasing influence of fascism in the third world societies and critically evaluates their resources – cultural, social and ideological.

5. *Iraq, Afghanistan and the Imperialism of Our Time* (LeftWorld Books, 2004)

In 1997, his careful and enthusiastic reading of Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* led to the creation of an insightful essay titled "Reading Arundhati Roy Politically." Despite its significance, this essay was not included in Aijaz's collections or in anthologies on Arundhati's work. However, it marked the beginning of a long-standing relationship with Frontline magazine, where Aijaz penned numerous articles offering critical perspectives on significant global developments. These writings addressed important global events such as the aftermath of 9/11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and conflicts in Syria and Libya. Additionally, Aijaz highlighted the rise of leftist movements in Latin America, notably led by figures like Hugo Chávez. These widely circulated essays eventually formed the foundation for his book *Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Imperialism of Our Time* (Verso, 2004) providing valuable insights into contemporary geopolitical dynamics and imperialism's enduring impact on the world stage.

6. *In Our Time: Empire, Politics, Culture* (Verso, 2007)

Edited Works:

1. *Ghazals of Ghalib*: Edited by Aijaz Ahmad. Oxford India, 1995. (With translations from the Urdu by Aijaz Ahmad, W.S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, William Stafford, David Ray, Thomas Fitzsimmons, Mark Strand, and William Hunt)
2. *A Singular Voice: Collected Writings of Michael Sprinker*: Editor (with Fred Pfeil and Modhumita Roy), 2000.

Collection of Interviews:

1. *Nothing Human is Alien to Me* (LeftWorld Books, 2020)

Ahmad is a prominent public intellectual. For the past twelve years till his demise in March, 2022, he served as an editorial consultant and contributing writer to Frontline, an Indian-based English-language magazine focused on domestic and international issues.

3.4.2 Intellectual and Political Context :

Aijaz Ahmad's scholarly contributions stand as a testament to the nuanced understanding he possessed of the intricate interplay between intellectual inquiry and political engagement. Rooted in a complex historical backdrop marked by the ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the proliferation of globalization, Ahmad's work emerged within a milieu fraught with both challenges and opportunities. It is important for us that we get a clarity of the multifaceted intellectual and political context that shaped Ahmad's scholarship, by examining the intricate influences and debates that informed his analysis of contemporary society.

The late 20th and early 21st centuries witnessed a seismic shift in the global political economy, with the rise of neoliberalism fundamentally reshaping the landscape of social, cultural, and economic relations. Against the backdrop of neoliberal hegemony, characterized by deregulation, privatization, and the primacy of the free market, Aijaz Ahmad's scholarship emerged as a critical intervention, challenging the

dominant narratives of capitalist triumphalism and offering alternative perspectives rooted in Marxist and postcolonial thought.

Central to Aijaz Ahmad's intellectual trajectory was his engagement with Marxist theory, which provided him with a robust analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of power, exploitation, and resistance in capitalist societies. Drawing upon the works of Marx, Engels, Gramsci, and others, Ahmad critically interrogated the underlying structures of capitalism, uncovering the mechanisms through which class domination and capitalist hegemony were perpetuated. Moreover, Ahmad's engagement with postcolonial theory in particular, enriched his analyses, enabling him to navigate the complexities of global capitalism with nuance and sensitivity.

In the realm of cultural studies, Aijaz Ahmad played a pivotal role in challenging Eurocentric modes of analysis and advocating for a more inclusive and polycentric approach to cultural production and representation. His critique of cultural imperialism and his insistence on the importance of situating cultural texts within their socio-political contexts resonated deeply with scholars grappling with questions of identity, representation, and power. Ahmad's insistence on interrogating the intersections of class, race, gender, and sexuality in cultural analysis laid the groundwork for a more holistic understanding of cultural phenomena.

Beyond the confines of academia, Aijaz Ahmad was a committed political activist, lending his voice to struggles for social justice, economic equality, and decolonization around the world. Whether it was his impassioned critiques of imperialism, militarism, and neoliberal globalization or his solidarity with marginalized communities and oppressed peoples, Ahmad's activism was inseparable from his scholarly endeavors. By bridging the gap between theory and praxis, Ahmad demonstrated the transformative potential of critical scholarship in effecting meaningful social change.

Aijaz Ahmad's scholarship was profoundly shaped by the intellectual and political currents of his time, rooted in a deep commitment to interrogating the structures of power and privilege that undergirded

contemporary society. By situating his analysis within broader historical and theoretical frameworks, Ahmad offered invaluable insights into the complexities of global capitalism and the possibilities for resistance and transformation. As we reflect on Ahmad's contributions, we are reminded of the imperative to engage critically with the world around us, to challenge dominant narratives, and to envision alternative futures grounded in principles of equity, justice, and solidarity.

3.4.3 Key Theoretical Frameworks and Debates Shaping Ahmad's Scholarship:

Aijaz Ahmad, in his critique of post-structuralism and post-Marxism, was acutely aware of the limitations inherent in the original formulation of Marxism by its pioneers. However, he advocated for a return to the fundamental principle of revolutionary praxis, which he viewed as the cornerstone of Marxism. Unlike other ideological frameworks, Marxism prioritizes the active engagement of individuals in revolutionary action to effect societal change. Aijaz staunchly defended the integrity of these core Marxist concepts, rejecting any attempts to dilute or modify them through the incorporation of extraneous ideas in the name of enhancing completeness or realism. Instead, he emphasized the importance of maintaining fidelity to the original principles of Marxism, recognizing their enduring power and relevance in understanding and transforming society. What stands out is Aijaz's nuanced approach to upholding Marxism without succumbing to an excessive emphasis on economic factors, a common tendency in defending Marxist ideas. This departure from overemphasis on economic determinism is noteworthy, especially considering the influence of structuralist Marxism championed by French philosopher Louis Althusser. Althusser's approach marginalized the significance of economic determinations within Marxist discourse, serving as a departure point for various alternative interpretations of Marxism. Aijaz's divergence from this trend underscores his commitment to a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of Marxist theory, avoiding the oversimplification that often accompanies exclusive focus on economic factors.

Stop to Consider

Structuralist Marxism analyzes society through economic structures, emphasizing class struggle and historical materialism. It explores how these structures shape culture, politics, and individuals' lives within capitalist systems.

3.4.4 Ahmad's Engagement with Marxism and Postcolonial Theory:

Aijaz Ahmad's scholarly journey is marked by a profound engagement with diverse theoretical frameworks, each contributing to a critical understanding of contemporary society. Among these, his interactions with Marxism and postcolonial theory stand out as foundational pillars, alongside his exploration of other critical perspectives. His engagement with Marxism, postcolonial theory, and other critical perspectives has shaped his analyses of power, culture, and resistance.

At the heart of Aijaz Ahmad's intellectual project lies his deep engagement with Marxist theory, which serves as a lens through which to analyze the complexities of capitalism, class struggle, and social change. Drawing upon the foundational works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Gramsci, Ahmad navigates the terrain of political economy with precision and insight. His analyses of capitalist development, imperialism, and globalization reveal the structural contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production, shedding light on the mechanisms through which class domination and exploitation are perpetuated. Moreover, Ahmad's Marxist analysis extends beyond the realm of economics to encompass cultural production, literary interpretation, and ideological critique. By situating his analyses within a Marxist framework, Ahmad offers valuable insights into the ways in which literature, culture, and ideology reflect and reproduce social relations. His work on the politics of narrative form ("Language of Class, Ideologies of Immigration" "Salman Rushdie's Shame: Postmodern Migrancy and the Representation of Women" etc.), the construction of literary category ("Indian Literature": Notes towards

the Definition of a Category” from *In Theory*), and the relationship between literature and social change demonstrates the profound impact of Marxist thought on his scholarly endeavors.

In addition to his engagement with Marxism, Aijaz Ahmad has made significant contributions to the field of postcolonial theory, challenging Eurocentric conceptions of history, culture, and identity. Drawing upon insights from postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha et al., Ahmad interrogates the legacies of colonialism and imperialism and examines the ways in which they continue to shape contemporary society. His analyses of colonial and postcolonial literature, cultural texts, and historical narratives highlight the complex interplay between power, knowledge, and representation. Moreover, Ahmad’s work destabilizes binary oppositions such as colonizer/colonized, West/East, and center/periphery, offering a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of postcolonial identity and experience. Through his engagement with postcolonial theory, Ahmad demonstrates the ways in which colonial histories continue to resonate in the present and underscores the imperative of decolonizing both our thinking and our praxis.

In addition to his engagements with Marxism and postcolonial theory, Aijaz Ahmad’s scholarship encompasses a wide range of other critical perspectives, including cultural studies and South Asian studies. Drawing upon insights from diverse theoretical traditions, Ahmad explores questions of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, interrogating the intersections of oppression and resistance in contemporary society. His analyses of cultural texts, popular culture, and mass media highlight the ways in which power operates along multiple axes and intersects with other forms of domination. Moreover, Ahmad’s work underscores the importance of solidarity and coalition-building across diverse social movements and struggles for justice. As we continue to grapple with pressing social, political, and economic issues, Ahmad’s work serves as a reminder of the importance of critical inquiry and interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing these complex phenomena.

Stop to Consider

In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures is a key text that will enable you to understand Ahmad as a critic and appreciate the theoretical underpinnings of his critical thought. While we are to discuss an essay titled "Indian Literature": Notes towards the Definition of a Category' from this book, essays such as "Literary Theory and Third World Literature" and "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'" would be immensely rewarding for your understanding of the mentioned essay.

Self-Assessment Questions

- Mention the essays by Aijaz Ahmad and briefly sum up their contents. (You may go through the essays yourself, which will be immensely rewarding.) (in 200 words)

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- Write a note on Ahmad's engagement with Marxism. (100 words)

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3.5 Key Concepts and Themes in Ahmad's Writings:

3.5.1 Major themes and concepts addressed in Ahmad's work:

a) Critiques of imperialism, globalization, and neoliberalism.

Aijaz Ahmad's scholarship is characterized by a searing critique of imperialism, globalization, and neoliberalism, rooted in a deep commitment to social justice and anti-capitalist struggle. Through rigorous analysis and incisive critique, Ahmad discloses the mechanisms of power and domination that underpin these hegemonic forces, offering a nuanced understanding of their impact on the Global South's social fabrics in particular.

At the heart of Aijaz Ahmad's critique of imperialism lies a recognition of its historical roots and contemporary manifestations. Drawing upon the

insights of Marxist theory and postcolonial analysis, Ahmad interrogates the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of imperialist and neo-imperialist domination. He highlights the ways in which Global imperialism operates through unequal exchange, resource extraction, and military intervention, perpetuating cycles of dependency and underdevelopment in the Global South. Moreover, Ahmad's analyses of both colonial and postcolonial literature reveal the ways in which imperialism inscribes itself onto the cultural imaginary, shaping representations of the Other and perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes. By exposing the structural inequalities and violence inherent in imperialist relations, Ahmad's work, particularly his essay titled "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the work of Edward Said" (included in *In Theory*) serves as a powerful indictment of the ongoing legacies of colonialism and imperialism in the contemporary world.

Aijaz Ahmad's critique of globalization extends beyond mere economic analysis to encompass its social, cultural, and political dimensions. He challenges the neoliberal narrative of globalization as a benign force for progress and development, instead revealing its destructive impacts on marginalized communities and the environment. Ahmad exposes the ways in which globalization has facilitated the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of transnational corporations and financial elites, exacerbating inequalities within and between nations. Moreover, his analyses of cultural globalization highlight the homogenizing effects of Western cultural imperialism, as multinational media conglomerates disseminate hegemonic images and narratives around the world. By foregrounding the voices and struggles of the Global South, Ahmad's work resists the Eurocentric hegemony of globalization discourse and advocates for a more equitable and inclusive vision of global interconnectedness.

Aijaz Ahmad's critique of neoliberalism cuts to the heart of its ideological foundations and material consequences. He exposes the myth of neoliberalism as a neutral economic doctrine, revealing its role as a tool for consolidating capitalist power and dismantling social welfare provisions. Ahmad interrogates the ways in which neoliberal policies have led to the privatization of public goods, the deregulation of financial

markets, and the erosion of labour rights, resulting in heightened inequality and insecurity for the majority of the world's population. Moreover, his analyses of neoliberal cultural politics highlight the ways in which market fundamentalism permeates all aspects of social life, from education and healthcare to media and popular culture. By exposing the contradictions and injustices inherent in neoliberal ideology and practice, Ahmad's work lays the groundwork for alternative visions of social and economic organization grounded in principles of solidarity, equity, and sustainability.

Aijaz Ahmad's critiques of imperialism, globalization, and neoliberalism offer valuable insights into the structures of power and domination that shape our world. By exposing the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of these hegemonic forces, Ahmad's work contributes to a deeper understanding of the social, economic, and cultural dynamics of global capitalism. Moreover, his commitment to social justice and anti-capitalist struggle inspires new generations of scholars and activists to challenge the status quo and envision alternative futures grounded in principles of liberation and equality.

b) Objection to "Third World"

Aijaz Ahmad aggressively rejects the concept of dividing the world into three distinct categories, as proposed by Jameson's framework of "Third World" literature. In his two essays from *In Theory* namely "Literary Theory and 'Third World Literature'" and "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'", Ahmad critiques the notion of "Third World" on multiple grounds, arguing against the homogenization and oversimplification it entails. He contends that such categorization fails to capture the diverse realities and struggles of nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Moreover, Ahmad challenges the use of allegory as a framework for understanding literature from these regions, advocating instead for a more nuanced approach grounded in critical realism. He emphasizes the need to recognize the complex historical and political contexts within which literary works emerge, rejecting the imposition of generalized frameworks that overlook the specificities of each literary tradition. Ahmad's critique reflects a broader concern with the neglect of Marxist perspectives on the national question and the

failure to engage with the radical traditions of anti-colonial struggle. His argument underscores the importance of theoretical rigor and historical understanding in the study of literature from the so-called “Third World,” emphasizing the need for a more nuanced and contextually grounded approach to literary analysis.

Stop to Consider :

The primary reason Ahmad presents against the categorization of Third World Literature by the intelligentsia of Western metropolitan academies is the inaccessibility of a large section of this literature in the West. Much of the text of Third World Literature is not available in metropolitan languages. While the circulation of Western texts and knowledge occurs among metropolitan countries in the West via translation, a significant portion of Third World Literature still remains alien to them. Hence, Third World Literature cannot be an object of a Western intellectual's theoretical knowledge. Theorization requires the availability of texts that are intended to be theorized. In "'Indian Literature': Notes towards the Definition of a Category," Ahmad employs the same logic when questioning the theoretical basis of the category of 'Indian Literature.'

c) Criticism of Edward Said

Aijaz Ahmad's critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism* is multifaceted and nuanced, reflecting a deep engagement with the complexities of colonial discourse and knowledge production. Ahmad, in many occasions and primarily in his essay "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said", challenges Said's assertion that European writing is inherently incapable of producing "true knowledge about non-Europe," arguing that this charge reflects a reductionist understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power. While acknowledging the distortions and condescension inherent in European perspectives on the Orient, Ahmad contends that Said's analysis overlooks the historical specificity and contingency of colonial knowledge production. Rather than attributing orientalist distortion solely to imperialism's material domination, Ahmad emphasizes the need to

interrogate the epistemological foundations of European thought and its construction of the Other.

Central to Ahmad's critique is his rejection of essentialist binaries between Europe and its Other, which he sees as perpetuated by Said's framework of Orientalism. By positing a rigid dichotomy between the Occident and the Orient, Said, according to Ahmad, risks essentializing both categories and obscuring the complexities and nuances of colonial encounters. Ahmad argues that such essentialism not only simplifies the dynamics of power and knowledge but also undermines the agency and heterogeneity of colonized subjects. Instead of essentializing European perspectives, Ahmad calls for a more nuanced analysis that takes into account the multiplicity of voices and perspectives within both colonizing and colonized societies.

Ahmad critiques Said's focus on the literary and cultural representations of the Orient, arguing that this approach neglects the material and economic dimensions of imperialism. While acknowledging the importance of cultural critique, Ahmad contends that Said's analysis overlooks the ways in which colonial power operates through economic exploitation and political domination. By emphasizing the material conditions of colonialism, Ahmad seeks to broaden the scope of analysis beyond the realm of discourse and representation, highlighting the material realities of imperialism and their impact on colonized societies.

d) Internationalism

Aijaz Ahmad's political analysis was by no means restricted to events in India. He was naturally internationalist by temperament and wrote with just as much insight and sensitivity about West Asia and the domestic politics of the U.S. and European nations. Ahmad's engagement with the concept of internationalism is multifaceted, reflecting his deep commitment to global solidarity and anti-imperialist struggle. Throughout his work, Ahmad emphasizes the interconnectedness of struggles for liberation and social justice across national boundaries, advocating for alliances between oppressed peoples and movements worldwide. His analysis goes beyond mere solidarity rhetoric, going deeper into the material conditions and historical contexts that shape international relations. Ahmad critiques the

hierarchical structures of global capitalism that perpetuate exploitation and inequality on a global scale, highlighting the ways in which neoliberalism undermine the sovereignty and self-determination of nations in the Global South. Moreover, Ahmad interrogates the role of Western imperialism and hegemony in shaping international institutions and norms, exposing the ways in which they serve the interests of global capital at the expense of marginalized communities. In his writings, Ahmad calls for a reinvigoration of internationalist movements rooted in principles of anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism, advocating for a more just and equitable world order based on solidarity, cooperation, and mutual respect among nations and peoples.

3.5.2 Ahmad's Contributions Literary Theory, Cultural Studies, and Political Economy:

Literary theory, cultural studies, and political economy are all touched by Aijaz Ahmad's intellectual journey, which shows a unique interdisciplinary approach that has had a lasting impact on all of these disciplines. Ahmad's contributions, marked by a sharp analytical eye and a strong commitment to social justice, have influenced academic discourse and challenged established orthodoxies.

In the field of literary theory, Aijaz Ahmad's scholarship is characterized by a rigorous engagement with questions of power, ideology, and representation. Drawing upon Marxist theory, postcolonial theory, and critical theory, Ahmad pioneered innovative approaches to literary analysis that shed light on the ways in which literature reflects and reproduces social relations. Central to Ahmad's work is his interrogation of the politics of narrative form, whereby he examines how literary texts encode and transmit ideological messages. Through his analyses of canonical and non-canonical texts alike, Ahmad highlights the ways in which literature serves as a site of contestation, negotiation, and resistance. Essays from his seminal work *In Theory*, such as "Language of Class, Ideologies of Imagination", "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'", "Salman Rushdie's Shame: Postmodern Migrancy and the Representation of Women", "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said" and "'Indian Literature': Notes towards the Definition of a Category"

etc. are important in our understanding of Ahmad's perspectives on the relationship between literature and social change, and the politics of literary interpretation which can fundamentally transform our understanding of the role of literature in society.

Aijaz Ahmad's contributions to cultural studies are equally profound, as he challenged dominant modes of cultural analysis and advocated for a more inclusive and polycentric approach to cultural production and representation. Drawing upon insights from Marxist theory and postcolonial theory, Ahmad critiqued Eurocentric conceptions of culture and called for a more expansive understanding of cultural diversity. Central to Ahmad's work is his examination of the ways in which cultural texts reflect and refract social identities, power dynamics, and historical processes. Through his analyses of popular culture, mass media, and cultural politics, Ahmad demonstrates the complex interplay between culture, power, and resistance. His critiques of cultural imperialism, cultural commodification, and cultural appropriation have challenged scholars to rethink their assumptions about the relationship between culture and society.

In the field of political economy, Aijaz Ahmad's scholarship is characterized by a rigorous engagement with questions of class struggle, imperialism, and globalization. Building upon the insights of Marxist political economy, Ahmad provided critiques of neoliberal capitalism and its attendant forms of exploitation and inequality. Central to Ahmad's work is his analysis of the global capitalist system and its impact on societies around the world. Through his studies of global economic trends, financial crises, contemporary politics and neoliberal policies, Ahmad exposes the contradictions inherent in capitalist development and underscores the urgent need for alternative modes of economic organization and social welfare. His advocacy for a more equitable distribution of resources, his critiques of corporate power and financial speculation, and his calls for global solidarity have resonated with scholars and activists alike, inspiring new generations to envision alternative futures grounded in principles of justice and equality.

One of the things that distinguishes Aijaz Ahmad as a scholar is his capacity to integrate knowledge from diverse disciplines and theoretical traditions, creating connections between seemingly unrelated fields and shedding light on the interconnected nature of social, cultural, and economic phenomena. Through his ability to connect literary theory, cultural studies, and political economics, Ahmad has shown the need of multidisciplinary investigation in tackling complex societal problems and promoting agendas for social change. His work serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of holistic and intersectional approaches to understanding the complexities of contemporary society.

Self-Assessment Questions:

- How does Ahmad put forward his argument against the category of Third World Literature? (80 words)

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- Could you comment on Ahmad’s contribution to literary theory? According to Ahmad, does the understanding of literature require a solid theoretical basis? (150 words)

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3.6 Summing Up:

Aijaz Ahmad was a prominent figure in Marxist thought, renowned for his original interpretations of contemporary global events through a Marxist lens. He staunchly advocated for the integrity of Marxist concepts, denouncing any endeavours to dilute or hybridize them with foreign ideologies.

Today, Aijaz Ahmad’s legacy endures as a beacon of critical inquiry and political engagement, inspiring scholars, activists, and students alike to challenge the status quo and envision alternative futures. His rigorous analysis of power relations, his unwavering commitment to social justice,

and his insistence on the primacy of collective struggle continue to reverberate in academic and activist circles worldwide. As we confront the myriad challenges of the 21st century, Ahmad's work serves as a potent reminder of the enduring relevance of critical scholarship in the pursuit of a more just and equitable world.

The political convictions of Aijaz Ahmad to freedom, social justice, and the fight against imperialism are inextricably linked to his scholarly legacy. Throughout his distinguished career, Ahmad's quest of knowledge has been driven by a strong conviction in the transformational power of grassroots action and critical inquiry. Ahmad's lasting political impact can be understood by looking at the ways in which his work has motivated activists, academics, and organisers to oppose hegemony, fight injustice, and imagine alternative futures based on equality and solidarity.

Aijaz Ahmad's political commitments extend beyond the realm of anti-imperialist struggle to encompass broader visions of social justice and equity. He critiques the neoliberal capitalist system for perpetuating inequalities and injustices on a global scale, advocating for alternative modes of economic organization that prioritize the needs and aspirations of the oppressed and marginalized. Moreover, Ahmad's analyses of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality challenge intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination. By centering the experiences and struggles of marginalized communities, Ahmad's work inspires new generations of activists and organizers to fight for a more just and equitable world.

Aijaz Ahmad's political legacy is characterized by his commitment to intellectual activism – the idea that scholarship should be inextricably linked to political praxis and social transformation. He rejects the notion of academic neutrality, arguing that scholars have a responsibility to engage with pressing social issues and to use their knowledge and expertise to challenge power and privilege. Throughout his career, Ahmad has been actively involved in grassroots movements, solidarity campaigns, and intellectual networks dedicated to social change. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, Ahmad's work demonstrates the transformative potential of critical inquiry and collective action in the pursuit of a more just and equitable world.

3.7 References and Suggested Readings:

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Suggested links:

<https://mayday.leftword.com/blog/post/the-life-of-a-great-marxist-aijaz-ahmad-1941-2022-by-vijay-prashad>

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/a-true-marxist-intellectual-aijaz-Ahmads-scholarship-encompassed-several-disciplines/article65211007.ece>

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UNIT - 4

Aijaz Ahmad: “‘Indian Literature’: Notes towards the Definition of a Category”

Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 The Concept of Literature
- 4.4 Reading the Essay
 - 4.4.1 An overview
 - 4.4.2 The key points
- 4.5 Summing Up
- 4.6 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives:

The objectives of this unit are to:

- *develop* a nuanced understanding of Indian literature and its significance in shaping cultural identity,
- *analyze* Aijaz Ahmad's arguments regarding the complexities of defining Indian literature,
- *explore* alternative perspectives on the categorization of literary works within the Indian context.

4.2 Introduction:

Indian literature embodies the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Indian subcontinent, reflecting the rich tapestry of its history, traditions, and social complexities. Aijaz Ahmad's seminal essay, “‘Indian Literature’: Notes toward the Definition of a Category”, offers profound insights into the challenges of defining Indian literature within the context of colonial legacies and postcolonial discourses. This unit aims to critically engage with Ahmad's ideas and provide a comprehensive exploration of Indian literature as a dynamic and multifaceted field of study.

Indian literature stands as a testament to the rich cultural heritage and linguistic diversity of the Indian subcontinent. Spanning millennia, Indian literary traditions have evolved alongside the complex tapestry of its society, reflecting the myriad voices, experiences, and identities that constitute its essence. In the pursuit of understanding Indian literature, we delve into the critical discourse surrounding its definition and categorization, guided by the insightful analysis of Aijaz Ahmad, a prominent literary critic and cultural theorist.

Central to our exploration is Ahmad's essay "Indian Literature: Notes toward the Definition of a Category", a seminal work included in his acclaimed book *In Theory: Classes, Nations and Literatures*. Published in 1992, *In Theory* represents Ahmad's rigorous engagement with postcolonial theory and literary criticism within a Marxist framework. In the essay under discussion, through his examination of Indian literature, Ahmad challenges essentialist and homogenizing narratives, advocating for a nuanced understanding that recognizes the plurality of Indian literary traditions.

The inclusion of Ahmad's essay within the course titled "Indian Writing" is itself suggestive of how it can shed light on various dimensions of this area. While the subject appears to be so benign and familiar, Ahmad's insightful and rigorously critical engagement with it raises a host of questions and concerns around issues of literary history, language, scholarship, postcoloniality, literary intelligentsia, cultural history and so on. By situating Indian literature within the broader discourse of class struggle, nationalism, and cultural hegemony, Ahmad invites readers to critically interrogate the politics of representation and the power dynamics inherent in the construction of the literary. As we embark on our journey through Indian literature, Ahmad's perspective serves as a guiding beacon, illuminating the intricate interplay between history, society, and artistic expression.

Our exploration begins by contextualizing Indian literature within its historical and cultural milieu, tracing its evolution from ancient epics and classical poetry to contemporary novels and short stories. We delve into the rich tapestry of regional languages and dialects that form the

bedrock of Indian literary traditions, acknowledging the diversity of voices and experiences that converge under the umbrella of “Indian literature.”

With Ahmad as our guide, we navigate the complexities of defining Indian literature, grappling with questions of language, as well as similarities and differences among its diverse literary trajectories, the peculiar historical conditions of formation of literary canon, centrality of textuality to the exclusion of the oral and the performative, and so on. Drawing upon interdisciplinary insights from literary theory, sociology, and cultural studies, we unpack the multiple layers of meaning embedded within the term “Indian literature,” recognizing its fluid and contested nature. Ahmad’s critique of essentialism and cultural nationalism challenges us to transcend simplistic categorizations and embrace the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of Indian literary production. Moreover, our exploration extends beyond the disciplinary limits of literary study, engaging with the broader socio-political contexts of literary production.

4.3 The Concept of Literature:

Literature, in its essence, embodies the artistic expression of human experiences, emotions, and ideas through various forms such as poetry, prose, drama, and folklore. It serves as a medium for communication, reflection, and interpretation of the world around us. However, defining literature is a complex endeavor, as it transcends boundaries of time, culture, and language. While some may view literature purely as written works of fiction or non-fiction, others recognize its broader scope, encompassing oral traditions, visual arts, and even digital media. In the Indian context, literature holds a particularly significant place, deeply intertwined with the rich tapestry of religious, philosophical, and socio-political discourses that characterize Indian civilization.

Indian literature, with its vast and diverse landscape, encompasses a multitude of languages, traditions, and genres. From the ancient Sanskrit epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata to the regional folk tales and modern-day novels, Indian literature reflects the myriad voices and experiences of its people throughout history. It serves as a repository of cultural heritage, preserving and transmitting traditions, beliefs, and values

from one generation to the next. Moreover, Indian literature has evolved over millennia, adapting to changing social, political, and technological landscapes while retaining its distinct cultural identity. Thus, the concept of literature in the Indian context is not only a means of artistic expression but also a reflection of the nation's rich and diverse cultural heritage.

The essay under discussion problematizes the concept of literature in the Indian context without taking it for granted. Ahmad's contention that 'Indian Literature' does not have a solid theoretical base. On the other hand, the concept of the literary, as the author demonstrates, evolves in the course of the peculiar historical circumstances.

4.4 Reading the Essay:

4.4.1 An Overview:

'Indian Literature' is a theoretically problematic category. The unity and coherence implicit in the category do not have a solid theoretical base. It is only by an intense theoretical practice combined with deeper and wider empirical study that we can establish "Indian Literature" as a coherent field of study.

Ahmad points out some of the theoretical problems involved in this categorization. He enumerates the historical conditions of the emergence of this literature, and suggests ways for a more nuanced understanding of 'Indian Literature'. By referring to Kosambi's criticism of the "backward bourgeoisie" whose propensity is to garner profit without labour, he ironically suggests that the construction of this category reveals absence of a great deal of intellectual labour. The prevalent understanding of 'Indian Literature' is the outcome of a hasty and homogenizing project of bringing all regional literatures of India under a vague and theoretically untenable umbrella term.

Stop to Consider:

Does Ahmad solely emphasize the diversity and variety of literatures and languages as the sole explanation of why a theoretical understanding of Indian Literature is not possible? He mentions uneven developments of regional literatures as well as shifts in state

boundaries. Understanding 'Indian Literature' is not only possible but also desirable, yet the narrativization of literary history here involves a process of exclusion of a whole body of literary work as well as oral traditions in favor of 'high textuality.' Classical texts are canonized with little engagement with "other kinds of history." What are these other histories? Well, you will gain some sense of them as you navigate through Ahmad's text. After all, Ahmad demonstrates how a comprehensive, inclusive, and nuanced understanding of Indian history is possible and what kinds of intellectual labor it involves.

How does Aijaz Ahmad point out the theoretical problems of this category? First, a mere assemblage of various language literatures by virtue of a common geography cannot give us a coherent field; there must be other grounds to sustain it. Second, narrativization of history resorts to a highly textualist tradition and foregrounds the 'classical texts'. (Please note how an exclusionary principle is associated with it: myriad non-canonical texts are marginalized while oral and performative tradition, which is quite crucial to gain a sense of the literary in Indian context, is overlooked). Third, theoretical possibility of an Indian literature hinges on a broad yet intensive intellectual engagement with discreet language-literary histories as well as with their unities. A materialist epistemological basis underlying diverse empirical knowledge of literatures, Ahmad argues, would prepare some ground for the kind of unity necessary for the construction of this category of 'Indian Literature'.

The essay is organized around nine sections. Let us explore how Ahmad addresses theoretical problems, illustrates features of historical development of literature in India, and delineates the contours of a field of study under the rubric of 'Indian Literature'.

4.4.2 The Key points:

(A) The first three sections deal with deal with the lack of sufficient empirical knowledge and absence of institutional agency devoted to studying, analyzing, and critically interpreting India's diverse linguistic traditions in a comparative manner, aiming to construct a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes 'Indian Literature.'

Despite the necessity for a multilingual approach, Ahmad notes the absence of concerted efforts by institutions to build upon the groundwork laid by individual scholars in consolidating and disseminating such traditions among students and academics. Besides, exclusionary practices of traditional scholarship and need of a comparatist perspective are also discussed.

Empirical knowledge of major languages and literatures is both uneven and insufficient. As Ahmad contends, the challenges in obtaining accurate information about texts, authors, genres, modes of transmission and circulation, as well as understanding the audience and readership, pose significant obstacles when studying the formative periods of modern Indian languages. These languages have evolved through a prolonged process of mutual interaction and sharing, resulting in a history of diverse and uneven mutual influences. For instance, we have limited reliable information about the development of languages like Tamil, Kannada, and Sanskrit. The historical circumstances that shaped these languages' identities and forms remain unclear.

Tracing the movement of diverse language-clusters and their effects on each other across geographical space presents a significant challenge. In the North, for instance, information about various regional languages, their overlapping vocabulary, and their historical differentiation into concrete linguistic-clusters is uneven. While we know that the process of differentiation occurred around the tenth and twelfth centuries, the details of this transformation remain obscure, with few instances shedding light on the differentiation of formerly overlapping languages. Overall, the understanding of the process that gave rise to concrete distinctions between various language-clusters in India remains underdeveloped. There is severe lack of historical documentation renders even a descriptive analysis of its commonalities, circulating generic forms within specific periods, and the interplay between various works across linguistic clusters virtually impossible. Any attempts made in this regard remain underdeveloped, uncertain, and fluid. The multilingual and polyglot nature of these literary clusters poses a formidable obstacle in developing a cohesive and comprehensive body of literary-historical knowledge. Additionally, many writers and scholars have contributed to literature in

more than one language, further complicating scholarly endeavors. Ahmad cites Mohan Singh Diwana to underscore the multilinguality of India's literary traditions, highlighting the challenges faced by modern scholars in systematically studying Indian literature due to the complexity of mastering multiple languages.

These huge gaps in knowledge also relates to lack of mutual translations of texts across languages. As Ahmad argues, these gaps cannot be bridged by English. The structure and aura of English is foreign to the ethos of our literatures. The more we move towards oral and performative traditions of literature, wider would be this distance with English

Genre study would also require to revamp itself. It would be crucial for the project of theorizing Indian literature in the multilingual climate of the country. Current practice of genre study is largely restricted to enumeration of compositional forms, aesthetic properties and classification of texts into genres, while evolution, currency and decline of a literary genre should take cognizance of such factors as social classes and belief systems that cut across languages.

Study of the languages and literatures as discreet entities would not be a solution. As Ahmad points out, it has only consolidated monolingual thrusts in discreet language departments. He writes, "All the Urdu academias, all the Departments of Urdu in colleges and universities, have failed to sponsor any real project of comparative scholarship, research and translation, aimed at a fuller understanding of the composite linguistic and cultural milieu in which they operate" (250). Thus, a comparatist work is required, and as he has already contended, English is not suitable for this work.

Stop to Consider

Please do not conflate 'English' with the 'English Literature Department'. In the essay's conclusion, Ahmad advocates for a significant overhaul of Indian university English Departments, aiming to 'decolonize' the curriculum. At present, however, the author merely dismisses the notion of using English as a universal medium for translating texts from various linguistic literary traditions.

We must see that Ahmad identifies the shortcomings in existing frameworks for understanding what is loosely referred to as ‘Indian Literature’ and suggests ways to avoid common pitfalls. The institutionalized practice of literary criticism also comes under scrutiny. Literary criticism grounded in the framework of New Criticism, emphasizing close textual analysis, overlooks essential aspects such as authorship, orality, and performativity. These elements are particularly significant in the context of Indian literature, particularly during the pre-modern era. Problem of authorship persists in many texts of Bhakti poets, while performance of poetry points to another dimension of literary culture. Many canonical texts in the Indian literature have deep roots in oral-performative traditions. Thus, a systematic study of Indian literature cannot be carried out in the cozy domain of close textual reading. Literary studies here must address a wide array of issues surrounding a diverse assortment of cultural artifacts, experiences, images, addresses etc., besides sociological issues. In other words, Ahmad calls for various other kinds of enquiries beyond the mere textual and the linguistic.

Ahmad also asserts the distinctiveness of ‘Indian Literature’ from the national literatures of the West. Western national literature is grounded on a historically produced monolinguality, while we are brought up in a bi- or multilingual culture. While the unity cannot be perceived in terms of any common national language, it is still possible to construct a composite history of Indian literature. He acknowledges that such a history exists at the level of civilizational continuities, historical experiences, and cultural ethos. Despite the diversity in literary-linguistic forms, there are shared fundamental “structures of feeling” manifested through beliefs, rituals, and utterances.

A prevalent trend in traditional scholarship is the favoritism towards classical texts, often neglecting their interconnections with a broader network of literary productions and their societal contexts. The canonization of classical texts, closely tied to a spiritual ethos labeled as inherently Indian, is indeed a legacy of Orientalism. As Ahmad contends,

the Orientalists played a key role in fostering the idea of Indian Literature with emphasis on antiquity as its distinctive marker. They emphasized the earlier traditions—the Vedic, and the Sanskritic—and this explains why they sidelined Tamil which had a major literary tradition in the South. However, the Orientalists opposed the typical colonial attitude of negation of the Indian tradition (exemplified in Macaulay’s infamous statement about Indian knowledge), yet they also shared a certain colonial eurocentrism. On the other hand, they were alive to universal humanism fostered by the Enlightenment. At any rate, it is the Orientalists, who prepared a substantial ground for the study of Indian literature.

While Orientalism’s harvest can be used now for superior scholarship, one must be also aware of the ideological underpinnings of their selection of texts. In the nineteenth century canonization of classical texts took place alongside the reformist-revivalist movements. Because of this historically evolving religious-intellectual nexus, the idea of literature got infused with the notion of sublimity and spirituality and a literary-religious canon was established. It also generated a certain mode of reading literature where secular reading had no place. Texts and ideas other than the Brahminical were relegated to secondariness and seen as part of a unitary version of Hindu religion.

Stop to Consider

Classical texts such as the *Mahabharata*, Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, the plays of Kalidasa, and the *Bhagavad-Gita* have been enshrined as the epitome of Indian literature through canonization. This process of canon formation inherently involves the exclusion of alternative literary works, a practice intricately woven into historical and cultural dynamics. You might contemplate how this unfolded within the literature of your own language. Take, for instance, the Borgeet genre within the Assamese Vaishnavite tradition. While Borgeet is commonly perceived as a specific repertoire of songs attributed to Sankardeva and Madhavadeva, numerous other songs, both oral and textual, are also popularly known as Borgeet. In an article

referenced in the "References and Suggested Readings" section, Dr. Sanjib Pol Deka illustrates how the canonization of these Vaishnavite saints' Borgeets transpired in the nineteenth century through a multifaceted interplay of orality, performance, and the emerging print culture—a process that marginalized other lyric texts, equally deserving of recognition as Borgeet.

Self-Assessment Questions

- Why do you think does Aijaz Ahmad contend that ‘Indian Literature’ does not have a theoretical base? (in 200 words)

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- Do you think that a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Indian literature must include the oral and performative traditions? (in 100 words)

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(B) In the fourth and fifth sections Ahmad emphasizes the need of a comparative framework for theorizing ‘Indian Literature’, and asserts how Indian literature, far from being a colonial imposition, is intricately linked to the development of Indian languages outside the colonial apparatuses.

Ahmad emphasizes the importance of adopting a comparative method to explore the relationships between different language-literatures, which would enhance our understanding of their composite nature. This approach entails detailed examinations of how these constituent parts overlap and interact, contributing to a unified sense of literary history. the quantifiable, aggregative version of literatures must be accompanied by a qualitative assessment of shifts and transitions as well as overlaps among the language-clusters. Transactions with the non-Indian literatures and western influences must also be considered.

Stop to Consider

Comparative Literature: Comparative literature is a field of study that involves comparative study of literatures from various linguistic-cultural traditions. It involves more than just a simple comparison between various literary texts. The texts that are compared with each other belong to different languages, cultures, genres, and historical periods. A comparative approach, thus, brings into its purview literary works from across languages and perspectives of various disciplines such as anthropology, history, philosophy and so on. While study of literary text is its basic task, broader cultural and historical contexts are taken into consideration, and similarities and differences of literary works across cultures in terms of themes, motifs and genres are examined.

Underdevelopment of Indian Literature as a coherent domain of study is partly explained in terms of weakness in this comparatist work largely because of lack of initiative from the Comparative Literature Departments. The task is enormous, requiring a huge institutional engagement devoted to the discovery of the dialectic of unities and differences of diverse language-literature tradition within Indian literature and geared towards negotiations with multiple issues of linguistic overlaps, class, community, gender as well as histories of orality, writing and print.

The advent of English literature in India has its roots in the colonial history of education, but the idea of literature was not shaped by English. Colonial historiography periodizes Indian history in terms of Hindu, Muslim and British periods, and foregrounding of English language and English texts in higher education and upper echelons of the Indian society. But as Ahmad argues here, the concept of literature is not defined by English. In the stratified colonial society, use of local vernacular languages at the lower strata of society and administration was a fact. In other words, English was not the common medium of popular expression or administrative action. Other vernacular languages thrived, and these

Indian languages gained sustenance from print culture. Printed books and magazines and periodicals etc. in vernacular languages circulated. While the politics of English was a fact, English was not the sole medium of education for creation of political consent. Second, imposition of English did not necessarily define the literary in Indian context, because English literature was used to enhance ability to write sentences, geared to mastery over vocabulary and grammar. Western knowledge's superior position was established, but literary superiority of English was not established. True that most various genres traveled to Indian literatures via English literature, but the most pervasive influence was in realism of French and Russian variety.

Stop to Consider

Has Ahmad really overlooked the historical significance of English and English literature in India? Let's not forget, 'Indian Literature' and 'Indian English Literature' may have some overlap, but they are distinct entities. The concept of the literary in the Indian context didn't solely emerge from colonial English literature. Think about it, various literary genres—epics, sonnets, tragedies, blank verse, historical romances—entered the scene through English literature, and Indian writers experimented with each of them. However, the influence of realism ran deeper and wider in Indian writing, mostly owing to the impact of other European literatures.

Now, diving into Ahmad's analysis, besides his main point about 'Indian literature', it should also spark some intriguing questions about your own language's literature. How did different genres evolve in Assamese literature? And how did they find their way there from other regional or foreign literatures? Do you notice any Western influence in the development of realism in Assamese fiction? There's no need for a definitive answer here; just ponder over these questions and explore the complexities.

Self-Assessment Questions

Why is it important to learn about the rise of vernacular languages to develop a comprehensive understanding of Indian literature? (in 100 words)

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(C) In sections five, six and seven, Ahmad deals with the socio-historical conditions of the rise of Indian literature (i.e. the regional varieties) and the rise of a literary intelligentsia and the roles of Bhakti tradition and reform movements in shaping the idea of literature and conferring some unity to ‘Indian Literature’.

The upper strata of the Indian intelligentsia were well-versed in English and sometimes exposed to Sanskrit and Persian (depending on their family traditions) while using indigenous languages for common discourse. It is largely from the petty bourgeois sections that a reading public since the advent of print flourished. Institutions devoted to the development of literatures of indigenous languages were established thanks to the traditional sections of the upper class- and upper-middle class intelligentsia. The petite bourgeoisie had opposed propensities for English and indigenous languages – a contradiction determined by the very contradiction in the colonial system itself. Colonial education avoided strict monolingualism but relied, instead, on of both English and the Indian languages depending on the social strata of the stakeholders. From these petty bourgeois sections emerged the literary clusters who were oppressed by the crisis of pre-capitalist society and were inclined towards ‘Bhakti’ tradition of medieval culture. These individuals, distinct from traditional land-owning classes, aligned with democratizing forces challenging entrenched social hierarchies. They sought to reconcile regional specificities with a collective civilizational unity in resistance to colonization, often through religious and mystical narratives until the emergence of secular historiography with the rise of the Communist movement in the early 20th century. Despite its religious underpinnings, the Bhakti movement symbolized a cross-cultural and inter-religious

synthesis of aspirations, transcending geographical and linguistic divides, serving as a bridge between modernity and tradition, attracting attention from various intellectual traditions in the subcontinent.

The regional literatures that arose in this process had to negotiate the relationship between the particularities of the regional literature and notion of civilizational unity. Ahmad's explanation here is that these regional literatures developed not in utterly insular spaces but in the context of capitalist unification, experience of colonial subjection and anti-colonial movements.

Stop to Consider

- In the colonial era, writers often felt compelled to emphasize the idea of India's civilizational unity, which naturally found its way into Indian literature. But did all discourses within Indian literature consistently uphold this notion of civilizational unity? Consider this: In a time when Western knowledge was perceived as superior, weren't writers also influenced by the belief in the supposed superiority of Western civilization? Think about it!
- It is important to note that Ahmad establishes Bhakti as a key inspiration for the nineteenth and the twentieth century literature because of its democratizing and anti-Brahminical stands. Because this huge democratic strain of Bhakti spread across languages and cultures, and especially the way it democratizes literary language, the notion of Indian Literature is deeply linked to this literary legacy of Bhakti in colonial times.

Reform movements in the nineteenth century had a great role in revitalizing of the Indian languages—modern and classical. The classical languages—Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian—which were the language of religious textuality, received great impetus from these movements. The reformists opened educational institutions augmenting public and government efforts in literacy but prioritized religious texts over critical enquiry and secularism. The modern Indian languages were pressed into the service of religion. In other words, the reform movements did not lead to democratization and secularization of literature.

Movements of religious reforms came in tandem with forms of revivalism. The weight of revivalist tendencies can be seen in various forms of movements subsumed in 'national movement' aimed to foster unity against colonialism. Secular discourses did not directly attack the spiritual ethos of Indian tradition, but secular goals could be pursued as long as they did not challenge the authority of fundamental scriptures of Indian spirituality. However, the progressive writers' movement of the 1930s remained staunchly secular in every sense.

It is at this moment the Ahmad enumerates the basic features of this historical situation of Indian Literature:

- As a literary institution, English developed in the country through the universities.
- Modern critical scholarship about the Vedic, Sanskrit, and Mughal heritage persisted in colonial times, though bulk of this scholarship was speculative and idealistic.
- In the last 200 years modern languages developed unevenly in diverse regions.
- The rise of the modern languages gave rise to overwhelming literary production while literary scholarship was far less developed.
- Systematic knowledge of any literary tradition has remained confined to that region.
- Writing of literary history stood opposed to historiographical tradition. While traditional histories resorted to metanarrative expounded by colonial historiographers, regional literary histories are largely kept insulated from corresponding histories in other regional literatures. There are fewer attempts to build up a comprehensive, comparative perspective.
- Lack of common language for theoretical aggregation poses a problem. Historical developments did not give rise to a common linguistic formation. Since decolonization some systematic attempts efforts for the study, research and publications in, regional languages and literatures are seen.

SAQ

- “Writing of literary history in India has stood opposed to conventional historiographical tradition.” Is the statement true? Explain. (100 words)

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- How does Ahmad elaborate the socio-historical processes through which literature resonated with the spiritual tradition in India? (100 words)

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(D) Before we move on to the key points in sections eight and nine, let us stop and think. How does Ahmad suggest solution to the problems he raises about the category under discussion? He discusses problem of insufficient and uneven empirical knowledge. He illustrates the manifold abilities required for this project, beyond the institutionalized practice of literary criticism. He also demonstrates the peculiarities of ‘Indian literature’ and the limits of considering it with models derived from western national literature. He demonstrates the limits of traditional scholarship and legacy of Orientalism, and explains how a distinctive meaning of the literary –both as form of textuality and spirituality—gained currency because of the socio-historical factors. He explains how ‘Indian literature’ cannot be in any way viewed in derivative fashion from the privileged point of ‘Indian English Literature’, illustrating how ‘English’ has contributed far less to conceptualization of literature than we might think. He also discusses the peculiar historical circumstances as well as the social matrix of the evolution of regional literature in the nineteenth century that allowed them to share certain commonalities such as the civilizational ethos of India, or the democratizing impulses of bhakti tradition. He enumerates the impact of the reform movements and how it eventually strengthened the notion of Indian spirituality and tradition, opposed to a secular and democratic culture.

Now, having delineated the contours of 'Indian Literature' as a possible discursive field, Ahmad further elaborates the matter of institutional role and reiterates the point of individual abilities necessary for an enormous intellectual labour warranted by this 'field'.

While Comparative Literature Departments in their present state cannot carry out the necessary work required to establish Indian Literature as a theoretical field, the prospect and limits of English Literature Departments are explored. While other language departments, including even Hindi, have a restricted linguistic-territorial boundary, English is practically a pan-Indian literary institution producing a literary intelligentsia on a national level. However, the Departments of English with their curricular focus on an alien 'English must refocus attention to "matters closer to home"'. On the other hand, the present condition of the English teacher such as the monolingual thrust, increasing professionalization and restricted movement within disciplinary boundary, is not conducive to the work Ahmad calls for throughout the text.

Ahmad calls for a certain kind of 'decolonization' of the English curriculum. He does not rule out teaching of typical or canonical work of English literature, but literary texts must be taught in the socio-political contexts of the history of capital, labour movement, colonialism and empire. This history has many consequences for us. In any case, the teaching of English should be redefined to remove its colonial connotations. Moreover, the study of English literature should run parallel to the exploration of the history of modern Indian literature itself.

Finally, Ahmad calls for a radical reorganization of the English literature Departments as well as subsumption of literary study within a much broader domain of historical and cultural studies. the literary intelligentsia must also step out of the elitist frame of the English study into a much broader interdisciplinary enterprise. The desirable traits of a scholar equipped to engage with Indian literature in a systematic way are erudition, multilingual abilities, the power to move across disciplines and ability for textual analysis etc. He upholds Professor Kosambi as a role model for any scholar willing to engage with Indian literature in a rigorous and systematic fashion.

Check Your Progress:

- How does Aijaz Ahmad's essay challenge conventional notions of Indian literature?
- How does Ahmad call for a radical reorientation of literary study to establish Indian literature as a theoretically consistent category?
- Comment on how Ahmad describes the historical role of English and the possibilities and limits of the English Literature Departments of India via-a-vis the project of establishing Indian Literature as a discipline.

4.5 Summing Up :

In conclusion, the exploration of Indian literature requires a nuanced understanding of its historical, cultural, and political contexts. Aijaz Ahmad's essay serves as a thought-provoking starting point for critical engagement with the complexities of defining Indian literature. By interrogating established frameworks and amplifying diverse voices, we can gain deeper insights into the rich and multifaceted tapestry of Indian literary traditions. In this unit, we have discussed how 'Indian Literature' in its present state lacks a solid theoretical base. Lack of sufficient empirical knowledge is a key issue which Ahmad extensively elaborates. We have also dealt, after Ahmad, with the limits of traditional scholarship and described a new form of scholarship characterized by multilingual engagements, a broad understanding of literature that includes oral and performative traditions, a broad historical and cultural perspective beyond the strictures of conventional literary criticism, and a comparative framework. We have further highlighted how Ahmad explores the dialectic of unity and difference of the literatures in India within its peculiar socio-historical contexts.

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