

**BLOCK: III**

**Unit 1: Yasmina Reza: *The God of Carnage* (Background)**

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# UNIT- 1

## Yasmina Reza: The God of Carnage (Background)

### Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Yasmina Reza: The Playwright
- 1.4 Composition and Production History
- 1.5 Context of the Play
- 1.6 Language of the play
- 1.7 Critical Reception
- 1.8 Summing Up
- 1.9 References and Suggested Readings

### 1.1 Objectives:

This unit is an attempt at analyzing the ideas of Yasmina Reza the playwright. After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- *know* about the playwright, Yasmina Reza,
- *analyze* the context in which the play was written,
- *evaluate* the reception of the play from different perspectives.

### 1.2 Introduction:

The play *The God of Carnage* is a one act play written by Yasmina Reza, first published in the year 2008. Often recognized as one of the most popular names in the field of contemporary French theater, her plays are widely known for their frivolous nature, depicting the small, trifles that makeup the core of human life. The play is set around two couples the Houllies and the Reilles (may differ in other translations),

who meet to discuss the misdemeanor caused by their sons, and try to solve the situation diplomatically until the mask of civility falls off and all that is left behind is the God of Carnage as mentioned in the title. The play is set in Paris but the situation represented is universal. As Reza in the very beginning declares, the play is set in the living room of one of the couples with nothing superfluous to determine it. So, the setting of the play is minimalistic and so, doesn't have any elaborate details. The living room has a simple set up in one of couples' residence.

The following unit will discuss Yasmina Reza and the play that earned her great accolades in great detail, highlighting the views and ideas that shaped her writing. She has been envisioned as someone who champions the cause of feminism in theater although she herself and many other critics do not agree with this association. The section will also shed light on her style of writing which is marked by a wry sense of humor aimed at providing only the required amount of information leaving the rest upon the audience to ponder upon for themselves.

### **1.3 Yasmina Reza: The Playwright:**

Widely known for her plays that are engulfed with sharp wit and commentary on contemporary anxieties and concerns, Yasmina Reza is a well-known French playwright and novelist. Yasmina Reza has received numerous accolades, including the prestigious Molière Award in 1997 for her first play "Conversations after a Burial" and the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Comedy in 1998 for "Art." Her other works have earned her various other prestigious titles and recognition in the world of theater. Her oeuvre is markedly focused on creating masterpieces that challenge the traditional norms of literature and theater.

Her writing style is marked by a style of providing just enough information about the characters and situation and leaving the rest upon the audience to develop a commentary of their own. She deconstructs her characters on stage through the use of sharp wit and language which leaves these characters bare on screen for the audience to decide for themselves what they think of them. She says of her characters, "I'm not interested in what they were like as children, in psychoanalysis, because writing is

totally instinctive. I work like a painter. If a painter is doing a portrait of someone, he's not interested in their childhood; he paints what he sees. There's no explanation because it doesn't mean anything" (Reza). Most of her plays are open ended and it depends entirely on the reader to ponder on it as they like. Apart from this the fact that her mother was a violinist also led to music having a significant impact on her writing as she was quoted as saying " I often use words because they sound good at a specific point, not because they are the right words to use at that specific point" (Reza).

Reza believes it is her background as an actor that allowed her to launch herself to the world of writing, bringing in the many silences and gaps and the wry humor that she wishes to address in her writing. She started writing at a time when literature paid heed only to the extraordinary and she being a writer who wrote on the mundane, made her stand apart from the crowd. Thus, she became a major voice in the world of theater.

#### **STOP TO CONSIDER:**

##### **Women in theater:**

Reza and other women playwrights like her have crafted for themselves a mastery of the arts by marking a significant place for themselves in the arena of theater. Reza has been successful in creating masterpieces which challenge the mainstream norms of theater and literature. As a female in the dominated sphere of theater she has created an appeal for her works amongst the European world by creating plays which deal with trivial matters of contemporary middle-class lives. It is this triviality which brings in the sarcastic and overall, the tragic that lies at the core of modern life. "The frivolous is the foam that floats over the depths. Human drama doesn't consist of big tragic incidents. Naturally, they happen in the course of a life—but for the most part, it's full of small details, minor scrapes, wrinkles, micro-events, that together make up the struggle of being. I choose to pick at what seems most irrelevant, most superficial, most unfit to dig into, and I dig into it—that's how I write." Reza was quoted as saying at an interview for the Paris review. Only three women have till date won the Tony Award for

Best Play and Reza is credited with authoring two of them: *Art* (1998) and *God of Carnage* (2009) thus making her one of the seven playwrights who have won the award twice. After being a successful actress for almost a decade she turned to playwriting because she wanted to explore the truth that lied at the core of human character. “After you are thirty, you are finished, while as a writer I am considered very young.” she was remarked as stating in an interview. She is the most acclaimed contemporary playwright whose writings have traversed countries and languages. In fact, her play 'Art' has won the highest of accolades in the world of theater- the French Molière award, the British Olivier award and the American Tony award. In fact, it was one of the first non - English play to win all of these accolades.

**SAQ:**

1. What are the various influences that influenced the writings of Yasmina Reza? (60 words)

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2. Comment on Yasmina Reza's art of characterization? (50 words)

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3. Do you believe it is her unique approach towards writing that made Reza a popular name in the world of theater? (50 words)

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#### **1.4 Composition and Production History:**

The original version of the play was written in French by Yasmina Reza in 2006, and was entitled "Le dieu du carnage". It received its world premiere production in German at the prestigious Schauspielhaus Zürich, and premiered in French in 2008 at the Theatre Antoine that Reza herself produced. The play received the Viennese Nestroy-Theatre prize for the best German-language performance of the season.

The play then opened in London in March 2008, in a path breaking translation by Christopher Hampton starring - Tamsin Greig, Janet McTeer, Ralph Fiennes and Ken Stott. The London production of the play won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Comedy. The play premiered on Broadway and won the Best Play at the Tony Awards in 2009. The play was then directed later again by Matthew Warchus and the original cast included Jeff Daniels, Hope Davis, James Gandolfini and Marcia Gay Harden wherein all four actors amongst them were nominated for Tony Awards for their grand performances. Marcia Gay Harden also went on to win the Tony award for Best Leading Actress in a Play. The Broadway production then closed on June 6th, 2010 with 24 previews and 452 regular performances. It became the third-longest running play of the 2000s.

In 2011 the play was also made into an award-winning film by the famous French and Polish film director, Roman Polanski who omitted the "God of" from the title while retaining all the other details to the exact order. In spite of Reza being a champion of feminism in theater, her association with Roman Polanski who was associated with the assault of a minor became quite controversial. The film was shot in France and most of the places shown in the movie were disguised to make them look like Brooklyn as Roman Polanski is a rape accused who's absconding the US. During the shooting he was and till date remains a wanted criminal in the US in connection with a 34-year-old case involving assault on a minor. On being asked about her associations about working with a person like him she maintained her silence.

**SAQ:**

Q. 1. What are the themes that Yasmina Reza explores in most of her works? (100 words)

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Q. 2. How is Yasmina Reza's writing different from other contemporaries of her time? (50 words)

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**SAQ:**

Q.1. With the play God of Carnage winning so many awards and nominations and running successfully in various productions in different times till date, what do you think are the factors that made it so successful and popular? Give reasons to support your answer? (60+20 words)

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**1.5 Context of the Play:**

The play is centered around two sets of couples who meet to discuss and resolve a fight that has undertaken between their sons. The seemingly civilized couple try to solve it all in a diplomatic manner until the veneer of civility shatters and everything turns into a session of bickering in an outlandish manner. The dark and unruly side of the couple and largely of the human race comes up displaying how beneath it all we are just humans waiting for the mask to fall off.

There is a dark voyeuristic pleasure in watching the battle of the couples who engage in all sorts of verbal commentaries. The sarcastic yet tragic part lies in how on examining closely we might see a bit of ourselves in the characters. The play according to Reza was inspired from a real-life

incident. Reza exclaims how, “There was a little incident in the life of my son. He was then about thirteen and fourteen and his friend was in a fight with another friend; they exchanged blows and my son’s friend had his tooth broken. A few days later, I met with the mother of this boy in the street. I asked her how her son was, if he was better, because I knew they’d had to do something to the tooth—they’d had to operate or something. And she said, ‘Can you imagine? The parents (of the other boy in the fight) didn’t even call me.’” This was how the play was born.

For many critics the play resembles in its core the questions that are also addressed in Edward Albee's play, *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The play also has resemblance to *The Slap*, a 2008 novel by Australian author Christos Tsiolkas.

The play overall is a brilliant commentary on the truth of contemporary society where the bourgeois class is so engrossed in masking their lives as civil that the moral emptiness and social pretensions get hidden in the process. This leads to a moral degradation of the person from the core. However, owing to the societal norms these fabrications of the self remain hidden but not for long. As we see in the play how at last the mask falls off and the truth comes upfront in the form of insults and vomit. While speaking about her characterization Reza states that she mostly writes about characters who are raised well but then lose control of themselves as they are impulsive by nature. The vomit is for many critics a major element of the play as it brings out the shallow truth about the lives these people are living. Alain, Veronique, Michel and Annette with their crumbling facade of civility are characters who have questionable moral codes and, in the end, come up as terrible parents depicting the collapse of the social structure of marriage and failure of parenting on their parts. What starts as a mere discussion to solve a crisis at the end becomes a mirror for society to look into and see a little bit of themselves. The moral corruption and breakdown that occurs in this social structure is reflective of the doom of mankind in general. So even though the play doesn't pin itself as existentialist it echoes the pangs of existentialism.



**Stop to Consider:**

Like most of the playwrights, Yasmina Reza too was influenced by the works of Shakespeare and this is clearly evident in her works.

- In the plays of Shakespeare, he catered to the audience of his time, but nevertheless his plays are universal and continue their appeal even today. Reza’s plays too have a universal appeal because they comment on human nature from its depth.
- Like the plays of Shakespeare which have transverse nationalities and languages, Reza's plays too have been adopted in various languages and have been liked by audiences in all the languages.
- Shakespeare provided us a view into the world of his audiences by incorporating them with rich language and dialogues that provided the reader with a view into their psyche. Reza's writing style is marked by a style of providing just enough information about the characters and situation and leaving the rest upon the audience to make up a commentary of their own.

**SAQ:**

1. What are the elements of Satire in Reza's plays? (50 words)

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2. What are the sources of inspiration behind the writings of Yasmina Reza? (30 words)

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3. Do you think the play can also be read as an absurd play? Give reasons for your answer? (30+20 words)

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## **1.6 Language of the Play:**

The play has been reproduced many times for theater companies across the globe and with each production its meaning has changed significantly because each place views it in terms of their culture and issues. The language that Reza developed in the original French script is sharp and she makes use of well-crafted dialogue because for her it's her weapon through which she deconstructs her characters. The audience gets to make up their minds about the characters of the play via the dialogue she has provided them with. At first the characters speak with all the niceties and social pretensions but as time passes, the arguments start to spiral to a point when all their real thoughts come to the surface. Their attitudes and rowdy behavior along with the verbal language shows how we as individuals are intrinsically violent at the core. The language shows the balance that Reza tries to strike between dark humor and serious themes of civility, social pretentiousness, parentage, marriage etc. As the conversation progresses the dynamics of the couples keep shifting, portraying how humans are selfish at the core. The language that they use for each other shows the cracks in their respective marriages. The play also signals a failure in the process of communicating itself, the failure of language. They try to draft the incident that led to their diplomatic meeting in civilized terms however they find themselves unable to agree on a simple word- 'armed' or 'furnished' with a stick. This failure then transgresses into an evening of abuse and meaningless, an inability to find any decipherable meaning.

### **Stop to Consider:**

#### **About the Characters :**

The play has four major characters- the two couples who meet to discuss the fight between their sons. Bruno Houillé and Ferdinand Reille - The two eleven-year-old boys fight and this leaves Bruno wounded and is on the verge of losing his tooth. The entire play is based on what course of action is to be taken next to mitigate the crisis at hand. They are known as Bruno Houllie and Ferdinand Reille (Henry Novak and Benjamin Raleigh in other translations) in this translation.

The other characters are:

- Veronique Houllie (Veronica in American productions)
- Michel Houllie (Michael in American productions)
- Annette Reille
- Alain Reille (Alan in American productions)

Veronique is the one character who portrays herself as the leading guide of the civil discourse; she's even writing a book on the Darfur tragedy. However, as the evening passes her aggressive side comes up to the surface and the atmosphere of the evening turns into one of savagery, name calling and casual sexism. Her use of harsh language, her uncaring nature to annoy Annette when she has her bouts of vomiting shows this. She cares more about her coffee table books rather than the sick woman. Later, she lets go of all her inhibitions. The very violence that the upholders of civility seem to denounce becomes their weapon to belittle one another either verbally or physically. Veronique “throws herself at her husband and hits him several times, with an uncontrolled and irrational desperation”.

The same is stated by her husband as well: “We tried to be nice, we bought tulips, my wife passed me off as a lefty, but the truth is, I can’t keep this up any more, I’m fundamentally uncouth” (41). Michell in the beginning seemingly portrays himself as a person who's eager to get into a confrontation and agreement with the other couple and solve the issue. Veronique and Michel initially act better than the other two but as the evening passes Veronique nearly assaults Michel by attacking him. She fights at every possible occasion and they would burst out in fury at each other towards the end of the drama.

Annette “launches herself at Alain, snatches the mobile and, after a brief look-round to see where she can put it, shoves it into the vase of tulips” (56). As more savagery and bad words flow the Id takes control of the situation and the characters drop their facade and let the 'God of Carnage' take over. What follows is the master element of the play-the vomit which is a visceral representative of the exasperation inside the characters: “This expulsion of Annette’s bile is a visceral symbol of the play’s collapse of civilization,” (Giguere 239).

Alain comes off as the irritating character who's always on the phone talking until his wife hurls his phone in a vase of tulips. "Women always think you need a man, you need a father, as if they'd be the slightest use" (*Carnage* 14), he is quoted as attacking womenkind. In *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud states how "Civilization, therefore, obtains the mastery over the dangerous love of aggression in individuals by enfeebling and disarming it and setting up an institution within their minds to keep watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city" (756). All characters in the play including Alain maintain this mastery until they're no longer able to and the id takes control of them. He is brutally honest and openly flings sexist remarks on women.

**SAQ:**

1. How does language compliment the themes of the play? (30 words)

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2. Do you think the characters' interactions with each other reveal their personalities and values? Give a reasoned answer (30+20 words)

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**1.7 Critical Reception:**

The play, *The God of Carnage* garnered a myriad view from the audience. The main idea of the playwright was to bring about the superficiality of the middle class and expose the hypocrisy which they hold. A calm and diplomatic discussion between two sets of parents about the unruly behavior of their sons soon turns into an evening of unruly behavior and all sorts of name calling. Often called a 'comedy of manners without the manners' this fight between the couples brings in an exploration of their multifaceted personalities and the veneer of civility they hold so close. "No matter how civilized and controlled we think ourselves to be, there lurks in each of us a savagery and delight in violence that is just waiting for the right opportunity to erupt". This is the philosophy as spoken by one of the characters in the Actors

Repertory Theatre production of *The God of Carnage*. A play that begins as a mere discussion then escalates into a portrayal of frail marriages and shallow lives.

For Reza the play is not much of a conical farce or a satire, to her it's a tragic tale about the sad reality of human nature. In 1999, she told The Los Angeles Times, "I would like to see them laugh at the right moments." A year later, she told another journalist, "Laughter is always a problem and is very dangerous. The way people laugh changes the way you see a play. A very profound play may seem very light. My plays have always been described as comedy but I think they're tragedy. They are funny tragedy, but they are tragedy. Maybe it's a new genre" (Kristin). UAE-based director Nina Hein states how "When the couples meet for a civilized conversation, the facade begins to fall apart,". "The play explores the universal topic of how we can live together and remain civilized. Yasmin uses an interesting mix of subtlety and being direct" (Shoush).

For many others the play is a dark comedy which brings about a sharp commentary on the nature of bourgeois lives. According to a review by Jaden Ogwayo " Reza displays a "grotesque" (41) portrayal of the primeval, animalistic elements of the very citizens we expect to be "the custodians" (65) of contemporary society. Reza exposes our "savage" (16) ids — in the Freudian sense — that fail to be extinguished by the matrix of social constructs — language, sex, gender, and etiquette in this case — that the Reilles, the Vallons, and audience members alike, police and adhere to in order to uphold a concerted fabrication of normative behavior. Society, Reza reveals, is underscored by an omnipresent deity, the looming The God of Carnage.

**Stop to Consider:**

The fight that escalates between the couples is in a way a result of Freud's instinct theory of aggression, which states how aggression is inherently innate rather than acquired. Every individual has a natural tendency to be aggressive towards others or to their own self. All the other attributes like love, marriage, friendship are mere masks that people put on to hide the animalistic instinct that lies at the core. Amanda Giguere a writer who writes on theater states how

“vocabulary deteriorates as the characters resort to less refined, cruder words; they begin to use words as weapons rather than as tools that lead toward positive change; finally, words are replaced with silences” (222). Most critics exclaim that the play is a descent into savagery. In the play there is a completely breakdown of the idea of marriage. An in depth reading of the text provides an insight that while trying to maintain the veneer of civility both the couples try to maintain a facade that relate to the norms of gender and its stereotypes which ultimately is the cause for descent into savagery. In the play the so-called upholders of civility are the very first ones who break the code of what it means to be civil. The playwright's view is shared by Alain Reille that beneath any 'civilization' a primeval id penetrates our psyche. We as humans are beings who are inherently aggressive but in trying to maintain the civil codes of conduct, we try to uphold the ideas of civility and social behavior.

Reza believes her play to be much of a tragedy rather than a comedy and was seen as quoting to an interviewer that her plays are “funny tragedies, but they are tragedies” (qtd. in Poirier). Even if she realizes that once written the text is no longer a component in the hands of the author and the meaning of a text is not determined by the author's intention, but rather by the reader's interpretation as stated by Barthes in 'Death of an Author'. She still prefers to highlight the tragic elements more. In the same interview she was quoted as saying that she was irritated by the fact that American and British audiences laugh too much (qtd. in Poirier) while watching her plays.

### **Check Your Progress:**

1. How was the audience's reception of the plays of Yasmina Reza?
2. What are the other plays that the critics have compared *The God of Carnage* to?
3. Discuss the themes of civility and savagery in the play?
4. Comment on the behavior of the adults in controlling the situation? What according to Freudian psychoanalysis is responsible for their behavior.

5. Examine the play as a commentary on the nature of bourgeois society?
6. Is the play a commentary on human nature? Give a reasonable answer.
7. What in your view is the 'God of Carnage' mentioned in the title? Does the title allude to the themes and issues discussed in the play?
8. Critically analyze the changes in of language of the characters as the play progresses? What do they reveal?
9. Do you think the themes contained in Reza's play appeal to the masses of her time? Give reasons to support your answer.

### **1.8 Summing Up:**

The play *The God of Carnage* is one of the most acclaimed plays of Yasmina Reza. Often tagged as a dark comedy, the play has premiered innumerable times since it was published in the year 2006. It has been published across the world in various languages and has also been made into an award-winning film by Roman Polanski in the year 2012. Many a times the play is known as comedy of manners without the manners where we see how a diplomatic argument of two couples about how to resolve a fight involving two young boys leads to an evening of incessant fights, crude language and uncontrollable vomit. The genius of Reza's works lies in the fact that she doesn't deconstruct her characters; instead, she provides a sharp and clear picture of the world as it is to the audience and leaves it upon them to find out for themselves the shallow truth about contemporary human lives. The play shows the complete failure of language in solving issues; the play reveals the breakdown of social institutions like marriage, family and also of human values of civility. The childishness of the parents who meet to solve their children's unruly behavior, themselves become the major source of crisis of the play. The principles of liberty, justice, human rights etc which these people are shown to guard are shattered as the evening progresses. The very people who are supposed to stand up for what has gone wrong between their sons and mend it become infantile fighting amongst themselves to prove they are the best. The very custodians of civility and social order then descend into savagery and display their innate nature. The very idea of

what is considered 'normal' then gets shattered by them and what gets left behind is the 'God of Carnage' as mentioned in the title.

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## UNIT- 2

### Yasmina Reza: *The God of Carnage* (Reading the Text)

#### Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 *The God of Carnage*: Reading the Text
- 2.4 Characters of the Play
- 2.5 Themes of the Play
- 2.6 Setting of the Play
- 2.7 Summing Up
- 2.8 References and Suggested Readings

#### 2.1 Objectives:

This unit is an attempt at analyzing the play *The God of Carnage* by Yasmina Reza. After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- *know* about the play in depth,
- *analyze* the characters of the play,
- *read* in detail about the themes that the play contains,
- *learn* about the settings of the play,
- *identify* the play in terms of the ideas and issues it brings forward.

#### 2.2 Introduction:

*The God of Carnage* is considered to be one of the most successful plays of Yasmina Reza. The play is the recipient of many accolades including Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Comedy for its London production; Molière Awards for best author, play, and production, and a Tony award for Best Play. The play is centered around the lives of two couples the Houllies and the Reilles (different for different translations) who decide to meet to discuss a situation that has taken place between their sons Bruno Houillé and Ferdinand Reille. Their

very civilized meeting to curtail the damage that has been caused by their sons fighting goes on diplomatically until the characters start losing their moral groundings and they leave behind their veneer of civility and the evening transcends into a horrid one.

The play opens in the living room of the Reilles and the setting is kept very minimalistic with nothing superfluous to determine it. The very first thing that shatters in the play is their language and the communication that they're having starts to breakdown as they're unable to pin down on one particular word that whether Ferdinand was armed or furnished with a stick when he hit Bruno. Very soon along with the loss of language even their actions seem to degrade as they start deviating from their 'civil' behavior and start hurling abuses and sexist comments at each other. At some point Veronique even “throws herself at her husband and hits him several times, with an uncontrolled and irrational desperation,”. The other woman Annette launches herself at her husband Alain, snatches the mobile and, after a brief look-round to see where she can put it, shoves it into the vase of tulips” (56). It is not only the women but the men show their unruly side by making casual sexist remarks on their wives, name calling them and fighting with their wives at any possible chance they get. So, a diplomatic discussion soon transforms into a drama about failed marriages, bad parenting and breakdown of civilization at large. The societal pretensions they seem to hold fall behind and the primal instincts that lie at the core of us as human beings get revealed in the end. It is Reza's style of leaving her plays at a middle ground with nothing substantial to end it giving the audience an open-ended space to think and reflect for themselves. Reza's wry sense of humor and the witty dialogues act as a mirror for society as this situation is reflective of the contemporary bourgeois society and the lives they live. In the end the civil code is broken, the vase is shattered, the coffee table books are smeared with the bile of hatred, there's vomit everywhere and the God of Carnage is let loose.

### **2.3 *The God of Carnage: Reading the Text:***

The play, *The God of Carnage*, is a one-act masterpiece by the distinguished playwright Yasmina Reza. The play initially presents itself as an exploration of the interactions between two couples who convene in

the evening to address an altercation involving their sons. Yet, as the narrative unfolds the evening turns dark and the play serves as an insight on the human condition. What appears on the surface as a discourse on a specific incident soon transcends its initial context, delving deep into the intricacies of human nature, behavior, and society at large. During the course of the evening the characters shed the layers of civility and decorum, revealing the raw, unvarnished aspects of our shared human experience.

Reza's attempt in the play is to transform a seemingly mundane discussion around civility and parenting into a thought-provoking mirror which reflects the complexities of the human psyche and the many layered personas we hide beneath our masks of normalcy. Reza skillfully breaks down her characters on stage using clever and sharp language. This process leaves the characters exposed, revealing their true selves for the audience to make their own judgments about them. This shows the audience the raw and unfiltered sides of her characters. Since the audience can clearly see the real side of the characters, the play becomes a commentary on human nature and relationships.

Ultimately, *The God of Carnage* concludes with the couples realizing the futility of maintaining societal values and the fragility of human civility when they are confronted with their primal instincts and desires. This is evident from Veronique's statement who declares "Behaving well gets you nowhere. Courtesy is a waste of time; it weakens you and undermines you"(Reza 26).

At one point even Annette exclaims "Why are you letting them call my son an executioner? You come to their house to settle things and you get insulted and bullied and lectured on how to be a good citizen of the planet, our son did well to clout yours and I wipe my ass with your bill of rights!"(Reza 41-42).

**Stop to Consider:**

**Violence in the play:**

The instances of violence in the play *The God of Carnage*, start with Ferdinand hitting Bruno with a stick breaking one of his incisors. Apart from that there's the act of vomiting and the killing of the

hamster which serve as symbolic representations of the breakdown of civility and the surfacing of the primal instincts of the characters.

- **Violence in Vomiting:**

Annette's act of vomiting is a physical representation of the emotional turmoil and disgust in her. The vomit is her visceral response to the stressful situation she's faced where her son is being accused of a grave crime - violence on another being. According to her it was Bruno who instigated him to carry out the act. Added to this is the serious and tight atmosphere of the living room, all the conversations taking place there which leads to fall of their hard held masks. Unable to hold it any longer "Annette vomits violently. A brutal and catastrophic spray, part of which goes over Alan. The art books on the coffee table are likewise deluged." Her act of vomiting symbolizes how conflict can give rise to visceral reactions breaking apart the idea of civility that lies on its path.

- **Killing of the Hamster:**

Michael's impulsive act of killing the pet hamster, Nibbles, is a stark act of violence. It symbolizes the complete breakdown of rationality in the face of conflict and the unleashing of primal instinct of aggression in humans. This can be studied in response to

Freud's theory on the nature of aggression which is an inherent trait in human beings and not a learned behavior. According to this perspective, every individual possesses a natural tendency for aggression, whether directed toward others or themselves. It suggests that fundamental human traits like love, marriage, and friendship are essentially facades that people adopt.

The hamster's death represents the characters' descent into chaos as they move away from civilized behavior. These violent moments are essential in the play as they highlight the transformative power of conflict and the exposure of the characters' true natures.

**SAQ:**

• Discuss the various acts of violence in the play? In your view, what do the various acts of violence in the play signify about inherent human nature? (30+20 words)

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• What are the ideas that you can draw from the play's portrayal of violence about the human capacity for aggression? Give a reasoned answer. (30+20 words)

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.....  
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**2.4 Characters in the Play:**

The play has two set of couples as the major characters- the Houllies and the Reilles (they're known as the Novaks and the Raleighs in other translations) who have met to discuss the altercation that has occurred between their sons namely Bruno Houillé and Ferdinand Reille. All of the characters bring with them their complex personalities and complexities. The two boys Bruno and Ferdinand are only referred to and never seen throughout the course of action. Only the four major characters seem to occupy the stage. They are known as Veronique Houllie (Veronica in American productions), Michel Houllie (Michael in American productions), Annette Reille and Alain Reille (Alan in American productions).

One thing which is noteworthy about the playwright is that she doesn't pass value judgements about her character. Her only aim is to present the characters on stage as they are and provide them with their dialogue; the rest is then left upon the audience to make out for themselves. So, the process of deconstruction takes place through the use of language and action on stage. While talking about her art of character development Reza states, "I'm not interested in what they were like as children, in psychoanalysis, because writing is totally instinctive. I work like a painter. If a painter is doing a portrait of someone, he's not interested in their childhood; he paints what he sees. There's no explanation because it

doesn't mean anything" (Reza). Most of her plays are open ended and it depends entirely on the reader to make out of it as they like. Apart from this the fact that her mother was a violinist also led to music having a significant impact on her writing as she was quoted as saying " I often use words because they sound good at a specific point, not because they are the right words to use at that specific point" (Reza).

Veronique comes up as a character who seems initially as someone who stands up for the rights of others and is shown as someone calm and composed. She is even writing a book on the Darfur tragedy which shows her concerns towards social causes. She also introduces herself as someone who also works in an art history bookshop and shows how she is a proponent of art as important for growth. Her high held idealism and desire for peace takes an unexpected turn as the evening progresses and she loses her demeanor and resorts to shaming and name calling the other couple. She even addresses Annette as a 'phony' because she vomits all over her Kokoschka books and she seems at the moment far more worried about the book than the well-being of Annette. This change is particularly evident in her interactions with Annette, where her once-polite demeanor gives way to a more uncaring and even provocative attitude. Rather than offering solace or assistance to the distressed Annette, Veronica's focus turns toward her cherished coffee table books, underlining her detachment from the immediate human concerns in the room. The complexities of her character are brought forward in this incident. Her character shift also depicts the unpredictability of human nature when faced with conflict. It is at last when she sheds off the mask of civility, that when she remarks: "Behaving well gets you nowhere. Courtesy is a waste of time, it weakens you and undermines you."

Michel Houllie is Veronique's husband who works as a businessman and deals in hardware products. He is called out in the very beginning by the other characters due to the cruelty he inflicts on his children's pet hamster Nibbles. Reza has made use of the juxtaposition to show how the cruelty and violence of the boys can be compared with the incident of letting the hamster loose. It is towards the end that Michel is irritated by this civil endeavor and states : "We tried to be nice, we bought tulips, my wife

passed me off as a lefty, but the truth is, I can't keep this up any more, I'm fundamentally uncouth" (41). At the outset of the play, Michael presents himself as a person genuinely eager to engage in a rational and constructive dialogue with the other couple, aiming to reach a resolution to the issue at hand. Both he and Veronica initially project an air of superiority, subtly implying their higher moral ground compared to the Raleighs. However, as the evening unfolds, a stark transformation takes place within the dynamics of their relationship. Veronica and Michael, who initially appeared as the picture of decorum and composure, descend into a chaotic and violent confrontation. The veneer of civility disintegrates, leading to an almost physical assault by Veronica on Michael. They engage in fierce arguments at every possible opportunity, and their anger towards each other intensifies as the drama reaches its climax.

Annette Reille is presented to us as the most reserved person amongst the four of them. She maintains a calm demeanor but at the end even her character undergoes a transformation throughout the play, showcasing how external pressures and conflicts can bring out hidden aspects of one's character. She at one point even "launches herself at Alain, snatches the mobile and, after a brief look-round to see where she can put it, shoves it into the vase of tulips" (56). Annette's vomiting also takes up a major space in the play as her act of throwing up is not just a simple bodily function; the bile represents the growing sense of frustration and anger engulfing the characters. In simpler terms, it's a physical symbol of how everything is falling apart in the play. Her supportive comments towards her son's violent act due to her irritation towards the Houllies shocks the audience as she remarks, "Why are you letting them call my son an executioner? You come to their house to settle things and you get insulted and bullied and lectured on how to be a good citizen of the planet, our son did well to clout yours and I wipe my ass with your bill of rights!"

Alain is the character who comes across as very annoying because he's always on the phone talking, and this irritates his wife. At one point, she even throws his phone into a vase of tulips out of frustration. He makes a pretty sexist remark, saying, "Women always think you need a man,



you need a father, as if they'd be the slightest use." This means he's attacking women in general, suggesting they believe men are necessary, even though he doesn't think they are. In Sigmund Freud's book, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he talks about how human beings control their aggressive instincts to keep things peaceful as part of a civilized order of society. All the characters in the play, including Alain, manage to control these aggressive instincts until they can't anymore, and their more impulsive and less controlled side takes over. Alain is brutally honest and openly makes sexist comments about women.

Annette's husband Alain works as a lawyer and is constantly on the phone which leads to his wife getting irritated and as a result, she dumps his phone in a vase of tulips. He is shown to be dealing with a crisis at hand regarding a pharmaceutical company which is facing some allegations due to selling of a drug with side effects. His lines to Veronica about women are: "You're part of the same category of woman [as Jane Fonda,] committed, problem solving, that's not what we like about women, what we like about women is sensuality, wildness, hormones. Women who make a song and dance of their intuition, women who are the custodians of the world depress us, even him, poor Michael, your husband, he's depressed" (Reza 43). His statement reveals a very problematic trait of his character as he reveals a rather traditional and outdated perspective on gender roles and expectations. His idea is one informed by stereotypical thinking whereby he thinks women are supposed to inculcate values like sensuality, wildness etc. rather than giving importance to skills like problem solving or being custodians of social causes. His words rather come off as sexist because he objectifies the position of women as guardians of sensibilities.

So, we can see that as the characters in the play become increasingly uncivil and use harsh language, their inner instincts, often referred to as the "Id" in psychology, begin to dominate the situation. They abandon their polite facades and allow their primal instincts to take control. This transformation marks a key element of the play.

### **Stop to Consider:**

#### **Failure of the institutions of marriage and parenting:**

" What I always say is, marriage: the most terrible ordeal God can inflict on you"

The above-mentioned statement by Michael portrays how the play shows the failure of interpersonal relationships and the breakdown of the institution of marriage. The view of Michael can be seen as having developed from his own experiences or observations in his relationship with Veronique. Initially as the play begins Michael and Veronique and even Allan and Annette portray themselves as couples who are very well adjusted and in harmony with each other. However, as we near the midst of the play and the argument starts to get heated the curtain drops in and the cracks within their relationship start to emerge. Michael's statement is reflective of the fact that "most terrible ordeal", indicating that he sees it as a difficult and burdensome commitment.

"Children consume our lives and then destroy them. Children drag us towards disaster; it's unavoidable. When you see those laughing couples casting off into the sea of matrimony, you say to yourself. they have no idea, poor things, they just have no idea, they're happy. No one tells you anything when you start out. I have an old school buddy who's just about to have a child with his new girlfriend. I said to him, a child, at our age, are you insane? The ten or twelve good years we have left before cancer or a stroke, and you're going to screw yourself up with some brat ?" (Reza 33).

Michael's statement projects a negative and radical statement about the idea of parenting, suggesting that children often tend to consume the lives of their parents leading them towards disaster. His view is ironic in itself because he is meeting the parents of the boy who hit his son in an altercation to decide the course of events that are to be followed next. He initially projects himself as a father who's very caring and protective of his son and his well-being however these statements do not align with his actions leading to confusion. His viewpoint suggests that he finds parenting to be burdening and unworthy. He even calls the very endeavor of child rearing to be a waste His comment also shows how couples often tend to enter parenthood without fully

comprehending the drastic changes it will bring to their lives. For him it is a departure from happiness and carefree existence. According to him we all eventually doomed to die to illnesses so one shouldn't engage in tedious endeavors like child rearing.

**SAQs:**

1. Comment on the nature of interpersonal relationships in the play?  
(30 words)

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2. How do the characters' personalities and behaviors change throughout the course of the play, and what factors contribute to these transformations? (30 words)

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**2.5 Themes of the Play:**

The themes that the play *The God of Carnage* addresses are diverse ranging from failed marriages to breakdown of civility, parenting failures to innate human nature. In the play the characters' initial pretenses are governed by their ideas of maintaining societal norms and the civil code of conduct. However, as the play progresses the veneer of civility starts to shatter and the characters are left behind with their true innate nature as individuals. Their social values degrade and their less social, hardly acceptable side emerges. Their behavior falls in line with Freud's instinct theory of aggression, which states how aggression is inherently innate rather than acquired. Every human being possesses a natural tendency to be violent towards others or to their own self. Attributes like love, parentage, marriage, friendship then become mere masks that people adapt to hide the primal instinct that lies at the core. Their inability as parents to handle the altercation between their children shows the failure of parental responsibility on their part and how parents often tend to project their insecurities on their children. Like for instance both set of parents are flawed in this play, they meet to discuss in the name of their

children but as the scenes progress, we see how the entire discussion revolves around their ideas, insecurities and prejudices. This allows the reader to look into their character graph and deconstruct them. This is a part of Reza's writing style whereby she doesn't focus much on giving background information about the characters but just gives the dialogues that helps the audience to understand and recognize the values each character stands for.

The very thing that they meet to do is communicate. Their attempt at communication creates serious misunderstanding and this leads to the argument getting out of hand rather than being solved. All the characters bad mouth each other, hurl abuses and use sharp, rowdy language leading to serious damage. The conversation also provides the audience a view into the dynamics of the relationship between them. The play is an assessment of the failure of marriage and any social structures. Both couples act untowardly with each other and often end up in a spiral of misunderstanding and passive aggressive behavior patterns. Also important is the fact that all of them have different priorities and preferences and each tries to project their own sensibilities on to the other thus irritating them. Lastly the power dynamics governing the relationship between them and their unfulfilled expectations rise up as the argument gets heated and finally the god of carnage is revealed, shattering everything in its path.

**Stop to Consider:**

The play has been called by some as a battle between the sexes. A paper titled "Gender: The Hidden God in Yasmina Reza's *Le Dieu du Carnage*" by Lauren Tilger states how "By taking part in a culture that worships gender ideals, the characters in Reza's play police one another's actions to ensure that everyone behaves like proper men and women. The act of attempting to successfully perform femininity or masculinity leads to the evening's disastrous events". So, an attempt at maintaining the facade of good men and women leads to the chaos of the play. Allan's statements in *The God of Carnage* highlight the underlying gender issues and stereotypes prevalent in the play. His remark, "You think too much.

Women think too much," underscores the stereotype that women tend to overanalyze and overthink situations. He further goes on to state "You're the same breed. You are part of the same category of woman, committed, problem—solving, that's not what we like about women, what we like about women is sensuality, wildness, hormones. Women who make a song and dance about their intuition, women who are custodians of the world depress us, even him, poor Michael, your husband, he's depressed". This statement perpetuates a problematic stereotype which reduces women as mere objects of desire and states how their value is primarily based on physical attributes like sensuality and their essence as women rather than their worldly attributes like problem-solving or social work. This viewpoint contributes a objectified view of women and it reinforces the traditional gender roles whereby men are shown rational and women as purely irrational and emotional beings.

#### **Check Your Progress:**

1. The breakdown of communication affects the overall mood of the play as it is the fallout of language which leads to all the chaos. Critically comment on the following statement and give a well-reasoned answer from your reading of the play.
2. Critically comment on the transformation of the characters throughout the play. Show how their behaviors change by the end of the play?
3. In what ways does Reza use symbolism in the play to compliment her concerns and themes? Write your answers with emphasis on coffee-table books and the vase of tulip.
4. Do you think that gender has an important role to play in the text? 5. Critically consider the sexist remark made by Allain in the play? What does this reflect about his character?
6. Comment on Reza's use of sharp wit and humor in the play to bring in greater conversations about human nature and relationships?

## 2.6 Setting of the play:

In the very beginning Reza informs us of the setting of the play by declaring:

*“A living room  
No realism  
Nothing superfluous.”*

The setting comprises of the living room of the Houllies where the couples meet to discuss the situation. The living room is the central location where the entirety of the play takes place. The place has been decorated to reflect the Houllies' dedication towards the cause of art: the vases of tulips, a coffee table, covered with art books etc. The setting is reflective of the social class of the couple. They are also symbolic elements that carry deeper meanings and contain in them the overall themes of the play. For instance, the coffee table books are the markers of civility, intellectual pursuits and her art aesthetics that she tried so hard to uphold throughout the play. In fact, keeping in tune with the idea of being a writer for the rights of liberty and a champion for art's sake, the books are a marker of her idealism. However, the audience will see the true face of this pretense as the evening unfolds. Even in times when Annette needs her, she holds on to the loss of her dear books (due to Annette vomiting on it) and instead of helping Annette shows her aversion towards her going to the extent of even calling her a phony. Annette's act of vomiting is a significant and vivid element in the play. It's not just a simple bodily function; it carries a deeper significance. The bile she expels from her stomach serves as a symbol of the mounting frustration and anger that is consuming the characters. In simpler terms, it is like a physical representation of how everything is unraveling and falling into chaos within the play.

The confined space of the apartment is also noteworthy as it intensifies the interactions and conflicts among the characters. As the characters are unable to physically escape the situation, the tension and chaos around them gets more intense and complicated.

The vase of tulips is mentioned in the stage direction at the start as "Two big bunches of tulips in vases. The prevailing mood is serious,

friendly and tolerant" depicting the significance it holds. This symbolic element undergoes a transformation during the course of the play as Annette who is unable to hold on to her calm demeanor hurls Alain's phone into the case of tulips. In the very last scene when she "makes to leave, then returns towards the tulips, which she lashes out at violently. Flowers fly, disintegrate and scatter all over the place. There, there, that's what I think of your pathetic flowers, your hideous tulips! Ha, ha, ha! (She bursts into tears.) It's the worst day of my life as well". The shattering of the vase marks a breakdown of the civil code of conduct which the three people of the play tried to maintain. So, both of these elements serve as an element helping the audiences distinguish between reality and pretenses.

## **2.7 Summing Up:**

*The God of Carnage* stands as an achievement in the illustrious career of renowned playwright Yasmina Reza. This theatrical masterpiece has gained a multitude of accolades, firmly establishing itself as a highly acclaimed modern drama. Reza's magnum opus has been showered with praise, receiving numerous prestigious awards and critical acclaim. Its profound exploration of human nature, incisive wit, and thought-provoking narrative have collectively earned it a place among the most celebrated works in contemporary theater. The play's ability to captivate audiences and spark meaningful conversations about human civilization is a testament to Reza's storytelling prowess, making *The God of Carnage* a timeless gem that continues to shine brightly in the theatrical world. The play has been performed in many different countries with numerous productions and updated versions of the play. *The God of Carnage* is often described as a "dark comedy" because it shows how people really act when they're not pretending to be polite. It is like taking off a mask and revealing what is underneath. The play uses humor and satire to explore how we often hide our true selves behind manners and politeness, and it helps us to see that beneath the surface, we all have primal instincts and desires. This makes *The God of Carnage* a thought-provoking play for students to study and understand human behavior.

The play vividly portrays how words and language often fall short in resolving conflicts and issues. It serves as a commentary on how one's ability to communicate effectively breaks down, leaving one with no clear solutions. Furthermore, the play also delves into the disintegration of societal structures like marriage, family and social life. It highlights the fragility of these bonds and how easily they can unravel when confronted with raw, unfiltered human nature. In doing so, the play questions the very essence of human values, particularly the idea of civility. It reveals how beneath our polite exteriors, there exists a turbulent sea of emotions and instincts that can disrupt the social norms we hold in to. So, the play *The God of Carnage* offers a captivating exploration of themes, inviting readers to ponder upon the complexities of human relationships and the consequences of our actions when faced with life's conflicts.

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## UNIT- 3

### Carol Ann Duffy: “Prayer”, “The Love Poem” (Background)

#### Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 The Poet and Her Poetry
  - 3.3.1 The Poet
  - 3.3.2 The Major Works
  - 3.3.3 The Duffyesque
  - 3.3.4 Colloquialism and Multivocality
  - 3.3.5 “The Music of Being Human”
- 3.4 “Prayer” and “The Love Poem”: A Short Prelude
- 3.5 Summing Up
- 3.6 References and Suggested Readings

#### 3.1 Objectives:

After completing this unit, you will be able to—

- *identify* Duffy as a major contemporary British woman poet,
- *understand* the principal traits and the unique features of her poetry,
- *analyse* Duffy’s poetry employing perspectives derived from the above.

#### 3.2 Introduction:

Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry marks the entry of a new poetic sensibility in British literary history. She also stands as a formidable bridge between the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries to outlive the *fin de siècle* tension as well as the transition in British culture. In this unit, you will be introduced to Carol Ann Duffy as a significant contemporary British woman poet and the essential attributes of her poetry. This will be done to make it easy for you

to posit this introduction as a necessary roadmap to a detailed reading of “Prayer” and “The Love Poem” as two representative poems of Duffy.

### **3.3 The Poet and Her Poetry:**

#### **3.3.1 The Poet:**

Duffy, born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1955, was born to parents of mixed Irish-Scottish ancestry, Scotland to parents of Irish-Scottish origin. Duffy’s family subsequently moved to Stafford, England, where she completed her schooling. In 1977, she received a bachelor’s degree with honours in philosophy from the University of Liverpool. Duffy started her professional career as a lecturer of poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University, where she later became a professor and the creative director of the writing school housed there. In 1995, she was awarded the Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for her outstanding contributions. Later in 2002, she was honored with the Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) and in 2015, she was named a Dame Commander of the British Empire (DBE) for her remarkable achievements.

Duffy’s creative prowess was visible early in her life. She started writing poetry when she was at Stafford Girls High School and was supported by two of her teachers in publishing her poems. As she started getting recognition as a poet, she came into contact with several societies and collectives of poets. At the age of 16, she started being in a relationship with Adrian Henri, one of the *Liverpool poets* and the same continued for more than a decade until they separated in 1982. Subsequently, Duffy developed a same-sex relationship with poet Jackie Kay, which lasted for 15 years, and during this relationship, Duffy openly proclaimed herself to be a lesbian.

In 2009, Duffy became the first woman Poet Laureate of the UK and remained in that capacity for ten years. During her tenure, she was known to have written poems on issues of British national interest, contemporary political and environmental concerns, and also, most sensitively, on the marginalised sections of society like those of the LGBTIQ+ communities.

From these descriptions, one can conclude that Duffy's personal life, including but not limited to her sexual orientation or, for that matter, her gender identity, is intricately related to her poetic outputs.

Historically, Duffy is often placed among the New Generation of poets to emerge in the 1980s following a brief but radical movement of the Martian School led by a loosely formed group of poets of the seventies such as Craig Raine, Christopher Reid, and James Fenton. Martianism, as a term, derived its currency from *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home* (1979) by Raine. As John Redmond suggested, the movement is marked by the unhomely marriage of exotic descriptions nearing the semblance of science fiction with down-to-earth, domestic environments (246). Duffy follows the Martians, contemporaneously with fellow poet Simon Armitage, having been drawn by their radicalising aesthetics of the Martian School.

Duffy's poetry marks a unique transition point in twentieth- and twenty-first-century British poetry, as it tends to avoid direct emotional involvement with experiences that differ from those of her male predecessors and contemporaries. Instead, she enacts her circumstances by creating multiple dramatic characters within her artistic premise. She is particularly interested in portraying marginalised beings, historicising their resistance, thereby implicating their subsistence and agency which they might otherwise be denied or deprived of.

Although the range of her poetic techniques and themes resists easy summation, she is known, among other things, to have revived the tradition of the dramatic monologue in British poetry. Employed by Robert Browning, one of the doyens of the Victorian age, to wide popularity, dramatic monologue, in Duffy's hands, is, of course, transformed into a fitting tool to bring forth a colloquialism that would kindle the polyphony of women's poetic articulation demonstrating a vigorous 'social turn' in twentieth-century poetry. Duffy's poetic temperament, in that way, comes very close to what Mikhail Bakhtin identified to be 'the dialogic' so far as the playful multivalence of voices within the ambit of the literary language is taken into account.

### **Stop to Consider:**

The dramatic monologue as a poetic form rose to prominence in the nineteenth century as a reaction to the romantic lyrics that glorified emotive excesses through the subjective integrity of the speaker in a given poetic discourse. The blurring of the boundary between the speaker and the poet in Romantic poetry enthused Robert Browning, a prominent Victorian poet, to explore alternative means of expression. In a dramatic monologue, the poet dramatically distances herself or himself from the speaker through whom the poem is expressed. However, far from being subjective, in dramatic monologues, a situation is created in which the speaker interacts with one or more implied addressees and produces a dialogic effect. Mikhail Bakhtin ascribes dialogism as an essential condition to fictional discourses in his influential book, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. However, Bakhtin opines against applying the principle of dialogism to the discourse of poetry as he believes its expression to be predominantly monologic and contained within the emotive utterances of the speaker. As an avid practitioner of the dramatic monologue after Browning, Carol Ann Duffy's poetry challenges Bakhtinian perception of poetry as a monologic expression. Ironically, she capitalises on the essence of Browning's monologue, which is its character of being 'dramatic' to make poetry conversational, playful, subversive, and, by virtue of all of these, a dialogic art.

### **3.3.2 The Major Works:**

Duffy is a prolific poet whose career has spanned over more than four decades now. Her first notable collection of poetry appeared in 1985 under the title *Standing Female Nude*. The eponymous poem from the collection is based on a painting by French Cubist painter Georges Braque where a female prostitute is seen standing in a difficult posture for her portrayal. The poem dramatises the voice of this woman and thereby asserts her marginalised subjectivity with an agency like many of Duffy's works. However, when it comes to her artistic representation, the irony of being subjected to the hands of a renowned male high-class artist is also clear:

I shall be represented analytically and hung  
In great museums. The bourgeoisie with coo  
At such an image of a river-whore. They call it Art.

(“Standing Female Nude”, Lines 5-7)

This was followed by her collections *Selling Manhattan* (1987) and *The Other Country* (1990). While she received the Somerset Maugham Award for the former, both collections garnered wide critical acclaim and popularity. Commenting on *Selling Manhattan*, poet Vernon Scannell of *The Tiger and the Rose* fame associates the poems compiled in the volume with a world shrouded by poverty, violence, fear, and frustration; however, Duffy’s deft verbal resourcefulness could treat these realities “in ways that are not depressing” (qtd. in Dowson 2016, 9).

In 1993, Duffy’s collection *Mean Time* was published, and the poems in this volume attracted both critical and popular attention. Duffy was original enough to treat the themes of love and loss in several poems compiled in this volume, and they were remarkable given the fading glory of emotionalism in the hands of her contemporaries. The collection received the Whitbread Poetry Award.

Her next work *The World’s Wife* (1999) marks a decisive shift in Duffy’s poetic sensibility with its vehement thrust on feminist essentialism. Although there have been recurrent concerns for women’s voices in Duffy’s poetry, this volume makes the same concern an exclusive one and potentially the cornerstone of her thematic universe. Asserting expression on marginalised female selves who were either real or even fictional counterparts of renowned and often celebrated male figures, Duffy fashions the poems of this collection as a counter-cultural force to fortify the discourse of female individuality and autonomy.

Duffy’s first remarkable work in the new century, *Feminine Gospels* (2002), can be considered a useful extension of what she offered in *The World’s Wife*. Symbolic density and a strong socio-political consciousness are Duffy’s hallmarks in this volume, although a temporary decline in her popularity

could be seen during this time as the work failed to gain due attention from the reading public in a significant way.

It was, however, with the publication of her next major collection titled *Rapture* (2005) she saw a resurrection of her career. Duffy won the prestigious T.S. Eliot Award for this volume of poetry. As many as fifty-two lyrics are compiled in the volume, which, although diverse in their outlook, celebrates ‘intimacy and interconnectedness [as] female preoccupations’ (Dowson 2016, 13). However, she does not fail to assign and assert a universal character to the very preoccupations in the poems. Similar observations can be made in the case of the works produced during Duffy’s Laureateship, viz *The Bees* (2011) and *Ritual Lightening: The Laureate Poems* (2014). Duffy’s poems continue to be anthologised in important edited collections at the turn of the second decade of the present century.

### 3.3.3 The Duffyesque:

Duffy’s plenteous poetic outputs have always invited zealous critical reading. One of her fervid critics, Peter Forbes, coined the term ‘Duffyesque’ to suggest the “unique crafting of emotional truth into literary forms that are woven from colloquial speech patterns, disruptive syntax, de-familiarizing symbols, and captivating sound effects” (qtd. in Dowson 26). However, the poet herself declares the Duffyesque ‘the music of being human’ (qtd. in Dowson 26).

Owing to recurrent and strong female concerns, many of her poems, especially those included in her collections *Standing Female Nude*, *The World’s Wife*, and *Feminine Gospels*, widely attracted feminist and gender perspectives for their critical reception.

As a popular poet who has been writing for over four decades, bridging two centuries, Duffy has often been termed the able successor to Auden and Larkin. With her blunt take on the issues pertinent to her times through a colloquialism signifying accessibility of style, she secures for herself a unique and authentic space among her contemporaries.

### **Stop to Consider:**

The influence of Duffy's poetry over other British poets is noteworthy, as many poets employ the technique of dramatisation in their poems to transpire and negotiate the 'other' voices originating at the margins of society. Jackie Kay, Linda France, Sylvia Kantaris, Vicki Feaver, Lavinia Greenlaw, Selima Hill, Moniza Alvi, Mimi Khalvati, and Carol Rumens, among others, exhibit immense semblance with Duffy's poetic orientation in this direction. Although these poets do not use the monologue form as exclusively and exhaustively as Duffy does, a strong commitment to the dialogic immersion of their expressions is distinctive in some of their best-known poems. While the unauthoritative, playful, and inconclusive co-existence of multiple voices in a single discourse of poetry has motivated a section of these poets to combine the elements of fantasy with realism in their poems, the others remained rooted in social realism.

Duffy is also someone who bridges the poetic landscapes of two centuries. While she holds on to an immensely popular image as a poet through her conventional collections and anthologies published in the last two decades of the twentieth century, she is equally able to cope with the transitional and transformative field of the literary in the twenty-first century. Interestingly, as part of the contemporary literary marketplace, Duffy is very recently seen contributing voice-overs for audiobook versions of her collections or reciting her popular poems in sessions before large fan gatherings which are recorded and made available as open-access resources on virtual platforms.

This is unquestioningly the mark of Duffy's versatility as well as adaptability which is also suggestive of the imperviousness of her poetic outputs to easy framing and categorisation. That being said, she constantly reminds us about the commitment of a poet representing a new generation—that a poet keenly observes the societal transformation not by staying apart from it, but by actively being a part of it.

The following perspectives can be deduced from reading and discussing her poetic oeuvre:



**SAQs:**

1. What makes Carol Ann Duffy a standalone contemporary British poet? (50 Words)

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2. Mention three quintessential features of Duffy’s poetry? (50 Words)

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**3.3.4 Colloquialism and Multivocality:**

Duffy’s poetic expressions are conversational and she employs colloquialism extensively in her poetry. It allows her to subsume the everyday speech of diverse sections of people and merge them with her own in an artistic confluence. For Duffy, this is a democratic act of liberating poetry from the strictures of formal, literary language (Dowson and Entwistle 214). Colloquialism in Duffy’s poetry also marks a democratic politics of linguistic free play by which the authorial and emotive excesses are contested.

**Stop to Consider:**

The democratic and creative multiplicity or pluralistic play of signification and the absence or subversion of the emotively dominating poetic persona in Duffy’s poems speak volumes about the conformity of her poetry to postmodernism. One of the indispensable characteristics of postmodernist representation happens to be the roistering of a fragmented view of the self as well as the world. Instead of understanding the self as an integrated entity, literary postmodernism views subjectivity and agency in terms

of pluralism, subversion, and disintegration. The multivocal and dialogic nature of Duffy's poetic outlook accounts for her amenability to postmodernist poetics of free play.

The monologue is Duffy's favourite form with which to encapsulate her poetry. After Robert Browning, the dramatic monologue finds its most vigorous and resurgent presence in the lyrics of Duffy. However, Duffy ensures its revision in tandem with the changing values and altered political-cultural commitments of the age. Without compromising on artistic or aesthetic standards, Duffy recreates the dramatic monologue as a tool of the socially engaged poet for contemporary times. Colloquialism becomes the necessary stylistic criteria under the circumstances. Critic Ian Gregson mentions in his chapter on Duffy's poetry in the book *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (1996) that Duffy's experience as a dramatist which she gained by writing two plays during her stay in Liverpool helped her in manoeuvring the contemporary speech patterns to assimilate them in her poetic outputs so much so that she could expand the dimension as well as the definition of poetry in the turn of the century (97).

To glimpse what has transpired above, let us look at the poem "Text", which was first compiled in the volume titled *Rapture* (2005). Here, Duffy interrogatively examines the changing scenario of human reciprocity by digital means. The new terms and conditions of human reciprocity set by Short Messaging Service (SMS) or 'texting' as part of the emergent everyday practices facilitated by mobile telephony are negotiated in the poem through the enactment of a mediated interaction between the speaker and the addressee: "We text, text, text/ our significant words" (lines 3-4). However, the speaker, in the consecutive lines, is fed up with the presumed superficiality of such communication and becomes critical of the absence of proximal human involvement:

"The codes we send  
arrive with a broken chord.  
I try to picture your hands,  
their image is blurred" (Lines 9-12)

The excessive intervention of technology, facilitated by a consumerist economy, causes a disjuncture in our lives. In the poem, the same is reflected through the speaker's choice of phrases such as 'broken chord' and 'blurred image', etc. This disjuncture affects human reciprocities in adverse ways. The speaker of "Text" almost sceptically accounts for this 'textual' takeover of mediated human communication. As an outcome, human beings experience detachment in the same way as an instrument would from its sonority, using the metaphor of music. The speaker's concluding note: "Nothing my thumb press/ will ever be heard" (lines 13-14) aptly sums up and also expands the implications of 'unheard voices' in explaining the governing human condition of contemporary times.

The poem's tone is distinctly conversational, with the addressee having a silent but important conative agency to keep responding to the speaker's emotive conveyances by texting, so much so that the coded reciprocity between them stays uninterrupted.

In "Text," both the speaker's and the addressee's sense of the self is located within their ability to send and receive 'texts,' silencing the possibility of direct, unmediated interpersonal communication. This dependency (as against autonomy) on textual or discursive means solidifies Duffy's postmodernist poetics, which celebrate pluralism.

Pluralism through fragmented subjectivity finds apt expression in another important poem by Duffy titled "Psychopath" which was part of her collection *Selling Manhattan* (1987). Unlike "Text", this poem is comparatively longer and exemplifies Duffy's liberal use of the dramatic monologue. The speaker of the poem is the eponymous male psychopath whose perspective is presented through blatant admissions and confessions, including that of his criminal acts. While the low life of the psychopath is either underrepresented or looked down upon with a patronising attitude due supposedly to its 'unpoeticness' elsewhere, Duffy, with her keen sense of immersion, democratically represents the same by foregrounding the speaker's marginalised voice.

However, in doing so, the poet asserts her voice as a destabilising presence in the poem. This intrusion by the poet is an act of a committed observer of

the psychopath and his society at the margins. As a result, the poem attains the attribute of a double-voiced discourse. As critic Ian Gregson maintains, there are significant moments in the poem that render the self-image of the speaker an incomplete and distorted one (98). The opening lines of the poem— “I run my metal comb through the D.A. and pose/ my reflection between the dummies in the window at Burton’s” (lines 1-2) reveal the speaker’s self-absorbed and vague understanding of themselves. They use their metal comb to style their D.A. hairstyle and then admire their reflection in the window of Burton’s store, positioning themselves amongst the mannequins on display. This reinforces the speaker’s unclear and ambiguous sense of self. With this, Duffy successfully undermines the prospect of a single monolithic voice in the poem.

You must have understood so far that colloquialism and multivocality are how Duffy proclaims the potency and resistance of the other voices against the dominant, monolithic ones inherent in the discourse of British poetry. She explores and projects the pluralistic assumptions of colloquialism in poetry as a postmodern representation of the marginalised but resistant voices.

### **3.3.5’*The Music of Being Human*’:**

From the surveys of poems done in the previous sections, it must be clear to you that Duffy is committed to the pragmatic facets of humanism in her poetry even though her stylistic experiments are deeply enmeshed in artistic self-reflexivity. This reconciliation between her thematic preoccupations, which do not mark any noticeable departure from her original vow to be a socially engaged poet, and her stylistic innovations that carry the signs of her adaptability to the age-specific artistic demands justifies her stature to be a bridge between two centuries as has been iterated at the beginning of this Unit. However, it is essential to realise the implications of Duffy’s rather intriguing confessional utterance that in her poetry, she captures ‘the music of being human’ (Dowson 26, 30, 32, 155). Living and writing in an era in which multiple forms of subjugation and marginalisation in terms of gender identity are gaining discursive attention, how would a poet promise to strike

a harmonious note of humanity at large through her representations? The answer lies in her poetics that would celebrate multivocality and dialogism combined with her intent of devising forms of articulation to bequeath agency to the marginalised. Contrary to framing humanism as an essentialist or exclusive project, Duffy's poetry stitches and then embroiders the pluralistic and heterogeneous fabric of being human.

### **3.4 “Prayer” and “The Love Poem”: A Short Prelude**

The previous sections of this unit gave you a glimpse of Carol Ann Duffy as a contemporary British poet and, through a cursory look at her major works, an understanding of a few ways to read her poetry. This short section sheds light on Duffy's poetic outlook through a brief contextual account of her poem “Prayer” and introduces *The Love Poem* briefly before elaborately reading the poem in Unit 4.

“Prayer” detaches spirituality from institutionalised religious practices and ritualistic embellishments. Duffy instead explores and relocates the essence of spirituality in the mundane materialistic practices; all that is needed, as she feels, is to discover the trace of music or poetry alive within them. Here, Duffy employs starkly straightforward and commonplace expressions to situate the notion of ‘prayer’ in various quotidian events and situations.

If we look at Duffy's early life, we see that she did not profess any religious belief or practice since the age of 15. She was brought up as a child in a devout Roman Catholic family and educated in a convent setup; that is to say, she grew up amidst ritualistic practices of religion to be deeply influenced by them. Her poetry records this ambivalence as she often talks of poetry as a form of prayer (Dowson 6). This somewhat resonates with the themes of “Prayer.” In the poem, Duffy tries to come to terms with the very notion of prayer through popular cultural associations. The postmodernist dissolution of the ‘high’ with the ‘low’ culminating in the rise of the ‘popular’ resonates through Duffy's claims in the poem. However, the warmth and the serenity of the notion, which seems ingrained in the public psyche, is fondly preserved in the poem.

“The Love Poem” is part of her poetry collection, *Rapture*, published in 2005. Duffy’s works are notable for her quintessential exploration of unconventional facets of love and relationships, pervading the stereotypical boundaries of heterosexual love affairs. Her poem, “The Love Poem”, is a poignant portrayal of a poet’s difficulties while composing a love poem. The poem can be regarded as a modernist composition for its fragmented structure and the deviation to follow a regular meter like the traditional love poems. The poem is free verse with an irregular rhyme scheme and consists of three twelve-line stanzas. A persistent, frustrated tone is present throughout as the poet struggles to express her feelings and emotions to an unknown persona in the poem.

**SAQs:**

1. How does Duffy represent the ‘social turn’ in poetry? (150 Words)

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2. Comment on the postmodernist influence on Duffy’s poetry. (150 Words)

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**3.5 Summing Up:**

In this unit, you were introduced to Carol Ann Duffy as a major contemporary poet through glimpses of her life and her major works. The unit also acquainted you with the essential characteristics of her poetry such as colloquialism and multivocality. Besides these, you were sensitised about a few ways in which to read and discuss Duffy’s poetry. Finally, through all these deliberations, an attempt was made to enable you to have a smooth

transition towards the detailed reading and analysis of Duffy's celebrated poems "Prayer" and "The Love Poem" in the next unit.

### **3.6 References and Suggested Readings:**

Corcoran, Neil. ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*. Cambridge UP, 2007.

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## UNIT- 4

### Carol Ann Duffy: “Prayer” “The Love Poem” (Reading the Poems)

#### Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 An Overview of the Poem
- 4.4 Reading the Poem: ‘Prayer’
  - 4.4.1 Summary
  - 4.4.2 Analysis
- 4.5 Reading “The Love Poem”
- 4.6 Summing Up
- 4.7 References and Suggested Readings

#### 4.1 Objectives:

After completing this unit, you will be able to—

- *identify* “Prayer” and “The Love Poems” as Duffyesque poems,
- *analyse* the thematic and stylistic nuances of the poems,
- *critically appreciate* the poems.

#### 4.2 Introduction:

In the previous unit, you were provided with the necessary background information including her life and poetic career as well as various perspectives to read her major works. In this unit, a detailed reading of Duffy’s poem “Prayer” will be carried out along with substantiation of the claims made in the previous unit, about her poetry.

#### 4.3 An Overview of “Prayer”:

“Prayer” was first published in *The Times Saturday Review* in 1992 and later included in Duffy’s collection *Mean Time* (1993). The collection stands



out among Duffy's other works in terms of the thematic integrity of the poems that address the sense of longing, loss, and nostalgia. Compared to her other works, the poems in *Mean Time* are more personal and typify sentimentality. However, that does not alienate the collection from the quintessential attributes of Duffy's poetics as has been discussed in the previous unit. The title of the collection 'Mean Time' is largely polysemantic: it at once implies the chronological physicality of time as recorded in Greenwich Mean Time; the concept of average (mean) time; and labelling the contemporary times as notorious and menacing (mean).

"Prayer" appears as the last poem of the collection and voices the broad range of themes suggested by the title of the collection in variegated ways. The outlook of the poem is contemplative and has a philosophical inclination. However, Duffy achieves the rare feat of philosophising without using erudite jargon in the poem. The poem is structured as a Shakespearean sonnet without using meter; instead, it uses colloquial expressions through freeversification. Thus, the poem exhibits postmodernism stylistically.

Thematically, the poem sketches a secular and populist way of experiencing a prayer. Dissociating it from devotion or institutionalised forms of religion, the poet, who is a non-believer in her personal life expresses alternative ways of coming to terms with a prayer. The poem resembles Larkin's "Church Going" which exemplifies blatant yet ironic avowal of agnosticism as Duffy, in her poem, proclaims a clear distance from the practice of institutionalised religion. A thematic and tonic similarity of the poem can be found with another Larkinian poem "The Whitsun Weddings" where the collocation of expressions with usual or anticipated concepts is rendered problematic.

**Stop to Consider:**

"The poems are about the different ways in which time brings about change or loss. In the collection, I mean to write about time. The effects of time can be mean. Mean can mean average. The events in the poems can happen to the average woman or man. The dwindling of childhood.

Ageing. The distance of history. The tricks of memory and the renewal of language. The end of love. Divorce. New love. Luck. And so on. . . . Lastly, I have tried to order the poems in *Mean Time* in such a way that the collection shares the coherence of a record album; that it reads with some kind of emotional, not literal, narrative. Opening with Manfred Mann's 'Do Wah Diddy Diddy' and closing with the quieter place names of the shipping forecast familiar from the radio— *Mean Time* tries to record the brief words we hear and speak under the clock. In that effort, at least, I hope it is optimistic."

(Carol Ann Duffy's comment on *Mean Time* as appeared in *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, Summer:8)

#### **4.4 Reading the Poem: "Prayer":**

##### **4.4.1 Summary:**

###### **Lines 1-4**

The poem opens with precision as the speaker (the pluralistic self-reference "we" is noteworthy here) declares that there are occasions when a prayer can express itself provided we are unable to pray. The reasons why we "cannot" pray include the existential ones that can potentially cut modern people off the traditional religious values, forms and practices. The speaker immediately cites a graphic instance of prayer as a spiritual engagement, found in ordinary chance occurrences, through the image of a woman lifting her head which was sunk in the "sieve of her hand" in despair, on hearing the melodious sound of a bird in a tree nearby. The poet ordains the sensory appeal of the birdsong, as a form of prayer, through the transferred epithet of "the minims" (the brief notes) of the tree which creates the delight and amazement of receiving a sudden and unexpected gift, elevating the mood of the woman.

###### **Lines 5-8**

The speaker now asserts the objective force of truth that inescapably insists on us despite the unpleasantness it often brings along. Thus, the "small familiar pain" that truth brings us, annoys or troubles us on "some nights" or on

some occasions. Even in such a situation, prayer, taking the form of the monotonous rhythmic sound of a passing train, makes a man stand “stock-still” in the nostalgic reminiscence of his golden youth. For this man, the rhythmic, repetitive sound of the train takes the form of a prayer through its sonorous semblance with the repetitive utterance of the Latin litanies he used to hear in his early life. This occurrence of prayer soothes the heart of the man and provides him with deep comfort and assurance.

### **Lines 9-12**

The poem now introduces us to the image of a wandering lodger who is stopped in a random Midlands Town, where he is stationed, by the simple scales of the piano, presumably played by a child or a novice. The lodger finds the consoling warmth of prayer in those Grade I piano scales. As dusk approaches, the children are wanted by the parents or elders of the house back home as darkness engulfs the outside and a ‘voice’ of concern goes out in the open. The loss of this caring, parental voice could be poignant in its semblance to God’s own filial call of love and care to the innocent beings in the world. Implying either love or loss, the voice carries the warmth of a prayer.

### **Lines 13-14**

The speaker finally suggests that during intensely dark times in which no hope or help seems possible, things as simple and ordinary as BBC radio’s broadcast of the daily shipping forecast for different locations around the British Isles resembles prayer through its repetitive and reassuring pronouncement of these locations including ‘Finisterre’ which stands for the ‘end of the world.’

#### **Stop to Consider:**

Duffy’s long-term association with the Liverpool Poets and her relationship with one of the group’s principal proponents, Adrian Henri, were to mould her orientation towards pop culture early in her life. The influence of *The Liverpool Scene*—a ‘poetry-rock’ group, as

they would stylise themselves- was also significant in shaping the poetic register, which she internalised for her literary outputs. This group brought poetry to pubs and clubs in the 1960s (Dowson 7). Duffy was preoccupied with pop culture with a postmodernist, writerly sensibility in her later life whereby she not only endorses poetry as a performative practice (with dramatisation as a crucial mode of its delivery to the readers) but also as live performances, at par with concerts, before a generous audience constitutive of her devout readers to the common public. Her public recitations of her poems before large gatherings and their availability in recorded form over digital platforms increased her popularity in recent years. For your comprehension, a YouTube video of Duffy’s recitation of “Prayer” is appended to the list of references at the end of this chapter.

**SAQs:**

1. Is “Prayer” a religious poem? Justify. (50 Words)

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2. Comment on the images used in the poem that refer to prayer. (50 Words)

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**4.4.2 Critical Analysis:**

“Prayer” opens a (post)modern outlook on faith and spirituality. As society passes through phases of change and transformation, one has to contend with the changing dynamics of faith. The poem demonstrates that even the most ordinary or mundane existences can become the vehicle of faith and open up pathways to psychic or spiritual insights.

You must have noticed the sentimental and seemingly personal note of nostalgia and a sense of loss running through the poem as it addresses how the (post)modern individual copes with the fast-changing economic and cultural ecosystem in which she locates herself. As the person struggles to retain the spiritual warmth within herself, keeping the conventional ascetic ways of finding spirituality becomes difficult in a world increasingly permeated by the symbols of materialism. Nonetheless, the poem retains multivocality and pluralism, for which Duffy is known, through a pluralistic sense of self-reflexivity evident from the plural ‘we’ instead of the singular ‘I’ to represent the dialogic subjectivity. For critic Jane Dowson, it is her attempt at “dramatizing subjectivity as a process rather than a fixed essential entity” (50). Thus, the poet integrates the personal or the sentimental with the collective or even the universal in terms of the experiences captured in the poem.

**Stop to Consider:**

The poem can be understood through the philosophical and political (often Neoliberal) viewpoints of post-secularism which underscores the persistence or resurgence of religious belief in the present era of globalised, multiple modernities. Challenging the universalist claims of secularism as part of a failed or unfinished Modernist project, post-secularism is defined by postmodern sociologist Jurgen Habermas, who is widely acknowledged for popularising the term, as the tolerant co-existence between faith and reason in various contemporary public spheres. In its literary manifestation, post-secularism is often in convergence with postmodern religion, according to which, spiritual realities are multiple and dependent upon the individual’s subjective worldview faced with the metanarratives of spirituality. Duffy’s poem celebrates this plurality or relativity of spiritual truth and lays bare an alternative trajectory for the claims of spirituality.

“Prayer” creates intertextual interfaces with texts across varied spatiotemporal configurations. An interesting one is a 17th-century sonnet of the same name by George Herbert, the prominent English Metaphysical poet. While Herbert’s poem reaffirms the ritualistic currency of prayer as “something understood” (Line 14), Duffy’s poem, through some aesthetic opacity, stands midway between the absolutist comprehension or construction of reality facilitated by secularism and dogmatic religious thought.

Duffy’s poem “The Prayer of the Magician’s Assistant” in *Ambit* in 1986 is another strong intertext of “Prayer.” The former, expressed through a magnified female assistant’s perspective, half-mockingly subverts the masculinist control and dominance of the magician over his female assistants employed merely as tools of his trade. Interestingly, through her colloquialism, the poem’s speaker, an assistant of a magician, asserts her subjectivity through her unconventional ‘prayer’ where she uses the expressions— ‘Christ’ and ‘Jesus’ merely as swear words. Even the speaker uses slang words that create a strong indictment of her position in the social class hierarchy, providing us with a window into the social reality of the times. Together with the latter poem, a centrifugal intertextual force becomes the hallmark of the Duffyesque, which hinges upon the unconventionality of prayer.

Duffy’s fascination with the BBC and the ‘broadcast culture’ it gave shape to, have been a tremendous influence on her. Over the years, the BBC has been a mouthpiece for Duffy’s poetic self to reach the masses with numerous interviews and other voice-over broadcasts. In “Prayer”, Duffy relates the BBC’s daily Shipping Forecasts with prayer through the former’s bizarre sonority and rhythmic intonation of repetitive place names impressed upon the public psyche. For critic Jane Dowson, “radio’s prayer” is a typical Duffyesque persuasion towards the popular acceptability of the prosaic but a strong representation of “how the human antennae for ‘otherwhere’ is attached to the most mundane rituals.” (76). A sample of the web version of the BBC’s Shipping Forecast is provided for you in the list of references.

**Stop to Consider:**

If you examine the prosodic features of “Prayer”, you will notice that is in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet as per its rhyme scheme. However, it has a loose metrical arrangement as was previously iterated. It is divided into four stanzas that are further divided into three sets of four lines and one set of two lines. True to the sonnet form, the three quatrains (sets of four lines) follow the Shakespearean rhyme scheme *abab cdcd efef* culminating in the couplet (the penultimate set of two lines) rhyming *gg*. While the sonnet form and its rhyme scheme preserve the lyrical quality of the poem and highlight the dramatic nature or performability of the actual prayer, the poem is composed of everyday colloquial expressions almost in its entirety.

**SAQs:**

1. Justify “Prayer” as a postmodern response to spirituality. (100 Words)

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2. How does Duffy reconcile poetry with pop-culture in “Prayer”? (100 Words)

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“Prayer” consists of several literary devices. The poet consistently employs *enjambment*, which means continuing a sentence or phrase from one poetic line to the next. Enjambment helps Duffy retain the colloquialism and dialogic or, for that matter, prosaic conversational form in her poem without compromising on its essential lyricism. Combined inevitably with

enjambment, Duffy uses as many *caesura* or metrical pauses or stops marked by punctuation to end her lines.

*Personification* occurs on multiple occasions in the poem: the first and foremost is the phrase “a prayer/ utters itself”, in the first stanza, where prayer is assigned with an individual subjectivity with considerable autonomy away from the human agency to ‘utter itself’. The first stanza contains another instance of personification where the tree is described as chanting a minimum, leading us to the metaphor of “a sudden gift.”

The poet uses *alliteration*, which is the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning (the initial syllable) of words that are strung together in a poetic expression. The alliterative “her head” and “her hand” direct us towards the exceptional *symbol* of the “sieve of her hand” in the first stanza. The symbolism of geographic locations in the last stanza, as expressed in shipping forecasts including that of the ‘Finisterre’ or the ‘end of the world’, demonstrates the poet’s ambiguous intention to confine her pronouncements within the limits of the worldly or the mundane, yet a strong impulse to transcend those limits is evident therein.

The above is a suggestive, not an exhaustive, enumeration of literary devices used in the poem. You can enlist and discuss the other figures and devices from reading the text.

#### **4.5 Reading “The Love Poem”:**

The first stanza of the poem highlights the dilemma and struggle of the poet to write a love poem. The fragmented structure, indicated by the use of enjambment, metaphorically represents the inefficiency of the poet to maintain decorum of poetic composition. The narrator’s privation to abide by the normative mechanism of composing a love poem draws a comparison between the famous canonical love poetry and modern day love poems. The reference to “shrink to a phrase like an epitaph” denotes Duffy’s desire to enshrine her love with ever-lasting words, and to immortalize her poem like the great poets of the past did. Her thoughts that hung like “clouds” fall like “syllables” in “a pool of verse”. It is her thoughts, in bits and pieces,



which resonate with the words, previously penned, and more appropriately express her feelings than words of her own.

The second stanza discusses the poet's struggle to find the right word to express her thoughts and feelings. The opening line of the stanza- "Till love gives in and speaks\

in the whisper of art" denotes the poet's longing for her feelings to "give in" and conjure the appropriate words to mould her poem. She urges the modern poets to "look in thy heart" and identify their feelings as authentically as possible, and then proceed to put them in words, to "write" their love poem. She compares the lover's lips kissing as "quotation marks" meeting on the pages and as she expresses and reveals her thoughts as words, all the "love's light" in her heart begins to fade as they take the form of "darkening, black ... ink on a page".

The third stanza addresses the past love poets and their poems. She assumes that when it comes to composing love poetry, the modern poets do not come close to the ancient composers. Modern day poets are devoid of feelings and possess an indefinable lack in putting their emotions into words in the page. She concludes that unless one conjures love in their heart and mind, and feels the emotion to the fullest, one cannot create an authentic poem. Initially, as the poem began, the poet was perplexed and overwhelmed with some sort of dispiritedness as she was unable to discern her own feelings in words. But eventually, towards the end, the poet manages to start anew with new hopes to compose her poem like "the desire of the moth\ for the star".

### **Stop to Consider:**

#### **Enjambment:**

An enjambment is a poetic device, often employed by poets to create a fragmented yet free-flowing rhythm, similar to the stream-of-consciousness technique in literary fiction. It is a French term, which means "striding over" in English. It is basically a continuation of a

statement or a literary phrase from one line of poetry to the next, creating the illusion of fragmentariness. An enjambment is the lack of punctuation at the end of a poetic line and an uninterrupted flow of the meaning to the next line of the poem.

Noteworthy, the poet though initially confesses that she does not want her poem to be like the traditional love poems, however, quotes the famous lines from the canonical love poems composed by famous poets like Sir Philip Sidney, John Donne, Elizabeth Barret Browning, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and others throughout. For instance, the third line of the poem- “my mistress’ eyes-” is borrowed from Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 130”. Similarly, “let me count the ways-” is taken from Elizabeth Barret Brownings’ “Sonnet 43” from her sonnet sequence *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. The closing line of stanza I, “one hour with thee” is quoted from “An Hour with Thee” by Walter Scott. The statement- “dear heart, how like you this?-” resembles a line from the poem, “They Flee From Me” by Sir Thomas Wyatt. The line “look in thy heart, and write-” is made up from the famous “Sonnet 1” of the sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*, by Sir Philip Sidney. Similarly, “O my America! My new-found land-” is borrowed from John Donne’s famous poem, “To His Mistress Going to Bed”.

Carol Ann Duffy’s “The Love Poem” is basically a collection of verses from other love poems, composed by poets across different literary eras. Duffy’s composing her love poem through a miscellaneous compilation of the famous quotes by some of the most celebrated poets of the bygone era can itself be seen as a metaphorical representation of the inability or the struggle she talks about in the poem, that is, to find the appropriate words for writing her poem. Her struggle to express her feelings and emotions in words, to find the correct vocabulary to mould her poem, and the reminiscence of the great poets of the past, becomes some of the most significant literary concerns of the poem. The irony lies in that the poet confirms that she does not want her poem to replicate the traditional poems of the past poets but her poem is molded and shaped by verses borrowed from them. As such, inter-textuality becomes one of the key themes of “The Love Poem”. Duffy’s constant use of direct quotations and allusions from the famous love poems

sheds light on the influence of traditional poetry on the narrator. The composition of the poem using borrowed lines of other poets and the fragmented structure of the narrative alludes to her struggle to subvert the traditional expectations of literary composition, specifically love poems.

**SAQ:**

1. Why do you think the poet uses verse and quotations of famous poets in “The Love Poem”? Discuss with reference to the text. (about 200 words)

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2. From your reading of “The Love Poem”, draw the differences in the poetic composition between traditional love poems and modern love poems. (about 200 words)

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**4.6 Summing Up:**

Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry marks a time of transition in British literary history ranging from the moment when women’s poetry was looked down upon with considerable censure and judgementalism, to the moment when the distinction between the so-called high cultural forms and the popular ones eroded.”Prayer” can be studied as a representative Duffyesque poem that gives voice to this transition. The poem detaches the notion of prayer itself from the confines of institutionalised practices or ascetic forms of spirituality and contextualises it in the mundane life experiences of the ordinary folks. The thematic landscape of the poem is built through colloquialism, multivocality, and a passionate inclination towards the prevalent popular

cultural forms—which is the hallmark of her dialogic poetics. The formal characteristics of the poem exemplify Duffy’s fondness for lyricism however without compromising on dialogism as the essential trait of her poetry. Duffy’s “The Love Poem”, is a poignant portrayal of the difficulties that the poet encounters while composing a love poem. The poem can be categorised as a modernist composition for its fragmented structure and irregular metre, unlike the traditional love poems. However, constant reference to quotations and allusions from the famous canonical love poems composed through the different literary eras highlights the influence of traditional poetic composition on the poet as well as in the poem.

#### **4.7 References and Suggested Readings:**

Dowson, Jane. *Carol Ann Duffy: Poet for Our Times*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2016.

Duffy, Carol Ann. “Prayer.” *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (5<sup>th</sup> Edition) edited by M. Ferguson et al, WW Norton and Company, 2005. pp. 2007-2008.

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Herbert, George. “Prayer(I).” *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44371/prayer-i>. Accessed 20 December 2023.

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## UNIT- 5

### Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: “We should All be Feminists” (Background)

#### Unit Structure:

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 Biography of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
  - 5.3.1 Personal life of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
  - 5.3.2 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Works
  - 5.3.3 Adichie’s speeches
- 5.4 About the text *We Should All Be Feminists*
  - 5.4.1 Background
  - 5.4.2 Adichie’s views on Gender
- 5.5 Summing Up
- 5.6 References and Suggested Readings

#### 5.1 Objectives:

This unit will focus on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s personal life and works with a special reference to her widely acclaimed book *We Should All Be Feminists*. Alongside, a detailed account of the background of the text will be provided in this unit. Thus, by the end of this unit, the reader will be able to:

- *familiarize* themselves with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as a writer and her works,
- *understand* the context of the essay, “We Should All Be Feminists” and the views expressed by her in her works,
- *recognize* the connection of the text with the backdrop of the age and situations that prevailed during Adichie’s time.

#### 5.2 Introduction:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian author who is known for her feminist stance, convincingly reflected in her works. She is a renowned

women's rights activist recognised for her profound views on the rights of women. Most of her writings and speeches raise the concerns of feminism as she has used her voice to speak about the stories of the marginalized groups in an emotional and personal way. Her works have been translated into thirty languages and have appeared in various renowned publications. She was named one of TIME Magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2015. In 2017, Fortune Magazine named her one of the World's 50 Greatest Leaders.

### **5.3 Biography of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie:**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian author, known for her three internationally best-selling novels and TED Talks. She is widely regarded as the leading voice of the so-called third generation of Anglophone writers from Nigeria. She is among the inheritors of the tradition in the African novel inaugurated by Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Adichie has quickly amassed an impressive list of major literary awards, beginning with the PEN, O. Henry, and BBC prizes for some of her earliest short stories.

#### **5.3.1 Personal life of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie:**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born on September 15, 1977 in the city of Enugu in Nigeria. She was the sixth child to Professor James Nwoye Adichie and Mrs Grace Ifeoma Adichie. Her family belonged to the Igbo tribe where her father was a professor of Statistics in the University of Nigeria and her mother was the first female Registrar of the University. The family moved to the campus of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where young Adichie grew up in a house that was previously inhabited by Chinua Achebe.

#### **Stops to Consider:**

**Chinua Achebe:** Achebe is a renowned novelist, poet, and critic from Nigeria, who is regarded as a central figure of modern African literature. He was known for his novels like *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964).

Adiche went to the University of Nigeria Secondary School, Nsukka for her secondary education and received several academic prizes. She pursued medical pharmacy for a brief period of time during which she edited a magazine maintained by the university's Catholic medical students titled The Compass. Later she moved to the US where she received a bachelor's degree from Eastern Connecticut State University (ECSU) in Communications and Political Science in 2001. Two years later in 2003, she obtained a Master's Degree in Creative Writing from Johns Hopkins University. In 2008, she obtained another degree of Master of Arts in African Studies from Yale University. She was bestowed with different fellowships such as Hodder fellow at Princeton University during the 2005–2006 academic year, MacArthur Fellowship in 2008 and 011–2012 fellowship by the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University. She has been awarded sixteen honorary doctorate degrees from renowned universities including Yale University, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Edinburgh, Duke University, Georgetown University, Johns Hopkins University, and the Catholic University of Louvain, where she received her sixteenth in a ceremony on 28 April, 2022. Adichie married a Nigerian doctor, Ivara Esege in 2009. They have a daughter born in 2016.

**SAQs:**

1. When and where was Adichie born? (about 50 words)

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2. To which tribe did Adichie belong? (about 30 words)

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3. Give a brief account of the personal life of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. (about 300 words)

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4. Mention some fellowships received by Adichie? (about 100 words)

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### 5.3.2 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Works:

Adichie started her writing career with a collection of poems titled *Decisions*, published in 1997. It was followed by a play *For Love of Biafra* in 1998, published under the name Amanda N. Adichie. When Adichie was in the US, she had also written a short story “My Mother, the Crazy African” which deals with the conditions of a person facing two absolutely different cultures. Several of her short stories were published in literary journals such as *Zoetrope: All-Story* and *Topic Magazine*. However, Adichie received widespread recognition with her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* published in 2003. The novel is based on the political upheaval in Nigeria during the 1990s. The novel is narrated from the perspective of 15-year-old girl named Kambili Achike, whose family is wealthy and well respected but who is terrorized by her fanatically religious father. It won the 2005 Commonwealth Writers Prize and was shortlisted for the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction. Her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* which won the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction in 2007 and the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. The novel is named after the flag of the briefly acknowledged nation Biafra and is set before and during the Biafran war, also known as Nigerian Civil War. Adiche has written this novel as a tribute to her grandfather who died in a refugee camp during the Biafran war. The novel is highly influenced by the experiences of her parents during the Nigeria-Biafra war. It was an epic novel that realistically presents the savagery of the war through a small group of characters, mostly middle-class Africans, and the displacement and deaths of perhaps a million people. Her third novel *Americanah*, published in 2013 presents the struggles of a young Nigerian woman studying in the United States and experiencing a new culture in a new place. She herself has faced racism in her life which she has presented in this novel. When she was young, Adichie was not used to racial discrimination back in Nigeria. It is only when she moved to



United States to attend college, did Adichie actually face discrimination based on the colour of her skin. Race as an idea became something that she had to navigate and learn. She has portrayed her struggle as a black African in America through the character of Ifemelu in this novel. *Americanah* won the US National Book Critics Circle Award and it was named one of *The New York Times* Top Ten Best Books of 2013.

Adichie also published a collection of twelve short stories under the title *The Thing Around Your Neck* in 2009 that explores the relationships between men and women, parents and children, Africa and the United States. Her next book *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* was published in 2017. This book is a manifesto in an epistolary form written as an advice on how to raise her daughter as a feminist. Adichie has also published a memoir named *Notes on Grief* in 2021, based on the death of her father. She is also credited with a children's book, *Mama's Sleeping Scarf* dedicated to her daughter. She was described in *The Times Literary Supplement* as "the most prominent" of a "procession of critically acclaimed young anglophone authors" of Nigerian fiction who are attracting a wider audience, particularly in her second home, the United States.

#### **Check Your Progress:**

1. When was *Purple Hibiscus* published?
2. Give an account of Adichie's second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*.
3. What is her third novel *Americanah* about?

#### **5.3.3 Adichie's speeches**

Being a prominent literary figure, Adichie was invited to deliver lectures at various events. Her speeches are of significance as they carry her views on human rights, gender, feminism, culture and so on. Her first TED talk titled "The Danger of a Single Story", delivered in 2009 was one of the most viewed TED Talks with views over 33 million. She expressed her concern of the lack for realistic representation of different cultures.

**Stop to Consider:**

A TED talk is a lecture that features a spoken presentation that was originally given at the main TED (technology, entertainment and design) annual event or one of its many satellite events around the world. TED is a non-profit organisation devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks, often called “TED talks.”

In the TEDx talk delivered in London in 2012 entitled “We Should all be Feminists”, Adichie shared her experiences of being a feminist and also an African feminist. This speech was viewed more than five million times and later released in print in the form of a book titled *We Should All Be Feminists* in 2014. Her views on female identity, gender problems and social norms are reflected in her speech. She expressed her personal experiences on what it means to be a feminist in a culture which is predominantly patriarchal and is governed by problematic gender abuses and discrimination in Nigeria. In a 2014 interview, Adichie commented on feminism and writing: “I think of myself as a storyteller, but I would not mind at all if someone were to think of me as a feminist writer... I’m very feminist in the way I look at the world, and that world view must somehow be part of my work.” (Hobson) Adichie delivered the Commonwealth Lecture 2012 at the Guildhall, London on March Twelve on March 2012, in which she has addressed the theme of different cultures connecting to each other. Adichie delivered another speech on 30th November, 2022. It is the first of the BBC’s Reith Lectures where she advocated the freedom of speech, inspired by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech.

**SAQs:**

1. What is the first Ted Talk delivered by Adichie? (about 50 words)

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2. When did Adichie deliver the talk on feminism? (about 50 words)

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#### **5.4 About the text *We Should All Be Feminists*:**

*We Should All Be Feminists* is a non-fictional book by Adichie published in 2014. It is based on a talk delivered at a TEDx event in London in 2012. In this section we will discuss the book and Adichie's views on feminism. This book has received numerous accolades, including winning the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize for Fiction: and was named one of *The New York Times* Ten Best Books of the Year. A part of the essay was adapted by Beyonce in one of her song titled "Flawless," bringing Adichie to instant international attention.

##### **5.4.1 Background:**

Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* is a book length essay, adapted from her talk delivered in 2012 with the same name. This book is based on one of her landmark TED talks titled "We Should All Be Feminists", which started a worldwide conversation about feminism. The TED talk was delivered at Ted X Euston in London which has been viewed more than five million times. It became so popular that later it was published as a book in 2014 by Fourth Estate. The book also became widely popular with reportedly 750,000 copies sold in the U.S. alone. "The essay reviews Ngozi's idea of experiencing inequality in the land of Africa. It also contains a discussion between men and women within the poor background of gender in Nigeria" (Anggeria 15).

Adichie herself has experienced gender politics since her early childhood. Growing up in the Igbo culture which is patriarchal in nature, the society is dominated by the male gender. "In communities where such gender distinction is the norm, male children are perceived as the sustainers of lineage, holders of central, and often, most important positions of authority, and inheritors of immovable properties" (Nwokocha 5). She narrates different instances of how men dominate every sphere of Igbo society in a tight patriarchal power structure. For instance, Adichie recalls an incident about her fifth grade teacher in the elementary school who had promised that the most brilliant student in the class would be awarded the position of class monitor, which is a highly prestigious post usually reserved for a brilliant and academically sound boy. Adichie

secured the top position but Adichie's teacher refrained from her promise because according to her teacher, the class monitor should be a boy. This prompted the onset of ideals of feminism in young Adichie. During her time, feminism was a new concept which was often seen in a negative light. Adichie herself became conscious of the unpopular opinion associated to feminist and feminism and from an early age, she voiced her opinion to break down the barriers that hinder gender equality. Adichie has identified the gender stereotypes quite early as she herself did not quite fit in the perfect image of being a "girl". In the short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, she details her experiences when she and her younger brother, Nnamabia, accompanied their mother to the market. Young Adichie looked nothing like her mother. Nnamabia, on the other hand, looked just like their mother, hence, making him incredibly handsome. While at the marketplace, Adichie recounts that the traders would call out to her mother, "Hey! Madam, why did you waste your fair skin on a boy and leave the girl so dark? What is a boy doing with all this beauty?" She has experienced gender stereotype in her graduation times. She was worried about her dress while attending a creative workshop in a graduate school in order to be taken seriously. Like other women, she too was worried not to look feminine and as such, Adichie dressed herself in a manly, ugly suit because the appearance of men is the standard for societal professional norms. The more feminine a woman appears, the less likely she is to be taken seriously as a professional. This kind of experiences in her life encouraged her to stop being apologetic for her femininity.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's writings are influenced by her personal experiences which finds its grounding in her stories. Adichie was raised in Enugu, the capital of proclaimed nation, Biafra. Biafra is a secessionist state that attempted to liberate itself from Nigeria which resulted in the Nigerian Civil War, sometimes known as the Biafran War, that lasted from 1967-1970. Very often, Adichie draws her inspiration from Achebe, who was brought up in Nsukka and had extensively talked about the Nigerian Civil War. Adichie acknowledges his influence, explaining that Achebe's "work gave her permission to write her own stories." However, Achebe was not particularly vocal about the notion of feminism while Adichie, on the other hand, is very vocal about being a feminist and

feminism. Adichie has been versatile in her approach to writings and her works has earned much recognition because of her feminist position. Through her works, Adichie has resisted the patriarchal culture. Adichie uses her works to urge women around the world in defying the gender constructions, stereotypes, and sexualities that have been used to subjugate women in society. In her book, *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie has described feminism as part of the consensus knowledge on human rights. However, she emphasizes on the specific problems of gender inequality in the society. Adiche in her TEDx talk mentioned about one of her male friend calling her a ‘feminists’ in a derogatory way. Adichie asserted that gendered-based discrimination is still very evident in the present day society. In Adichie’s words: “We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful. Otherwise, you would threaten the man. Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. Now marriage can be a source of joy and love and mutual support but why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage and we don’t teach boys the same? We raise girls to see each other as competitors not for jobs or accomplishments, which I think can be a good thing, but for the attention of men. We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are” (Adichie 11). Furthermore, Adichie adds that the concept of masculinity is like a small cage into which boys are forced to act and behave. She talks about the pressures of masculinity, as men have to prove themselves as strong, tough, invulnerable and unbending. “Gender, as it functions today, is a grave injustice—we should all be angry, anger has a long history of bringing about positive change, but in addition to being angry, I’m also hopeful because I believe deeply in the ability of human beings to make and remake themselves for the better”(Adichie 9). According to Adichie, men have to live with fragile egos which creates some sense of insecurity regulated by how they are brought up in the patriarchal society and their self-worth is challenged if they are not dominant and in charge as ‘men’.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s style is simple, argumentative and rational. Her writings have inspired thousands of women around the

world. Women are the constant victims of the hegemonic masculinity that is embedded in the patriarchal society of today. Women are now emboldened to speak up and resist hegemonic masculine norms and Adichie is a driving force for this movement. Her reformist-feminist approach has been tested and proven effective in changing the minds of men who exhibit discriminatory tendencies against women.

**SAQs:**

1. Where was the TED Talk *We Should All Be Feminists* delivered?  
(about 50 words)

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2. When did Adichie identify the gender stereotypes? (about 50 words)

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3. What is Adichie’s style of expression in *We Should All Be Feminists*? (about 100 words)

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**5.4.2 Adichie’s view on Gender:**

Adichie became a literary sensation, known to the world for her vocal thoughts on gender and her complex, lively characters. The division of women and men based on gender is a common phenomenon in patriarchal society. According to Adichie, women and men alike should come together to bring forth a gender neutral world which she highlights in her book *We Should All Be Feminists*. Adichie adds that talking about gender is also talking about feminism. Adichie writes about gender in terms of womanhood. Adichie provides a sagacious account of what women have to face and experience. The study of gender in Africa is often considered as a taboo because women are considered as “second-

class” human beings who are meant to be seen but not heard. Women are discriminated in every sphere of their existence. Adichie also highlights the issue of stereotype that consists of the psychological beliefs and characteristics attributed as gender specific. In Africa, as in the world alike, women are stereotyped as submissive while men are dominant and assertive in nature. “Sex is the biological category; whereas, gender is the culturally shaped expression of sexual difference; the masculine way in which men should behave and the feminine way in which women should behave” (Timothy 86). Women face a lot of limitations on the basis of their gender and these limitations are interconnected to the economic, cultural, religious, political, and social spheres in Nigeria.

Adichie’s ideals on the importance of liberation of women from male oppression and dominance is reflected in her works. It is important for women to occupy their space in the socio-economic and political realms. Adichie asserts that the social definitions of what it means to be a woman restricts the movements and actions of a woman. “Gender is a socio-cultural expression of particular simplest way to do it is to characteristics and roles that are social spheres in Nigeria. Despite the depth of this gender problem, some Nigerians still dismiss its existence; especially women themselves. In a bid to liberate women from male oppression and dominance and to better their lot in the society, women (and men) have tended to organize themselves into socio-political groups. These groups with their ideologies have metamorphosed into feminist movements. The feminist movement is specifically aimed at creating a level playing ground for both genders; and, in Nigeria, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of those on the forefronts of the positive fight to emancipate women” (Timothy 86).

Through her works, Adichie has been vocal about the limitations of Nigerian women in the socio-economic and political domains. She has stated that in terms of gender, she is “becoming less interested in the way the West sees Africa, and more interested in how Africa sees itself.” She adds: “I am angry. Gender as it functions today is a grave injustice. We should all be angry. Anger has a long history of bringing about positive change, but in addition to being angry, I’m also hopeful because I believe deeply in the ability of human beings to make and remake themselves for

the better.” On 8th of December 2021, Adichie talks about her responsibility of being a feminist in an interview hosted by BBC News. She stated that she did not want another person to define her responsibility and she rather defined her responsibility for herself but did not mind using her platform to speak up for someone else. She also spoke about the right of women to be angry, because anger propels action.

#### **Check Your progress:**

1. Give an account of the personal life and works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. (about 250 words)
2. How did Adichie reflect her ideals on feminism in her works?
3. Give an account of Adichie’s speeches and their purposes.
4. What is the background of the essay *We Should All Be Feminists*?
5. What are Adichie’s views on gender and gender based discrimination in Nigerian society?
6. What are Adichie’s views on the women in Nigeria?

#### **5.5 Summing Up:**

In this unit, the readers will learn about the author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as a feminist through her works. Besides, the context with which to read Adichie’s book length essay *We Should All Be Feminists* is also provided to facilitate the understanding of the same. Additionally, Adichie’s view on gender and the realities of gender discrimination faced by the Nigerian women in their daily lives is also presented in this unit.

#### **5.6 References and Suggested Readings:**

Anggeria, F. “Gender Representation Of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie In *We Should All Be Feminists*”. *Etnolinguist*, 3(1), 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.20473/etno.v3i1.12016>.

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Timothy, Dokpesi and Chika John. "The Nigerian Woman's Limitations: A Philosophical Appraisal of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Feminist Philosophy". <https://acjol.org/index.php/jassd/article/download/3112/3060>

<http://vialogue.wordpress.com/2013/12/30/ted-we-should-all-be-feminists-Chimamanda-Ngozi-Adichie-at-tedxouston-transcript/> Vialogue, 30 December 2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBaVveCMXuk> 8 December 2021. Retrieved 12 March 2022 – via YouTube.

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## UNIT- 6

### Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: We should All be Feminists (Reading the Text)

#### Unit Structure:

- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 Introduction
- 6.3 Reading the Text
- 6.4 Critical Analysis of the text
- 6.5 Thematic Concerns
- 6.6 Summing Up
- 6.7 References and Suggested Readings

#### 6.1 Objectives:

This unit will focus on the understanding of the text *We should All be Feminists* by critically analysing the same with reference to the themes and issues presented. Through this unit, the readers will be able to:

- *read* the text in the light of the issues advocated by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,
- *understand* the text and the views of Adichie regarding gender and gender discrimination in the society,
- *understand* the thematic concerns of the text.

#### 6.2 Introduction:

*We should All be Feminists* is a book length essay by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, published in 2014. It is a powerful and concise account of the author's personal experiences of gender discrimination. It was adapted from Adichie's eloquently delivered Ted Talk in London in the year 2012 where she has distinctly advocated for gender equality.

### 6.3 Reading the Text:

*We Should All Be Feminists* is a sagacious account of the unequal treatment faced by women and why it is important for all to become a feminist in the patriarchal society. It is the expansion of the ideas presented by Adichie in her much proclaimed TED Talk on feminism. Throughout the text, Adichie gives several highly detailed and nuanced arguments of why feminism is important and why everyone should turn into a feminist. She also explains the true essence of feminism and the need of the world to strike a balance between the treatment of men and women. She begins the essay by referring to one of her very close childhood friends who for the first time introduced the term 'feminist' to her. Adichie writes, "Okoloma was one of my greatest childhood friends. He lived on my street and looked after me like a big brother: if I liked a boy, I would ask Okoloma's opinion. Okoloma was funny and intelligent and wore cowboy boots that were pointy at the tips. In December 2005, in a plane crash in southern Nigeria, Okoloma died. It is still hard for me to put into words how I felt. Okoloma was a person I could argue with, laugh with and truly talk to. He was also the first person to call me a feminist. I was about fourteen. We were in his house, arguing, both of us bristling with half-baked knowledge from the books we had read. I don't remember what this particular argument was about. But I remember that as I argued and argued, Okoloma looked at me and said, 'You know, you're a feminist.' It was not a compliment. I could tell from his tone – the same tone with which a person would say, 'You're a supporter of terrorism.' I did not know exactly what this word feminist meant. And I did not want Okoloma to know that I didn't know. So I brushed it aside and continued to argue. The first thing I planned to do when I got home was look up the word in the dictionary" (Adichie 6). Okoloma represents the typical man in Nigeria who didn't like women speaking out loud and voicing their opinion. Okoloma was like a big brother to her with whom she could be her true self. Adichie recounts that she and Okoloma were having an argument over something that she cannot remember. While she was around fourteen years old, Okoloma called her a feminist and Adichie could know from his tone that it was not a compliment. Through this incident, she recalls learning about the word 'feminist' for the first time.

### Check Your Progress:

1. How does the essay *We Should All Be Feminists* begin?
2. Who is Okoloma?
3. What kind of person was Okoloma was and what had happened to him?
4. Who introduced Adichie to the word 'feminist' for the first time?

Adichie then talks about her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* in 2003 where she discussed issues like physical abuse and gender discrimination among others. She recalls an incident while promoting her novel in Nigeria when a male journalist commented that her book was based on feminism and went on to give her an unsolicited advice to never be a feminist. Adichie says that through this man, she could understand the unfavourable opinion that Nigerians had regarding a feminist as women who are unhappy because they cannot find husbands for themselves. Adichie shows that not only men, but women too had a negative opinion regarding feminists and had a great role to play in institutionalizing patriarchy and subjugation of women. A well-educated Nigerian woman told Adichie that feminism is not in the culture of Africa and adds that Adichie is influenced by Western narratives. Then a dear friend of Adichie told her that being a feminist means hating men. Through these incidents Adichie makes it evident how the word 'feminism' is misinterpreted and misrepresented by man and woman alike. "So I decided I would now be a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men. At some point I was a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men and Who Likes to Wear Lip Gloss and High Heels for Herself and Not for Men. Of course much of this was tongue-in-cheek, but what it shows is how that word feminist is so heavy with baggage, negative baggage: you hate men, you hate bras, you hate African culture, you think women should always be in charge, you don't wear make-up, you don't shave, you're always angry, you don't have a sense of humour, you don't use deodorant" (Adichie 6-7).

**SAQs:**

1. What happened to Adichie when she was promoting her book?  
(about 100 words)

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2. How did Adichie turn into a feminist? (about 150 words)

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Next, Adichie narrates a story from her childhood when she was in primary school in Nsukka, a university town in south-eastern Nigeria. Her teacher promised to the class that the academically best student would be rewarded with the position of the class monitor. Adichie says that being the class monitor was a big deal as it brought along the power to control the class. However, the teacher breaks her promise when Adichie scored the highest in the test simply because according to her, the monitor had to be a boy. “But I was female and he was male and he became class monitor. I have never forgotten that incident. If we do something over and over again, it becomes normal. If we see the same thing over and over again, it becomes normal. If only boys are made class monitor, then at some point we will all think, even if unconsciously, that the class monitor has to be a boy. If we keep seeing only men as heads of corporations, it starts to seem ‘natural’ that only men should be heads of corporations” (Adichie 7). This incident made Adichie realise at a very young age, about the repressive spaces that woman are allotted in the patriarchal society in Nigeria. Then she talks about a progressive man named Louis who initially denied the existence of gender discrimination until he witnessed it himself. Adichie argues that during the ancient times, because of the importance of physical strength as a significant source of survival, men who were biologically stronger used to rule the world. She adds that in the present context, the world is ruled by cognitive strength and as such men and women must be given equal importance to evolve and live. In today’s world, one who is more

intelligent, knowledgeable, creative, and innovative is sufficient for taking the charge and these attributes do not demand physical strength. However, Adichie makes it clear that the scenario of gender equality in the real world is yet to evolve. “Over the years, the perception of the issue of ‘gender’ has been changing and developing from essentialism to social constructionism. Essentialism suggests that gender stands for biological sex, by contrast, social constructionism suggests that gender is constructed within a social and cultural discourse. Due to its complex nature, gender intrigues numerous debates over the extent to which gender is a biological construct or environment ideas” (Anggeria 15). Thus, it is important to understand the true essence of feminism, which means providing equal rights to every gender. Back then in Nigeria, women are not expected to book a room in hotels and it is assumed that a Nigerian female walking into a hotel alone has to be a sex worker. Adichie herself had experienced this discrimination when she was stopped by a guard at the entrance who asked annoying questions like, “What was the name and room number of the person I was visiting? Did I know this person? Could I prove that I was a hotel guest by showing him my key card?” (Adichie 9-10) In Lagos, women are not allowed in many reputable clubs and bars without a male partner. Adichie recalls having many male friends who would go into these clubs with their arms linked up with a woman whom he didn’t know earlier as these women had no choice but to enter these clubs, only with a man. Adichie also recounts some other instances of the discriminations faced by women in Nigeria. She states that whenever she entered a restaurant in Nigeria with a man, the waiter would greet her male companion while completely ignoring her. She criticizes the tendency of the patriarchal society to see men as superior to women. She admits that she used to get upset each time she was ignored and recalls writing a compelling article about being young and a female in Lagos. She has unapologetically expressed her anger on the multifaceted discrimination, marginalization, commodification and suppression of women. Adichie contends that gender operates as a profound injustice, fuelling her passionate anger. She implores all to share in this indignation, emphasizing that throughout history, anger has often catalyzed significant and positive transformation.

**SAQs:**

1. Why did the teacher break her promise? (about 150 words)

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2. How does the waiter react to women in restaurants in Nigeria?  
(about 150 words)

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Adichie’s narrative then moves from her personal experiences to the situation faced by other women. She talks about one of her American friend who took over a significant position, that was previously held by a man. She is criticized for similar kinds of actions that her male counterparts would have been appreciated for. Adichie also talks about another American friend who was in a high-paying job in advertising, who was ignored by the boss who praised her colleague who was a man. She was angry and wanted to voice her angst but let her resentments simmer because of the low status of women in Nigerian society. However, what surprised Adichie the most was the tendency of women to try to be likeable whereas men are never pressurized to behave in a certain way. “We spend too much time telling girls that they cannot be angry or aggressive or tough, which is bad enough, but then we turn around and either praise or excuse men for the same reasons. All over the world, there are so many magazine articles and books telling women what to do, how to be and not to be, in order to attract or please men” (Adichie 10).

She mentions about one of her writing workshops in Lagos when one of the participants, a young woman, told Adichie that a friend advised her not to listen to Adichie’s ‘feminist talk’ that would destroy her marriage. Here Adichie advocates the importance of a world that accords equal status to both genders and urges everyone to dream about a fairer world and this would happen only when the daughters and the sons are raised in non-discriminatory way. According to Adiche, the exclusion and under-representation of women in every aspect of our lives are doing a

disservice for the cultural, economic, political, and social progression of humanity. Adichie also speaks about the injustice done towards boys by seeing them through the lens of masculinity. As per the societal expectations on gender, men are asked not to express their fear, weaknesses or vulnerability. The gender politics often associates masculinity with money and expects that a man must always pay. This is how men are raised with a very fragile ego while women are taught to suppress their desires. Adichie questions the word 'emasculatation' and refers to the social conditioning of women as the 'other' in the society. Women are taught to aspire for marriages whereas boys are taught to be the bread winner in the family. Adichie gives the anecdote of one of her Nigerian friends, who decided to sell her house because she did not want to look ambitious and intimidate a man who might marry her. Similarly, another unmarried woman in Nigeria used to wear a wedding ring because she believed that her marital status would call respect for her. Adichie recalls knowing many young women who have to make terrible choices to get married. She highlights the difference in the sacrifices that man and women make to bring peace in the marriages.

Adichie admits that boys and girls are biologically different, but the social conditioning exaggerates the differences in an altogether different light. Here Adichie talks about the household chores like cooking and cleaning which are considered to be the work of women by the society. Adichie concludes her talk by emphasizing that a great deal of disservice is done to both men and women if they persist in adhering to the stringent gender roles society produces. She herself has been a victim of gender expectations as she recalls being worried about what to wear, despite being well prepared to teach, in order to be taken seriously. She was worried about not looking feminine and, in the process, wore a very ugly, manly suit, because the appearance of men is considered as the standard form of appearance. However, as she grows up to understand the complicated situations of gender politics, she learnt to be unapologetic of her femininity. Some people try to tell her to be a believer in human rights instead of being a feminist but she refuses to listen to them. She concludes her essay by saying that the best feminist she knows is her brother Kene, as he fits into her definition of being a feminist. According



to her, both man and woman can be a feminist if he or she accepts the power politics that surrounds gender and instead of following the gender discrimination, rather strives to make the world a better and equal place for both the sexes.

**SAQ:**

1. Who is the best feminist according to Adichie? (about 150 words)

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**6.4 Critical Analysis of the text :**

Adichie offers the readers a unique definition of feminism for the twenty-first century, one rooted in inclusion and awareness. Drawing extensively on her own experiences and her deep understanding of the realities of gender politics and sexual power, Adichie presents a picture of what it means to be a woman and why we should all be feminists. In the speech, Adichie has spoken about her personal experiences of being a woman. She focuses on the inequality faced by women in their day to day life just on account of being born a female. She accentuates how the gender biases are naturally embedded into our thoughts and actions, and how people adhere to the established gender biases of tradition and culture. Through her speech, Adichie highlights the hypocrisy behind the established norms of patriarchy. She gives various illustrations from her personal experiences to highlight the gender discrimination that is deeply rooted in the society. While sharing her personal experience in the patriarchal society, the author also reasons why it is taking decades, even centuries to remove the gender inequalities. This gender gap is very evident not only in the behaviour of men but also in the way, the women behave and because of the sheer acceptance of women. Women themselves institutionalize patriarchal condition of women by accepting the gender biases. The notions of compromise, nurturing, sacrifice, devotion, sensitivity, forgiveness are commonly attributed as specific to women. The author, while questioning the gender discrimination also

questions everyone about why women get treated in a discriminatory way and she also emphasizes how women should raise their concerns on gender discrimination around them.

Adichie’s writing is known for her strong assertion of human rights, especially of women. She, in a very subtle way challenges the societal norms and throws light on the pervasive impact of sexism. By presenting personal anecdotes and sharp observations, Adichie shows the importance of not only identifying and acknowledging discriminations based on gender but also dismantling them through actions. The essay, originally a speech, can also be considered an emotional appeal of a woman for an inclusive world, asking readers to embrace feminism as a crucial movement for social progress. Thus, Adichie offers a unique definition of feminism for the twenty-first century via a personal, eloquently argued essay.

Adichie presents a realistic picture of gender biases and the importance of feminism in the society. She gives the readers many instances where the word ‘feminist’ is often confused as a position of hating men, makeup, hating femininity and thinking only women should be in charge. Men, very often referred to being a feminist with negativity and hatred which the author doesn’t agree with. According to her, being a feminist is being socially, politically and economically independent, and seeking equality for both the sexes. Adichie, hence gives justification as to why everyone should be feminists. The world has evolved over time, but the ideas on gender have not evolved very much.

**SAQs:**

1. What is Adichie’s writings known for? (about 200 words)

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2. What are the attributes commonly associated with women? (about 250 words)

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### 6.5 Thematic Concerns:

**Feminism:** *We Should all Be Feminists* presents firm views about feminism and being a feminist. From the beginning of the essay, Adichie argues about the mainstream opinion of men and women alike regarding a feminist. Adichie narrates several incidents wherein she comes across the unfavourable connotations of the word ‘feminist’. In this essay, Adichie has shared her experiences of being a woman in Africa. She has shared her experiences of being an African feminist and how people react to her views on gender and sexuality. Adichie expresses various problems related to gender that are rampant in the society and how they shape the identity of what a woman should be. Adichie explains that feminism is viewed as “negative” in African culture because females are thought to be “angry” and hateful of men by defending their rights. She implies that the problem of gender is deep rooted within the psyche of the whole society.

She narrates several instances through which she argues about the importance of being a feminist in Nigerian society. She begins with the negative connotations of the word ‘feminist’ through a personal anecdote of arguing with one of her childhood friend, Okoloma. Again, when she tries to tip the parking attendant, he thanks her male companion instead of her. Adichie presents several personal anecdotes which have led Adichie to turn into a feminist. The society has always treated woman as the weaker section irrespective of how much a woman earns. Adichie in this essay explores the hurdles that a feminist faces and the taboo associated with the word ‘feminist’. According to Adichie, feminism is not about men or not having husbands or hating bras. “I think, for a long

time, people felt that to be a feminist meant somehow to reject everything to do with femininity – that you have to in some ways kind of appropriate a man to be a feminist – but I don't think so at all," she says. "Femininity and feminism actually do complement each other. Women should be allowed to have a broad range of what they can be, of who they can be, of how they can present themselves. I think femininity is one of those options and I love femininity" (Adichie 1). Adichie advocates a fairer world where gender equality should be the norm. The author narrates another incident wherein her female friend decides to sell her house so as not to seem superior than the man who might be marrying her. According to Adichie, young females in Nigeria are under pressure to marry before a 'certain age,' else it's a great personal failure.

**Gender Discrimination:** Gender discrimination refers to the exclusion or restrictions imposed on women that creates unfair boundaries for men and women. Gender discrimination restricts the exercising of human rights and prohibits the women from getting treated in an equal way. Adichie through her works have advocated the elimination of gender discrimination and has put forward her vision of a world where women and men can enjoy equal rights, resources, and opportunities and so on. While trying to eradicate gender discrimination, Adichie highlights the issue of gender inequality, and highlights that men occupy most positions of power and prestige even though women make up slightly more than half of the world's population. Adichie argues that everyone should be a feminist and work towards achieving gender equality.

**SAQs:**

1. What are the various personal anecdotes provided by Adichie in her essay? (about 200 words)

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2. How do Adichie’s characters stand as spokespersons for her notion of gender equality and her notion of femaleness? (about 200 words)

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3. Give a critical analysis of the text *We Should All Be Feminists*. (about 200 words)

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4. What are the thematic concerns of Adichie’s text? (about 200 words)

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### 6.6 Summing Up:

In this unit, a detailed understanding of Adichie’s book *We Should All Be Feminists* is attempted. *We Should All Be Feminists* is a book that helps the readers to understand gender politics and at the same time, also to unlearn the tabooed lessons on gender. It initiates the much-needed discussions on feminism.

### 6.7 References and Suggested Readings:

Adichie, Chimamanda N. 2014. *We Should All Be Feminists*. Fourth Estate-HarperCollins: London.

Anggeria, F. (2019). Gender Representation of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *We Should All be Feminists*. *Etnolinguist*, 3(1), 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.20473/etno.v3i1.12016>.

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## UNIT- 7

### Sojourner Truth: Ain't I a Woman? (Background)

#### Unit Structure:

- 7.1 Objectives
- 7.2 Introduction
- 7.3 Introducing The Author
  - 7.3.1 A Brief Biographical Sketch
  - 7.3.2 Sojourner Truth's Religious Leaning
- 7.4 Sojourner's Experience of Slavery
- 7.5 Author's Views
- 7.6 Summing Up
- 7.7 References And Suggested Readings

#### 7.1 Objectives:

After thorough reading of this unit, you will be able to

- *discuss* about the life of the author in detail,
- *familiarise* yourself about the author's experience of slavery,
- *assess* women's sufferings through the author's life experiences.

#### 7.2 Introduction:

As much as it is essential to read and understand a text, it is also necessary to read the author as well as the background to the text. Studying about the author would help you to place the text which would further help us to understand why or under what circumstances such a text was written. It would also help you to dive deep into the author's mind-set, the thought processes which went into the author's mind while writing a particular text or in this regard while giving the speech. The background serves your purpose in in-depth understanding of the text. The background, which is mostly historical, will help you to know what went into the author's life, the problems, the trials and tribulations she faced during her lifetime.

Even after speaking all these, a question might arise in your mind – Why do we need to read the author and the background? Is it not sufficient only to read the text? The answer is no. Reading the text alone would not suffice. Studying the background would give you a holistic understanding of the text. You need to remember that a text should always be studied along with the context, then only, you will be able to understand it in a better way.

In the present unit, we will make an attempt to highlight the author's stand on women's sufferings as slaves. In this unit, we will discuss the author's life, her experience of slavery, her viewpoint on women's identity and the like.

### **7.3 Introducing the Author:**

#### **7.3.1 A Brief Biographical Sketch:**

Sojourner truth was born in the year 1797-1800. There is no accurate birth date of Truth. She was born under the name of Isabella Baumfree. Later, she took up the name, Sojourner Truth, as we know her now. She was born to James and Betsy (her parents) who were the slaves of one called Colonel Ardinburgh of Hurley, Ulster County, New York. Her first master, Colonel Ardinburgh died when she was an infant. So, she could not remember him, how he was as a master or how he was as a person and the like. After his death Colonel Ardinburgh's son, Charles Ardinburgh, became the new master to Sojourner Truth, her parents and to ten –twelve other slaves. Her parents used to say that Master Charles was the best master because he was a kind master. James and Betsy were obedient, faithful and deferential towards their master. They, due to their docile behaviour, earned favours like a plot of land on the slope of a mountain from their master Charles. In the land, they used to grow tobacco, flax and corn, which they used as a means of barter. In this way, they get extra food and clothing for themselves and their children.

After his father's demise, Charles built a hotel and under this hotel, a cellar was built for the slaves. In this cellar, all the slaves of both gender slept together. This cellar was the slaves'ssleeping room /chamber. This

chamber was a nightmare for Sojourner Truth. She quivers as she recounts her experience of living in this chamber. Her evocative description of the chamber makes us realise that the memory still lingered upon her for a long time. The chamber was dimly lit, devoid of sunlight; “its only lights consisting of a few panes of glass, through which she thinks the sun never shone, but with thrice reflected rays; and the space between the loose boards of the floor and the uneven earth below, was often filled with mud and water,...” the slaves used to sleep on boards over muddy floor which was detrimental to health and sometimes proved fatal.

“...its inmates, of both sexes and all ages, sleeping on those damp boards, like the horse, with a little straw and a blanket; ...fever sores and palsies, that distorted the limbs and racked the bodies of those fellow-slaves in after- life”( Narrative of Sojourner Truth 14).

Truth’s mother had ten to twelve children, of which many were sold, even before Truth could remember. Truth was an infant when her brother and sister were sold at a very young age. Her father and mother would sit for hours, recalling and recounting every endearing circumstance. They would talk about their departed children, and their hearts would cry and ache.

Sojourner and Peter, her youngest brother along with her parents remained slaves of Charles Ardinburgh until his demise. Charles died when Isabella was nine years old. Her mother would often cry thinking about Isabella’s brother and sisters. In the evening, after work, Isabella’s mother would pray to God and ask her children to do the same. She would teach her children to do the same. She would teach her children to seek help from God whenever they were beaten or treated brutally or if they fell into any trouble. She said, He would always hear and help them. “She taught them to kneel and say the Lord’s prayer”.

After Charles’ expiry, his slaves, horses and cattle were to be sold to another master. Therefore, an auction took place. In the auction, Isabella, Peter and their mother were destined to be sold away. But Isabella’s father, James Bomefree, was suffering from rheumatoid. His limbs were becoming weak and distorted. So, the question arose, who would take care of James’s health if Mau-mauBett( Isabella’s mother)



is sold. It was decided that she would be given the freedom to look after her husband. After some time her mother's health deteriorated, due to fever-sores and later on paralysis took hold of her. After a few days passed, her condition became worse and Mau-mauBett expired. Isabella and Peter, sometime later also bid farewell to their father.

Following the sad demise of her parents, Isabella was auctioned and sold to John Nealy of Ulster County, New York. Sojourner only knew Dutch, but John Nealy and his wife could speak only in English, although Mr Nealy understood Dutch. This problem of language was an obstacle to understand each other, which afterwards, to dissatisfaction of the mistress and punishment and suffering for Sojourner. She did not have proper clothing to wear during winter, she used to shiver and her feet used to freeze due to severe cold. While she had plenty of food to eat, she also got plenty of floggings. She used to pray to God regularly to get rid of the punishment and sufferings that befell.

One day, a fisherman named Scriver came to Mr Nealy's house and bought Isabella for one hundred and five dollars. The family of the fisherman was uneducated but honest and kind. Then she was sold to John J. Dumont for seventy pounds, in 1810. She remained with him for a short period of time till 1828, until she was freed from slavery. Isabella was married to Thomas, a fellow slave, who already had two wives. Isabella became mother of five children. Isabella's master promised to liberate her, when the state ordered emancipation from slavery, and would give her 'free papers' a year earlier than she was legally freed, but only on one condition. The condition was she had to be faithful and do her duty well. In 1826, her hand suffered from a disease. Yet, she did her work diligently. However, the master refused to give her 'free papers' due to the loss incurred because of her hand. She then, tried to elope with her infant child from her master's house. But, she could not go far and her master found her. He wanted to take her back, but she refused to go with him. She stayed with Isaac S. Van Wagener, for one year. Dumont charged twenty dollars for her and five dollars for the child in order to liberate them. Her son was also fraudulently sold out of the state. Till that time, the state banned selling and buying of slaves in and out of the state. Soon after, she met a man

who out of sympathy introduced her to Quakers. The Quakers took her to the Court to register a case against her son.

There is a rule that the slaves don't use their surnames. They take the surnames of their masters as their own. In 1827, Sojourner was emancipated from slavery life. She then started working as a domestic.

### **Check Your Progress**

1. What is the main view of the author about women?

### **7.3.2 Sojourner's Religious Leaning:**

When Sojourner was a child, her mother used to talk about God. Her mother asked her to seek help from God in times of distress. Thus, Sojourner started thinking about God as powerful and great who is superior to everyone. She believed that God kept a record of her actions like her masters. She would tell in detail about her trouble to God, thinking He would deliver her needs or wants. She had a firm trust in God. Sojourner even selected a place for her daily prayers. She went to a small island situated in a stream, "covered with large willow shrubbery." She chose the spot due to its beauty and thought she could speak louder to God as people rarely came to that place. She did not want her prayers to be overheard by others. As the place was isolated, she thought it best for her orisons. She not only offered her prayers, rather she would talk to God. She would question God if He is just another human-being or her friend. Her wants became demands, which later became commands. She felt God was under her obligation, more than she was to God. After a while, Sojourner felt her prayers were answered. God delivered her wants. So she was content with her life now.

As time passed, Sojourner started predicting the future. Once she predicted Mr Dumont would come to Mr Van Wagener's house and he does appear. She said that "God revealed himself to her, with all the suddenness of a flash of lighting, showing her, in the twinkling of an eye, that he was all over that he pervaded the universe – and that there was no place where God was not". According to her, one cannot run away from one's sins. There is no place in heaven or hell where God is not

present “and where could she Flee?” She became a member of the Methodist Church in Kingston. Later, she joined another Church called Zion’s Church which was full of colored people” (the Blacks). She was then gradually drawn towards Prophet Matthias (also called Robert Matthews), “for he said the spirit of God the father dwelt in him”(92). After joining the African church she started instructing the girl at Magdalene Asylum, Bowery Hill.

Isabella was living with Mr Pierson. When he was asked the reason for his fasting, he said that “fasting gave him great light in the things of God”. Hence, Isabella too started fasting for God. Isabella, after staying for 5 years with Mr Pierson had accumulated enough wealth. She introspected and ran the course of events of her life through her mind. She came to the conclusion that “the rich rob the poor and the poor rob one another”. So, she was not at all interested in the material things of life. Therefore, she left the city. She felt there was a calling to leave the city and travel East and lecture. She was named Sojourner- one who travels. The name Sojourner Truth suggests a journey across the nation to preach the truth of the world. She said on going East “The spirits calls me there, I must go.” She was on a mission. Her mission was not just to travel but to lecture on embracing Jesus, refraining from committing sins and so on. Thus, Sojourner Truth, from a slave, became a religious preacher.

#### **7.4 Sojourner Truth’s Experience of Slavery:**

In this section, you will learn about the experiences of Sojourner Truth as a slave. Truth was a slave by birth. She was sold a number of times. She had to adjust herself in the new houses of the masters. Everytime a master was changed she had to adjust in the new environment, which was not easy. She had to go through difficult times. She underwent a slave auction- an auction which was held for buying and selling of slaves. Such auctions also tried to separate her father and mother. Her father was weak and was suffering from rheumatoid, hence no one was willing to take him. But Sojourner’s mother was going to be sold off. Nevertheless, due to her husband’s illness Mau-mauBett (Sojourner’s mother) was granted freedom in order to look after her husband.

Next, Sojourner was sold to John Nealy for one hundred dollars. Isabella only knew Dutch and the Nealys could only speak English though John Nealy could understand a little bit of Dutch. So the problem of communication occurred between Isabella and her mistress (Mrs Nealy). They were not able to understand each other properly. Language became a barrier between them. The mistress was thoroughly dissatisfied with Isabella because of which Isabella was punished. If the mistress asks for frying-pan and Isabella carries “pot- hooks and trammels” she would get angry and punish her. Although she got enough food to eat, she also got enough floggings. The mistress used to whip her whenever she was angry with her. She remembers a particular day, when her master tied her hands with cords and whipped her with rods until the flesh was deeply cut and blood flowed through her wounds. This incident gives her chills whenever she thinks of it.

Isabella was married to Thomas who was also a slave and already had two wives. Their marriage ceremony was not performed in the presence of God following proper rituals. It was performed by a slave. So, it is said to be a farce or a mock marriage. As it was not recognized by any law, it could be revoked at any time as the master wished to. Later Isabella as a mother also had to endure the illegal sale of her son. It was illegal because her son was sold outside New York city. The law had prohibited the selling of slaves outside the state. As soon as she heard about it, Isabella immediately went in search of her son alone and on foot. We see that Isabella since her childhood had many bitter experiences as a slave. She had to overcome many hurdles. Her birth as a slave posed a bane on her for which she had to undergo various trials and tribulations throughout her life. Even during winter she had to endure the cold as she did not have proper clothing to wear.

**SAQs:**

1. Describe the life of Sojourner Truth as a slave. (about 200 words)

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2. What are the difficulties that the author faced when she was a slave ? (about 200 words)

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**7.5 Author’s Views:**

**(a) On Slavery :**

As she had undergone torture from her masters, she says that whenever she hears about whipping women on bare flesh it sends a chill down her spine. “It makes my flesh crawl, and my very hair rise on my head ” She questions the way human beings are treated. According to her, humans have lost their humanity. She tries to convey that slaves are human beings too. The slaveholders or the masters look at/ treat the slaves the same way as they would treat a horse violently and brutally.

**(b) On God :**

Sojourner viewed God as “an all powerful, all- pervading spirit”. According to her, there is no one more powerful than Him. He is present everywhere and He has the power to deliver her wants whenever she asks for them. She studied the first chapters of Genesis with deep interest. She tried to reason out why God takes rest whenever He is tired by the day’s work. Sojourner, on the other hand, has to work regularly, irrespective of day or night no matter how tired she was. She then came to the conclusion that God cannot rest, for if He rests the motion of the whole world will cease. She regarded that God has to be worshipped at all times and in all places. According to her God is meant to be worshipped so we all should pray to God. She believes God is always near her and would guide her whenever she digresses her way.

Sojourner Truth afterwards, contributed to the development of the reform movements, especially the movements for women’s rights and abolition of slavery. She has travelled hundreds and thousands of miles to preach her learnings. She has given lectures in many states of the union and also she has spoken in the Congress. An article was also

published in a newspaper during the Presidency of Abraham Lincoln about Truth making her appearance in the Senate House. Truth carries a book with her which contains the autographs of many distinguished personalities who are the great people of the world.

She calls this book the “Book of Life”. She also came in contact with other distinguished abolitionists such as Hon. George Thompson of England. She also appeared in the Woman’s Right Convention at Akron, Ohio. In this Convention, she gave her famous speech “Ain’t I a Woman?”. She continued her journey as a voice for women’s rights. She also became a frequent speaker in anti-slavery meetings. Her name started appearing on the radical abolitionist papers very often. In every meeting she goes, she made her presence felt as a strong woman with a voice; she had that silent, subtle power of her personality : Sojourner Truth, a tall black woman of African descent, who wears grey or white dress, neat and clean with a white turban.

**Stop to Consider:**

**Barter** – to exchange goods for other things rather than for money

**Orison** – a prayer

**Quiver** – to shake slightly, tremble

**Linger** – to take a long time to leave or disappear

**Rheumatoid** – a disease that causes stiffness, swelling and pain in the joints of the body

**Flogging** – a punishment in which someone is beaten severely with a whip or a stick

**SAQs:**

1. What are the ways put forward by the author for women’s emancipation ? (50 words)

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2. Write a note on Sojourner Truth’s inclination towards religion.  
(60 words)

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**7.6 Summing Up:**

In this unit you have learned about the woman behind the speech “Ain’t I a Woman ?” prescribed in your syllabus. This unit has helped you to understand the workings of the system of slavery during that time. Also, you have gathered knowledge about the life of the author, how she became a famous personality after living the life of a slave.

Sojourner Truth is not just a name. She is the torchbearer of certain movements in her lifetime. She is an inspiration to all other women, who want to fight for women’s rights. At that time, when no woman, either Black or White, had the courage to speak in the meetings, Truth stood with firmness to speak against slavery and about the rights of women. She had a fighting spirit, she fought for the abolition of slavery and helped the women learn about their rights. She also fought for women’s suffrage, that is, the voting rights of women. She became the source of inspiration for millions of women.

**7.7 References And Suggested Readings:**

Abrams, M.H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 10th ed., Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2012.

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## UNIT- 8

### Sojourner Truth: *Ain't I a Woman?* (Reading the Text)

#### Unit Structure:

- 8.1 Objectives
- 8.2 Introduction
- 8.3 Understanding The Text
- 8.4 Themes of 'Ain't I a Woman'
- 8.5 Reading the text: With A Feminist Approach
- 8.6 Summing Up
- 8.7 References and Suggested Readings

#### 8.1 Objectives:

In this unit, you will read about the text 'Ain't I a Woman?' prescribed in your syllabus. By the end of this unit, you will be able to :

- *understand* the gist of the text,
- *assess* the text in its critical perspective,
- *discuss* the various aspects related to the text,
- *learn* what the author has tried to say through the text,
- *familiarise* yourself with the approaches through which the text can be read.

#### 8.2 Introduction:

In the previous unit, you got acquainted with Sojourner Truth. You have studied in detail about her life experiences. She is not unknown to you now. You have learned quite a lot of things about her, and can answer questions like who was she was and what her life was like.

In this unit, you will learn about her famous speech 'Ain't I a Woman ?' This unit will help you to understand the meaning of the text.



The speech, 'Ain't I a Woman ?' was delivered by Sojourner Truth at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in the year 1851. It is very strange that the speech was never recorded anywhere or written down by someone. Then, question arises as to how we have come across this speech. It is very interesting to learn that this speech was written from the memory. A woman named Frances Gage who attended the meeting reproduced it on paper from memory after a very long time.

As it was written from reminiscence, the words might not be accurate, but the power of the speech and the feeling which comes after reading it is not lost. Sojourner's powerful expression can be felt in each and every word of the speech.

### **8.3 Understanding the Text:**

In this section, you will try to understand the text and comprehend its significance.

Sojourner Truth addressed the audience as "children". She says that there is a "racket" which refers to the contradictions in the women rights movement. The woman rights movement was not inclusive. It referred to the rights of the White Women and left out the Black women. There was racism within the movement, as a result of which there was strife and dissension. According to Truth, such tumult and conflict arose because something is "out of kilter"- something which is not in proper state or condition. As the movement is racist and not same for all (Black and Whites), Truth further indicates that Blacks and the women from South to North, all are "talking about rights". But, no one is able to take action to implement the rights, as there is little support for the women, especially the Black women. The Whites do not really support the feminist movement and the abolitionist movement. So, there is no point in speaking about rights as the Blacks and Whites are not seen with equal eyes. The White men will be in a dilemma, "in a fix" if the Black women are given rights as the Whites won't be able to assert power over the Blacks.

She then goes on pointing to a particular person “That man over there”, who says women are weak and need help. They should be carried, picked up above the “ditches” and placed on the best place one could have. But nobody has helped Truth like the man has said. No one has carried her above “mud-puddles” or tried to provide her the best place, because she is black. So, she questions ‘Ain’t I a Woman ?’. Nobody has looked upon her as a woman but has always seen her as Black. She has faced racism and has been discriminated all through her life. Sojourner Truth asks the members present at the Convention to look at her. “Look at me ! Look at my arm !” She also asks them to look at her physique- she has worked hard like men. She has done all the work of men like ploughing, planting, gathering harvest; she has basically worked on the fields like a man. She works and eats, “as much as a man”. Also, she can tolerate the whips or lashes. Through these lines she is trying to say that she is as strong as a man. Then why the differentiation ? Why cannot a woman have the rights like man ? She repeats the phrase ‘Ain’t I a Woman ?’ in the speech emphasizing the discrimination between Blacks and Whites as far as women are concerned. Although she is a woman she is being discriminated on grounds of race or colour.

Truth then talks about the hardships she has to go through and that too alone. She gave birth to thirteen children but all of them were sold to become slaves. She used to cry seeing the unfortunate destiny of her children. As a mother, she was sad and grief-stricken. No one was there to comfort her. So, she would pray to God, Jesus. He was her only support. She earnestly believed in God. She says that God has helped her out of her troubles; “Jesus heard me !”, God has granted her wishes. Sojourner asks the name of the thing which is in the head. One of the members replied, it is called intellect. She approves of the answer and asks about the relation of the intellect to “women’s rights or Negro’s rights” She couldn’t find any relation between the two. Intellect has got nothing to do with the rights of the women or the rights of the Blacks.

She then asks another question to her audience: suppose she has one pint in her glass and they have one quart in their glass, wouldn’t they let

her have that pint or whatever amount is her glass. Although she has less and they have more, yet will they seize that little amount in from her ? Won't they let her have that and be happy with it ? It's not like they have less or nothing and so they want to take the pint from her. These lines indicate that Sojourner is not able to understand the unwillingness to bestow rights to women. The Whites are reluctant to grant freedom to the Blacks and confer rights upon them. The men are already free then, the reason of this reluctance is unfathomable or not understandable.

A Black man, apparently, said in the meeting that women cannot have equal rights like men, because Christ was not a woman. So women cannot be at par or equal with men. To this comment, Sojourner Truth replies by asking how Christ came into this world. She answers that Christ came from God and a woman. A woman has brought Christ into this world, not a man. So, a man has nothing to do with Christ. Instead a woman is associated with the creation of Christ as she gave birth to Him. Further Truth stated that the first woman which God has created was strong enough to turn the whole world upside down. The first woman that God created refers to Eve. When Adam and Eve were sent to the Earth from heaven, the world changed all together. Because of Eve, they had to come to Earth. Therefore, Sojourner Truth argued that women can also turn this world again and make things right. They should be given a chance to do so. If one Eve was so powerful then how much more powerful all the women together can become. They will be able to make big changes if they are given the opportunity. If one Eve can bring such a great impact on this world then how much more impact can all the women together can have. The women are asking for a chance to change things and Truth said men should give them that chance. The women are asking for an opportunity to change things and men should grant them the opportunity.

Sojourner thanks her audience for the patience they showed in listening to her. She was grateful to the audience for hearing her out. In the last line she calls herself "old Sojourner" and states that she has nothing more to convey. She conveyed what she had to; she said all that she had to say. With this line, her speech came to an end.

**SAQ:**

1. How did Sojourner Truth’s faith in God give her peace during her days of turmoil? Discuss. (40-50 words)

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**8.4 Themes of ‘Ain’t I a Woman’:**

While reading any text it is essential to explore the themes of the text in order to have a better understanding of the text. Exploring and reading the themes will help you to have more clarity about the text and have a good grasp of it.

The first theme we encounter in ‘Ain’t I a Woman’ is racism. Sojourner didn’t just fight for the rights of woman, rather she fought for the rights of the Black woman too. The Blacks were marginalized and discriminated. They were used as slaves of the Whites. Truth herself worked as a slave. Even her parents, her brothers and sisters as well as her children were also slaves. The Blacks were not respected, they were not treated as human beings. Every individual should be treated as an individual first. They shouldn’t be treated on the basis of colour, caste, creed, race or religion. She said that nobody treated her like a woman because she was Black. Women should be helped into carriages and carried over mud-puddles, but nobody helped Truth in such way. She was alienated because of the colour of her skin. She said that she worked like men, she ploughed and planted in the fields and also took the “lash”. Even after going through so much pain and suffering, Truth is never treated with dignity as a woman - the reason being only that is she is black. That’s why she used the phrase ‘Ain’t I a Woman ?.’ In her speech, she questioned why she is not treated as a woman but as Black or White. Truth also states that intellect has nothing to do with what she is fighting. All women should be recognised as women first and participate in the women’s rights movement. All women should be treated as equals. They should not be discriminated on the basis of race. Women can have great impact on the world. They can bring

the necessary changes; they are waiting for that chance. But Black women are not supported. They were excluded from taking part in the movement because they were Black.

Another theme is men's treatment of women. At that time men did not think women can play social roles or assume roles as public figure. Men expect that women should endure all the hardships quietly, without complaining. A Black woman goes through a lot. As a Black woman Truth herself went through a lot. She worked in the fields like men, she did all the works of men. She tolerated the whippings too. She also saw her child sold into slavery. Even after going through all the difficulties, a woman is not considered capable of being in the public sphere. Men think women are unqualified, unversed, naive, weak and delicate to do collective work for the society. According to Truth such thinking is the destructive force of the society. Such thoughts of men portray men as impostors or as hypocritical beings. Men said that women should "have the best place everywhere". They should be helped and lifted from puddles or "ditches". However, the same men are not willing to give them equal rights as that of men. Men patronize women. They speak of helping women but do little to help women obtain the rights. Men think that women cannot take on the responsibilities which come by being in the public sphere. Truth points out that nobody has helped her in any form or manner just because she is a Black. Men do not take actions for the women's cause of realizing the rights.

Men also do not offer help in the abolition of slavery. The White men might get scared that if a Black woman or a Black man is given the rights, that might disrupt the superiority of the Whites. They do not want to let go off their superiority which they are showcasing all these previous years. Truth also states that intellect has nothing to do with the rights. Intellect and rights have no relation at all. Men think that intellectual people should only have rights. But, this is not true. Rights should not be granted to a person based on their race, religion or ethnicity or how intelligent they are. Truth asserts that men are not willing to give even a pint of power even though they have quarts of it. They are scared that

their superiority might get lost if women achieve the rights. They don't want to share their space with the women or with anyone for that matter.

Further, another theme which is reflected in the speech is the religion of Christianity and faith in God. Sojourner believed in God since childhood. Her mother taught her to pray whenever she was in any difficult situation. Her mother believed that God will grant their prayers. Sojourner took out time from her busy slave life to pray to God. She tells her problems and difficulties in detail to God. She also believes like her mother that God will deliver her wishes. Once, when she wished to leave her master's house, the next day, a person came and showed his desire to take her. Her master Dumont reluctantly sold her to Isaac. Sojourner in her days of misery fixed a place for herself where she would pray daily. The place is near a stream, devoid of human habitation. It was an isolated place. She chose that place for her prayers so that nobody heard her prayers. She could say it aloud in order to reach God. She stated that her prayers are more like talking to God as though talking to her friend. She questions God directly like she would question another human-being in a casual way. She demands her needs and believed that God will anyhow fulfil her wishes. Her belief in God became so firm later that she joined Churches. She travelled from place to place to preach about God and thus she got the name 'Sojourner'.

**Check Your Progress :**

1. What other themes do you find in the text 'Ain't I a Woman'? Write briefly about them.
2. How were the Blacks treated in those times? Support your answer by providing instances from the text.

**8.5 Reading the Text With a Feminist Approach:**

Sojourner Truth's 'Ain't I a Woman' is also a feminist text. Truth gave the speech asking for support for women's rights. She said women do a lot of work; like men, they are capable of ploughing and planting, that

is, working in the fields yet they are not considered equal to men. Even though men say that women deserve the best place and the best of everything, still men do not support granting equal rights to women. Men try to suppress women and do not let them shine in their own way. Men do not always provide opportunities for women, like, they were not supporting the rights to Black women in the Women's Rights Convention.

Truth stated how much a woman can bear. She gave her example that she tolerated the lashes and beatings of her masters when she was a slave. She also saw her children sold off to slavery. She felt her mother's grief when her children were sold off to a master. She started praying as nobody consoled her but Jesus did. He helped her out of difficult situations in life. God saved her and she found peace in God's company.

Sojourner Truth also points out that a woman should not be measured through intellect. Intellect has nothing to do with women's rights. Men think that they are intellectual enough or are knowledgeable enough, so they acquire the highest positions. However this is not true. A woman also can show her abilities and skills, given an opportunity. As women were not provided with a chance, Truth and other feminists had to fight for it. Truth also points out that Eve, "the first woman", was so strong that she changed the world alone. So, if a single woman can bring such a drastic change, then all women can bring a great impact on this world. Christ might not have been a woman, but, He came from a woman, Truth asserts.

On 8th March, every year Women's Day is celebrated. Women are aware that they are empowered and do not lag behind in any task compared to men. In the present time, women are treated as equal to men.

In Truth's speech, 'Ain't I a Woman' it is very evident that she fought for the rights of women. Through her speech she tried to establish equal rights for women. Such a convention would have no meaning if women are not supported. Women need to be encouraged to come to the front and take up responsibility in the social sphere. Truth believed in equal treatment of men and women.

**Stop To Consider :**

- Feminism is a movement for equal rights of women and men. Our society has neglected women for quite a long time. They are treated as inferior to men. They have always lagged behind men. Later, acknowledgement of women’s social and cultural roles, recognition of women’s rights, was brought under focus by few writers. Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), Margaret Fuller in *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Woman* (1869) and Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), talked about women’s rights and the aspect of feminism. They put forward the disadvantages brought upon women by not allowing them education, rights and decision-making power. The patriarchal society prevented/hindered women from realizing their full possibilities.
- Feminism in the 21st century is different from the earlier times as today’s scenario is very different from Truth’s time. Women are conscious about their rights across the globe. They need not be taught about their rights. Women now-a-days, do not tolerate ill-treatment of the society or of men. They leave the place where they are not respected. They realize that they are dignified individuals first and should be treated likewise. In today’s world, women are also not discriminated as before. Today’s women are educated, earn their livelihood, are self-reliant, independent and economically-abled.

**SAQ:**

1. Why do you think Sojourner Truth repeated the phrase ‘Ain’t I a Woman’ in her speech? Give reasons for your answer. (about 150 words)

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## **8.6 Summing Up:**

In this unit you have learned about the speech of Sojourner Truth delivered at the Women's Rights Convention. Through this unit, you are also able to acquaint yourself with the themes or the subject matter of 'Ain't I a Woman?' You are now able to understand the treatment meted out to woman by the society at that time. The discriminations between the Whites and the Blacks and between men and women is pretty evident from the text. The unit has also helped you to learn the thoughts of men or the society regarding women. Moreover, Truth showed her support towards women and spoke on behalf of all the women, especially, the Black women. In this unit, you have gained knowledge about racism and feminism which has helped you in forming a broad understanding of the text.

## **8.7 References and Suggested Readings:**

Abrams, M.H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 10th ed., Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2012.

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