

**BLOCK: III**

**Unit 1 : Jung Chang: *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*  
Background**

**Unit 2 : Reading *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (I)**

**Unit 3 : Reading *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (II)**

**Unit 4 : Sun-mi Hwang : *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*  
(Background)**

**Unit 5 : Sun-mi Hwang : *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*  
Introducing the Novel**

**Unit 6 : Sun-mi Hwang : *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*  
(Themes and Techniques)**

## UNIT - 1

### **Jung Chang: *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (Background)**

#### **Unit Structure:**

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 About the author
  - 1.3.1 Early Life and Political Upheavals
  - 1.3.2 Literary Prowess and Academic Background
  - 1.3.3 Impact of *Wild Swans*
  - 1.3.4 Subsequent Works and Advocacy
- 1.4 Political Backdrop of *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*
  - 1.4.1 The Historical Canvas of Maoist China:
  - 1.4.2 The Cultural Revolutions's Shadow on Personal Narratives
  - 1.4.3 Winds of Change and the Legacy of Maoist China
- 1.5 Summing Up
- 1.6 References and Suggested Readings

#### **1.1 Objectives:**

The learner is expected to be conversant with the following at the end of this unit–

- *know* the author of the text and her background, career, and inspiration for writing this memoir,
- *understand* the kinds of life-writing involved in this text which includes the memoir, the biography, and the autobiography,
- *learn* about the historical backdrop of the twentieth century China and the political ramifications of the period on the social structure of Chinese society.

## **1.2 Introduction:**

Jung Chang is a Chinese-born British writer who records in her memoir *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* the lived experiences of her grandmother and her mother from conversations with the latter where she recollects these events. Chang also incorporates her own experiences of living in China and creates an exemplar of sorts for the documentation of the evolution of Chinese society and history throughout the three generations in her family in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* is a beautiful encapsulation of personal history delicately woven into the fabric of the turn of the century China. The practice of life writing is integral to the understanding of such a memoir and the necessity of externalizing the story that constitutes the identity of these three women.

## **1.3 About the Author:**

Jung Chang, a renowned Chinese-born British author, historian, and memoirist, has left an indelible mark on the literary landscape with her powerful and deeply personal narratives. Born on March 25, 1952, in Yibin, Sichuan Province, China, Chang's life journey is intricately interwoven with the tumultuous political and social transformations of 20<sup>th</sup> century China.

### **1.3.1 Early Life and Political Upheavals:**

Growing up during Mao Zedong's ascendancy and the early years of the People's Republic of China, Chang experienced first-hand the political upheavals that would later become the backdrop for her acclaimed memoir, *Wild Swans*. Born into a family of intellectuals, her parents were fervent supporters of the Communist cause. However, the fervour of the early years soon gave way to the harsh realities of Maoist rule.

Chang's family, like many others, faced persecution during the Cultural Revolution. Her father, a high-ranking official, fell victim to political purges, and her mother endured public humiliation and imprisonment. These

experiences profoundly shaped Chang’s worldview and ignited her desire to tell the stories of individuals caught in the crossfire of political ideologies.

**Stop to Consider:**

Take a moment to reflect on how an individual’s personal experiences can shape their intellectual pursuits and creative expression. Consider the impact of historical and cultural contexts on an author’s work.

**SAQ**

1. How did the political climate of Maoist China shape Jung Chang’s early life?( in 50 words)

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2. In what ways did Chang’s family experiences during the Cultural Revolution influence her worldview?(in 60 words)

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**1.3.2 Literary Prowess and Academic Background:**

Jung Chang’s literary journey took a significant turn when she moved to the United Kingdom in 1978 to pursue her studies. She earned a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of York, showcasing her intellectual depth and commitment to scholarly pursuits. Her academic background provided her with a nuanced understanding of language, a skill that she would later employ in crafting eloquent narratives that transcend cultural boundaries.

Chang’s foray into writing began with her collaboration on the bestselling biography *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, published in 1991. Written after conversations with her mother who was recalling the past and with the aid of her husband, Jon Halliday, the memoir covering the

lives of three generations of women in her family became an international sensation. It offered readers a rare glimpse into the personal and lived experiences of individuals navigating the treacherous waters of Maoist China.

**Stop to Consider:**

Consider the significance of combining academic depth with storytelling. How might this fusion enhance the impact of a literary work? Think about it.

**1.3.3 Impact of *Wild Swans*:**

*Wild Swans* not only catapulted Chang into literary stardom but also garnered widespread acclaim for its poignant storytelling and historical significance. The memoir's success lies in Chang's ability to seamlessly blend personal narratives with broader historical events. Her writing style, characterized by a delicate balance of empathy and historical rigor, allows readers to connect emotionally with the characters while gaining insights into the socio-political context.

The impact of *Wild Swans* extends beyond its literary acclaim. The memoir has been translated into over 40 languages, reaching audiences around the world and contributing to a global understanding of China's complex history. Its success paved the way for Chang to become a prominent voice in the realm of Chinese literature and history, sparking important conversations about the human cost of political ideologies.

**Check Your Progress:**

Evaluate how Chang's storytelling approach in *Wild Swans* contributed to its international acclaim. Consider the role of personal narratives in enhancing the impact of historical documentation.

**SAQ:**

3. How did the narrative style of *Wild Swans* contribute to its accessibility to a global audience? (60 words)

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4. In what ways did personal narratives elevate the historical significance of Chang’s work?(in 60 words)

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**1.3.4 Subsequent Works and Advocacy:**

Jung Chang continued to explore China’s history and culture in her subsequent works. *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2005), co-authored with Jon Halliday, offered a controversial reinterpretation of Mao Zedong’s life, challenging conventional narratives. The biography sparked debates and discussions, cementing Chang’s reputation as a fearless historian unafraid to question established perspectives.

Apart from her literary contributions, Chang has been an advocate for human rights and political freedom. Her outspoken stance on issues related to China’s governance and her courage in challenging historical narratives have positioned her as a prominent figure in the global discourse on China.

In recognition of her literary achievements and contributions to understanding China’s history, Jung Chang has received numerous awards and honours. Her life’s journey, from the turbulence of Maoist China to becoming a celebrated author and historian, stands as a testament to the transformative power of storytelling and the enduring quest for truth and justice. Through her words, Jung Chang has bridged cultures, illuminated history, and empowered individuals to confront the complexities of the human experience.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Reflect on the importance of challenging established narratives and advocating for human rights in the realm of historical storytelling.
2. Assess your understanding of Chang’s fearless pursuit of historical truth through her subsequent works and advocacy.

**SAQs:**

5. How did *Mao: The Unknown Story* contribute to challenging conventional narratives about Mao Zedong? (in 50 words)

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6. What role does an author play as a global citizen when advocating for human rights through their work?

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**Stop to Consider:**

**On Life Writing:**

Life writing, a genre that encompasses autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, and personal essays, serves as a captivating and rich avenue for individuals to explore and articulate their personal experiences, emotions, and reflections. As an academic endeavour, the study of life writing delves into the intricate intersections of literature, psychology, and sociology. It helps to unravel the significance of life writing, examining its evolution, cultural impact, and the transformative power it holds for both writers and readers. It inarguably provides a nuanced perspective into an otherwise objective telling of the past, thereby enriching the historical documentation of an event, a phenomenon, or even an episode.

Life writing has a long and diverse history, with roots tracing back to ancient autobiographical writings such as Augustine’s *Confessions* and

Marco Polo's travelogue. Over the centuries, the genre has evolved, adapting to cultural shifts and technological advancements. In the contemporary era, life writing encompasses a broad spectrum of voices, including those traditionally marginalized or overlooked. One notable example of modern life writing is Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Angelou's memoir chronicles her experiences as a young black girl growing up in the segregated South, addressing themes of racism, identity, and resilience. The book serves not only as a personal narrative but also as a testament to the broader social and political struggles of the time.

Life writing possesses a transformative power that extends beyond the realm of literature. For writers, the process of recounting personal experiences becomes a therapeutic and self-reflective journey. The act of putting one's life on paper can provide a sense of closure, healing, and empowerment. It allows writers to make sense of their past, understand their identity, and shape the narrative of their lives.

An exemplar of this transformative power is Anne Frank's diary, *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Written during the Holocaust, Frank's diary provides access to an intimate glimpse into her thoughts, fears, and dreams while hiding from the Nazis. The diary not only immortalizes Frank's voice but also serves as a poignant reminder of the human cost of war and persecution. Beyond its historical significance, Frank's life writing has inspired generations to empathize with the individual stories within broader historical narratives and understand the impact of conflict on the vulnerable communities made precarious by their very living condition.

Life writing plays a crucial role in representing diverse voices and experiences, offering a platform for marginalized communities to share their stories. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of diverse narratives and multiple perspectives that retain the individual subtleties of lived experiences in shaping a more inclusive cultural landscape. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*



is a novel that blends fiction with elements of life writing to depict the Nigerian Civil War. Through the intertwined lives of its characters, Adichie provides a nuanced portrayal of the conflict's impact on individuals and communities. The novel exemplifies how life writing, even when fictionalized, can serve as a powerful tool for cultural representation and historical documentation.

Life writing stands at the intersection of literature, personal introspection, and cultural representation. From ancient autobiographies to contemporary memoirs, this genre continues to evolve, adapting to the changing landscapes of society. Through the transformative power of self-expression, life writing enables individuals to navigate their past, shape their present, and contribute to a collective understanding of the human experience. As one delves deeper into the intricacies of life writing, one is able to uncover not only the individual narratives but also the broader cultural and societal implications that make this genre a dynamic and invaluable field of study and an invaluable testament to the particular ways in which certain events have been experienced as opposed to how history records them.

#### **1.4 Political Backdrop of *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*:**

The landscape on which the events unfold in this memoir begins with the Imperial China and traverse its way into Maoist China and eventually to the modern-day cultural revolution. The political thread that runs through the text places the goings-on in context and highlights the struggles of each generation as autocracy and power change hands.

##### **1.4.1 The Historical Canvas of Maoist China:**

The memoir *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang unfolds against the tumultuous backdrop of Maoist China, a period marked by ideological fervor, political upheavals, and social transformations making it essential to contextualize the narrative within the broader historical canvas of the time.

In the early pages of the memoir, Chang vividly portrays the era of her grandmother's youth, a time when China was in the throes of political and social change. This period reflects the traditional Chinese society with its hierarchical family structures and the prevalence of Confucian values. The fall of the Qing Dynasty and the subsequent establishment of the Republic of China set the stage for a nation in flux. However, it was the rise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the leadership of Mao Zedong that would redefine the trajectory of the country and profoundly influence the lives of the individuals chronicled in *Wild Swans*. The Chinese Civil War between the Nationalists (led by the Kuomintang, Chiang Kai-shek) and the Communists (led by the Chinese Communist Party, CCP, and Mao Zedong) is a significant backdrop. The political turmoil during this period had profound effects on the lives of ordinary citizens, leading to displacement, violence, and social unrest.

Mao's vision for a socialist China led to radical reforms, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, both of which had far-reaching consequences for the nation. The Great Leap Forward, an ambitious economic and social campaign launched in the late 1950s, resulted in widespread famine and economic collapse. These catastrophic events are interwoven into the personal narratives of Chang's family, illustrating the profound impact of political ideologies on individual lives.

#### **1.4.2 The Cultural Revolution's Shadow on Personal Narratives:**

The Cultural Revolution, initiated by Mao in 1966, sought to purge China of perceived bourgeois elements and counter-revolutionary tendencies. This period of intense ideological fervor witnessed the mobilization of the youth into Red Guards, the destruction of cultural heritage, and the persecution of perceived enemies of the state. Chang's family becomes a microcosm of the larger societal upheavals during the Cultural Revolution. Her parents, once ardent supporters of the Communist cause, find themselves ensnared in the political maelstrom. The family endures harassment, persecution, and forced ideological re-education. Chang's father, a high-ranking official, falls victim to the capriciousness of political purges, while her mother faces public humiliation and imprisonment.

Within the pages of *Wild Swans*, the reader witnesses the erosion of personal freedom, the pervasiveness of political indoctrination, and the tragic disintegration of familial bonds in the face of ideological fervor. Chang skillfully navigates the intricate intersection of personal narratives and political history, highlighting the ways in which political ideologies can permeate the most intimate aspects of individuals' lives. Another critical aspect of the political backdrop is the Japanese occupation of China during World War II. The invasion led to widespread suffering, atrocities, and further destabilization of the country. This period shaped the experiences of Jung Chang's family and the broader Chinese population.

#### **1.4.3 Winds of Change and the Legacy of Maoist China:**

The narrative also explores the aftermath of Maoist rule in China and the legacy it leaves for the generations to come. As the memoir progresses, it captures the winds of change that swept through China in the post-Mao era. The economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s usher in a new era of openness and economic growth, symbolizing a departure from the rigid ideological constraints of the past. Chang's own journey mirrors the transformations in China during this period. Her move to the United Kingdom and the opportunity to engage with different cultures and ideas mark a personal liberation from the constraints of Maoist ideology. The memoir concludes with a reflection on the enduring impact of Maoist China on the author's life and the collective psyche of the nation.

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

1. How did Jung Chang's personal experiences during Mao Zedong's rule and the Cultural Revolution shape her perspective on political ideologies, and in what ways did these experiences influence her decision to share the stories of individuals caught in the crossfire?

2. Jung Chang's move to the United Kingdom for academic pursuits played a crucial role in her literary journey. How did her background in linguistics contribute to the nuance in her writing, and in what ways did her academic pursuits impact her ability to communicate the complexities of Chinese history to a diverse, international audience?

### 1.5 Summing Up:

In conclusion, *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang provides a poignant exploration of the impact of the Cultural Revolution on personal narratives, and the legacy of Maoist China, serving as a testament to the intricate interplay between individual lives and the broader political forces that shape them. This political backdrop of *Wild Swans* provides a lens through which readers can understand the complex and often brutal forces that shaped modern Chinese history. Jung Chang's personal narrative serves as a microcosm of the larger societal transformations and challenges faced by the Chinese people during a century of political turbulence exploring the resilience and strength of individuals amidst the chaos.

### 1.6 References and Suggested Readings:

Shull, Ellen. "Living History with Asian Women: A Review of Two Recent Books", *The English Journal*, Vol. 86, No. 4, Literary Festival, 1997, pp. 85-86.

Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

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Yamada, Teri Shaffer (Ed.). *Modern Short Fiction of Southeast Asia: A Literary History*. Ann Arbor, MI: Association of Asian Studies, 2009.

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## UNIT - 2

### Reading *Three Daughters of China: (I)*

#### Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Status of Women in China: A multigenerational Odyssey through *Wild Swans*
- 2.4 Marriage, Autonomy, and the Female Agency in *Wild Swans*
- 2.5 Ethics of Writing the Woman
- 2.6 Summing Up
- 2.7 References and Suggested Readings

#### 2.1 Objectives:

This unit is expected to familiarize the student with the following topics:

- the status of women in China as the society progresses from the Imperial era to the present day,
- the institution of marriage, the autonomy of the woman that marriage under patriarchy encroaches upon, and the ability of the woman to endure and even thwart those practices,
- the lived experiences of the woman being written down and the ethics surrounding such writing.

#### 2.2 Introduction:

Women in China represented by Jung Chang in *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* have been under the stringent patriarchal norms that had governed Imperial China till the modern-day period where such ideas have softened and relaxed in their nature. A reading of Jung Chang's memoir provides details of the women's status within the household and the society and how traditions and customs work together to confine and trap women. The stories of the three women across generations is also a telling of the resistances each offers in the little spaces they find possible.

### **2.3 The Status of Women in China: A Multigenerational Odyssey through *Wild Swans*:**

Jung Chang's masterful narrative, *Wild Swans*, unfurls a poignant and deeply personal exploration of the status of women in China across three generations – Grandmother Yu-fang, Mother Bao-qin/De-hong, and Jung Chang herself. Through their compelling stories, Chang illuminates the nuanced evolution of women's role in a nation undergoing profound political and social upheavals, marked by instances of discrimination and social injustices.

The journey commences with Grandmother Yu-fang, a concubine in a traditional Chinese household. Born into a world where a woman's value hinged on obedience and the ability to bear sons, Yu-fang grappled with the oppressive norms of a polygamous marriage. Instances of discrimination were rampant, with societal expectations restricting her agency and relegating her to a secondary position within the family hierarchy. This is evident when Yu-fang, despite her intelligence and capabilities, finds herself confined by the limitations imposed on her by patriarchal traditions. In the early part of the book, Grandmother Yu-fang's experience with foot binding reflects the deep-rooted societal norms of beauty and gender roles. Foot binding was a practice that symbolized a woman's social status and eligibility for marriage. The painful process of foot binding, a form of physical constraint, exemplifies the extent to which women's bodies were subjected to societal expectations.

Grandmother Yu-fang's status as a concubine in a polygamous marriage also highlights the patriarchal nature of traditional Chinese families. The discrimination faced by concubines, who held a secondary position compared to the primary wife, reflects the hierarchical structure of these households. The limited agency and influence of women within such family dynamics are evident in Chang's portrayal of her grandmother's life.

Transitioning to the next generation, Mother Bao-qin takes center stage during the Communist Revolution and the ensuing Cultural Revolution. The promise of gender equality during the Communist era clashed with the harsh realities faced by Bao-qin. She initially embraced the vision of a more egalitarian society, only to confront new forms of discrimination during the Cultural Revolution. Her experience exemplifies the paradox

where revolutionary ideals, while challenging traditional gender roles, subjected women to the arbitrary nature of political ideologies. The Cultural Revolution inflicted blatant instances of social injustice upon Bao-qin, including public humiliation and imprisonment, as she became a victim of political purges. She endures public humiliation, forced labour, and imprisonment due to political purges. Her suffering exemplifies the gendered dimensions of political persecution, as women were often targeted not only for their political affiliations but also for perceived deviations from revolutionary norms.

The narrative culminates with Jung Chang herself, embodying a generation straddling tradition and modernity. Having witnessed the trials of her mother's life, Jung Chang emerges as a symbol of resilience against oppressive systems. Her journey, spanning from China to the United Kingdom, marks a departure from the constraints of Maoist ideology. In the contemporary era, she experiences a shift towards greater opportunities for women, yet challenges persist.

Instances of discrimination are threaded through Jung Chang's narrative, serving as stark reminders of the complexities faced by women. The discrimination faced by her mother during the Cultural Revolution underscores the cost of political upheaval on women's lives. The narrative also reflects on the lingering gender biases and cultural expectations shaping women's experiences in modern China, illustrating that the journey toward gender equality remains an ongoing struggle. Throughout the book, women, including the author herself, grapple with restrictions on personal freedom imposed by political ideologies. During the Cultural Revolution, individuals, irrespective of gender, faced limitations on their personal choices, but the narrative underscores how these restrictions often manifested differently for women. The imposition of rigid revolutionary behavioural standards constrained women's autonomy and individual expression.

The text depicts the challenges women faced in accessing education, particularly during periods of political upheaval. Chang describes how her mother, despite her intellectual abilities, was denied the opportunity for higher education due to class background and political affiliations. It stands as a reflection of the broader systemic issues that limited



educational opportunities for women in certain circumstances. Even marriage as an institution could be deeply entwined with political considerations, as such arrangements were often influenced by political affiliations, and individuals were judged based on their perceived revolutionary fervor, thus emphasizing the politicization of personal relationships and its impact on women's lives.

*Wild Swans* paints a multifaceted portrait of the status of women in China, intricately woven through the lives of grandmother Yu-fang, mother Bao-qin, and Jung Chang. Instances of discrimination and social injustices punctuate their stories, revealing the complexities of gender dynamics in a nation undergoing seismic shifts. The narrative invites readers to contemplate the enduring quest for women's rights in China, acknowledging progress while recognizing the persistent challenges that demand collective attention and advocacy. Beyond a family saga, *Wild Swans* stands as a profound exploration of societal transformations, resilience, and the evolving roles of women in the intricate tapestry of Chinese history.

**Stop to Consider:**

Pause to think about the ways *Wild Swans* challenges patriarchal norms. How does Chang portray women navigating societal expectations, and why is this portrayal significant?

**Self-Assessment Questions:**

1. How does the portrayal of women in *Wild Swans* contribute to a broader conversation about gender roles in historical narratives? (100 words)

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2. In what ways does Chang depict the agency of the women in her family in challenging societal norms? (100 words)

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3. Identify specific examples in the memoir that illustrate challenges to patriarchal norms. How do these examples shape the narrative's perspective on women? (100 words)

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#### **2.4 Marriage, Autonomy, and Female Agency in *Wild Swans*:**

Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* intricately weaves a narrative that explores the themes of marriage, autonomy, and female agency across three generations of women in China. The book serves as a lens through which readers witness the evolution of societal norms, the impact of political ideologies, and the changing dynamics of relationships, revealing a nuanced portrayal of women's experiences in a tumultuous period of Chinese history.

##### **Marriage as a Political Act:**

Throughout the narrative, marriage is depicted not only as a personal choice but also as a political act deeply entwined with the broader socio-political context. Grandmother Yu-fang's life reflects the traditional expectations placed on women, where marriages were often arranged, and the role of a wife was defined by societal norms. The practice of concubinage, as seen in her life, highlights how marriage could be a reflection of power dynamics and social status rather than a union based on personal agency.

The influence of political ideologies on marital choices becomes pronounced during the Communist era. Individuals were judged based on their revolutionary fervor, and marriage alliances were often shaped by one's political affiliations. Chang's mother, Bao-qin, experiences the consequences of these political considerations in her marriage. The intertwining of personal relationships with political ideologies underscores the complex nature of marital decisions in a society undergoing radical transformations.

##### **Autonomy amid Tradition:**

The theme of autonomy runs as a thread through the lives of the women in *Wild Swans*. Grandmother Yu-fang, despite the constraints of

traditional gender roles, exhibits resilience and resourcefulness in navigating her circumstances. Her ability to protect and nurture her daughter, Bao-qin, becomes an expression of autonomy within the confines of societal expectations.

However, as the narrative progresses, the characters, particularly Bao-qin, face challenges to their autonomy. The advent of Communist rule brings about a shift in the nature of familial relationships. Personal choices are increasingly subjected to political scrutiny, and the autonomy once held by individuals is eroded in the name of revolutionary ideals. Bao-qin's experiences reflect the struggle for autonomy within a rapidly changing social and political landscape.

### **Female Agency amid Political Turmoil:**

The concept of female agency emerges prominently in the lives of the women portrayed in the book. Despite societal constraints, Chang's mother, Bao-qin, demonstrates agency through her commitment to Communist ideals and active participation in revolutionary activities. However, the irony lies in how her political convictions, intended to empower women, ultimately become tools of oppression during the Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution represents a nadir for female agency, as political fervor trumps individual autonomy. Women are pressured to conform to a narrow definition of revolutionary behavior, suppressing personal aspirations and desires. Chang vividly depicts the struggles of women like her mother, who, despite their initial fervor for the cause, find themselves ensnared in a system that curtails their agency.

### **Transformation and the Quest for Modern Autonomy:**

As the narrative transitions to Jung Chang's generation, the quest for autonomy takes on new dimensions. Jung Chang's move to the United Kingdom marks a departure from the constraints of Maoist ideology and traditional expectations. Her experiences in the West provide a glimpse of a different world where autonomy is more readily available, illustrating the transformative power of changing environments on female agency.

In conclusion, *Wild Swans* offers a rich tapestry of narratives that illuminate the themes of marriage, autonomy, and female agency in the context of Chinese history. The book underscores the intersectionality of these themes, demonstrating how societal norms, political ideologies, and personal choices intertwine to shape the lives of women across generations. Through the lens of the Yu family, Chang invites readers to reflect on the complexities of autonomy and agency in the face of tradition, political upheavals, and the enduring quest for personal freedom.

**Stop to Consider:**

Take a moment to reflect on how marriage is portrayed in the early chapters of *Wild Swans*. Consider the influence of societal norms and power dynamics within the traditional Chinese family structure.

**Self-Assessment Questions**

1. In what ways does the practice of concubinage in traditional Chinese society impact women’s autonomy? (80 words)

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2. In what ways does the Cultural Revolution represent a challenging period for female autonomy?( 100 words)

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**2.5 Ethics of Writing the Woman:**

Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* engages deeply with the ethics of writing about women, presenting a nuanced exploration of the lives of three generations of women in China. The memoir unfolds against a backdrop of political upheaval, societal expectations, and personal struggles. As we delve into the ethical considerations of portraying women in this narrative, several key aspects come to light.

### **Empathy and Humanization:**

One of the ethical strengths of Chang's writing is her ability to empathize with the women in her family and, by extension, with women throughout China's tumultuous history. She humanizes her subjects, depicting their joys, sorrows, aspirations, and vulnerabilities. By doing so, Chang moves beyond mere historical documentation and crafts a narrative that resonates emotionally, fostering a connection between the reader and the women whose lives are laid bare.

Chang's ethical approach involves recognizing the humanity of her subjects, transcending the political and ideological forces that shaped their lives. This emphasis on empathy discourages a reductionist view of women as passive victims or mere products of their time, instead portraying them as complex individuals with agency, resilience, and unique experiences.

### **Honest Reflection on Personal Struggles:**

The ethics of writing are intricately tied to the author's honesty, memory, and transparency. Chang grapples with her own personal struggles and complex family dynamics, contributing to the ethical depth of her narrative. She confronts her mother's loyalty to the Communist Party, her own ideological transformations, and the challenges of navigating a changing China. Her candid exploration of her family's imperfections and the contradictions within their lives adds authenticity to the narrative. This honesty serves as a testament to the ethical responsibility of presenting a genuine, unfiltered account of the women at the heart of the memoir.

### **Challenges to Patriarchal Norms:**

*Wild Swans* challenges entrenched patriarchal norms by offering a multi-generational perspective on the experiences of women in China. From the constrained existence of Chang's grandmother, Yu-fang, in a polygamous household to the ideological indoctrination faced by her mother, Bao-Qin/De-hong, the narrative sheds light on the various ways women navigated societal expectations. The ethical dimension lies in Chang's commitment to presenting these stories without sensationalism

or reductionism. By portraying the women in her family as individuals with agency and complex motivations, Chang challenges not only the patriarchal norms of Chinese society but also the potential for such norms to permeate historical narratives.

### **Contextualization of Historical Forces:**

The ethical responsibility in writing about women extends to the contextualization of historical forces that shaped their lives. Chang skillfully weaves the personal narratives of the women in her family with broader historical events, providing readers with a nuanced understanding of the impact of political ideologies, wars, and social upheavals. By placing the experiences of women within the broader historical context, Chang avoids essentializing their stories solely based on gender. This contextualization is vital for an ethical portrayal that recognizes the interconnectedness of individual lives and larger socio-political forces.

An ethical consideration in writing about women, especially in a cross-cultural context, involves navigating cultural sensitivities with respect and understanding. Chang, who left China in the 1970s, brings an outsider-insider perspective that allows for critical reflection on her own cultural background while respecting the intricacies of Chinese society.

The memoir does not impose Western perspectives on the experiences of Chinese women but rather presents a complex narrative that acknowledges the diversity and agency within Chinese culture. This approach underscores the ethical importance of avoiding cultural stereotypes and promoting a nuanced understanding of women's lives in a specific historical and cultural context.

### **2.6 Summing Up:**

In conclusion, Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* exemplifies ethical considerations in writing about women. Through empathy, honesty, challenging patriarchal norms, contextualization of historical forces, and cultural sensitivity, Chang crafts a narrative that goes beyond the surface, allowing readers to engage with the lives of the women in her family in a profound and ethical manner. The memoir stands as a testament to the

power of storytelling to illuminate the complexities of women's experiences and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of history.

## **2.7 References and Suggested Readings:**

Bergoffen, Debra B. "Marriage, Autonomy, and the Feminine Protest", *Hypatia*, Vol. 14, No. 4, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, 1999, pp. 18-35.

Franklin, Betty and Lucy Townsend. "Relational Ethics in Writing a Woman's Life", *Journal of Thought*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1995, pp. 71-83.

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## UNIT - 3

### Reading *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (II)

#### Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Unveiling Personal Identity and Self-Expression in Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*
- 3.4 Education as a Gateway to Transformation
- 3.5 The Human Cost of Political Movements
- 3.6 Summing Up
- 3.7 References and Suggested Readings

#### 3.1 Objectives:

The objectives of this unit are to enable the learner to

- *familiarize* themselves with the struggle of the victims of conflict to acknowledge and assert their self-identity,
- *assess* the impact of the political movements and the cultural revolution especially on the status of education in the country focusing on women,
- *understand* the grave consequences of the political movements.

#### 3.2 Introduction:

Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* serves as a poignant exploration of the impact of the state of conflict on a victim's personal identity, on the education of a generation and sometimes an entire population, and the human cost of political movements in 20th-century China. This unit delves into specific examples from the memoir to understand the sacrifices, familial strife, psychological trauma, displacement, and suppression of individual aspirations faced by ordinary individuals during turbulent political periods.



### **3.3 Unveiling Personal Identity and Self-Expression in Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*:**

Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* is not merely a historical memoir but an intricate exploration of personal identity and self-expression within the tumultuous landscape of 20th-century China. As the narrative unfolds across three generations, it unveils the profound impact of political upheavals on individuals and their struggle to assert their identities amidst a backdrop of shifting ideologies.

#### **Generational Identities: Navigating Traditions and Revolution:**

At its core, *Wild Swans* is a multi-generational saga that traces the lives of Chang's grandmother, mother, and eventually, her own. Each woman grapples with the complexities of personal identity in the face of societal expectations and political turbulence. The narrative traverses the shifting landscapes of pre-revolutionary, revolutionary, and post-revolutionary China, providing a canvas to examine how personal identities are shaped by external forces.

Chang's grandmother, Yu-fang, represents a generation deeply rooted in traditional Chinese values. Her identity is intricately tied to societal expectations, familial duties, and adherence to Confucian principles. The constraints on women during this era are palpable, and Yu-fang's journey becomes a poignant exploration of self-expression within the narrow confines of societal norms.

As the narrative progresses to Chang's mother, Bao Qin, the impact of revolutionary ideologies on personal identity becomes pronounced. Bao Qin enthusiastically embraces the ideals of the Communist Party, seeking a new identity aligned with the revolutionary fervor. However, the narrative poignantly portrays the disillusionment and personal sacrifices that accompany such ideological shifts. Bao Qin's struggle to reconcile personal convictions with the harsh realities of political upheavals highlights the fragility of identity in the face of sweeping societal changes.

Chang herself becomes the torchbearer of a new generation, caught between the weight of tradition and the turbulence of Maoist ideology. Her journey reflects the evolving nature of personal identity as she grapples with the remnants of traditional values and the disruptive forces of revolutionary zeal. The struggle for self-expression in a society undergoing radical transformation becomes a central theme, revealing the intricacies of identity formation amid political chaos.

### **Cultural Revolution: Suppression and Subversion of Identity:**

The Cultural Revolution serves as a crucible where personal identities are tested, suppressed, and, in some instances, subverted. The fervent drive for conformity under Maoist rule stifles individual expression and imposes a uniform identity dictated by the Party. The Red Guards become instruments of conformity, enforcing a singular ideological identity while suppressing dissent.

Chang's family becomes a microcosm of the larger societal impact of the Cultural Revolution on personal identities. Her father's fall from grace and her mother's public humiliations showcase the brutal erasure of individual identities deemed counter-revolutionary. The suppression of personal expression reaches its zenith during this period, as citizens are forced to conform to a prescribed identity or face severe consequences.

Yet, amidst this suppression, *Wild Swans* subtly explores the subversive ways in which individuals attempt to preserve their personal identities. Secret acts of resistance, hidden expressions of individuality, and the preservation of personal beliefs in the face of political orthodoxy become threads of resilience in the narrative. Chang's ability to clandestinely explore literature, her mother's silent acts of defiance, and her grandmother's quiet wisdom all signify the persistent yearning for personal expression even in the darkest hours of political repression.

### **The Quest for Self-Expression: Beyond Political Ideologies:**

As the narrative progresses into the post-Mao era, the quest for self-expression takes on new dimensions. Chang's departure from China

and her exposure to different cultures mark a turning point in her journey of self-discovery. The limitations imposed by Maoist ideologies begin to crumble, and the narrative opens up to explore the possibility of individual expression beyond the constraints of political dogma.

Chang's pursuit of education, her engagement with Western literature, and her eventual move to the United Kingdom become symbolic of the broader quest for personal identity and self-expression. The memoir suggests that true liberation comes not only from political upheavals but also from the ability to define one's identity on one's own terms. The transformative power of language and literature is evident in Chang's own academic pursuits. Her Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of York becomes a metaphorical journey into the nuances of self-expression. Language, as a tool for communication and self-articulation, becomes an instrument for Chang to reclaim her personal identity and transcend the limitations imposed by a turbulent past.

### **Resilience and Legacy:**

*Wild Swans* by Jung Chang serves as a profound meditation on personal identity and self-expression amidst the complexities of 20th-century China. The narrative traces the generational shifts in identity, from traditional values to revolutionary zeal and, ultimately, to a quest for individual expression beyond political ideologies. The resilience exhibited by Chang and the women in her family becomes a testament to the enduring human spirit in the face of adversity. Their stories reflect the universal struggle for personal identity and self-expression, transcending cultural and historical boundaries.

*Wild Swans* leaves a lasting legacy by inviting readers to contemplate the intricate interplay between personal identity and external forces. It prompts us to question the nature of self-expression in the face of political upheavals and encourages a nuanced understanding of the resilience inherent in the human quest for identity. The memoir stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit that seeks to express, define, and assert the self, even in the most challenging of circumstances.

**Stop to Consider:**

Reflect on the significance of personal identity in shaping an individual’s experiences and worldview. Consider how external factors, such as societal norms and political ideologies, can influence one’s sense of self. Also, evaluate your understanding of the generational shifts in personal identity portrayed in *Wild Swans*. Consider how societal expectations and political changes impact the identities of Yu-fang, Bao Qin, and Jung Chang.

**Self-Assesment Questions**

1. How do traditional values influence Yu-fang’s sense of personal identity? (60 words)

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2. In what ways does a revolutionary zeal impact Bao Qin’s quest for a new identity? ( 60 words)

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3. How does Jung Chang navigate the remnants of tradition and revolutionary ideologies to shape her own identity? (80 words)

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**3.4 Education as a Gateway to Transformation:**

Jung Chang’s memoir, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, transcends the boundaries of personal narrative to offer profound insights into the transformative power of education. Against the backdrop of China’s tumultuous 20th-century history, the memoir illuminates how

education becomes a portal to a new life, a means of empowerment, and a catalyst for personal and societal change.

### **Traditional Constraints: Breaking the Chains of Ignorance:**

In the early chapters of *Wild Swans*, Chang portrays a China steeped in traditional values and plagued by gender disparities. The limitations imposed on women, particularly her grandmother Yu-fang, reflect the societal norms that hindered educational opportunities. Yu-fang's constrained existence becomes emblematic of a larger pattern, where women were often relegated to roles defined by patriarchal structures and denied access to formal education. The narrative underscores the oppressive nature of traditional constraints, where ignorance thrives, and individuals, especially women, are confined to predefined roles. The absence of education perpetuates a cycle of subservience and perpetuates societal norms that stifle personal growth and development.

### **Revolutionary Ideals: The Promise of Educational Liberation:**

As the political landscape undergoes radical shifts with the advent of the Communist Revolution, the promise of educational liberation becomes a central tenet of revolutionary ideals. Chang's mother, Bao Qin, embraces the call for women's emancipation and envisions a society where education becomes a tool for empowerment.

The Communist Party's commitment to eradicating illiteracy and promoting education is portrayed as a beacon of hope. Bao Qin's journey into political activism is intrinsically linked to her belief in the transformative power of education. The fervor for learning becomes a revolutionary act, challenging established norms and providing a glimpse into a future where education is a vehicle for societal progress.

### **Cultural Revolution: The Betrayal of Educational Ideals:**

The Cultural Revolution, despite its initial rhetoric of educational ideals, takes a dark turn that betrays the very promise of enlightenment. Schools are shuttered, intellectuals are persecuted, and the pursuit of knowledge

is deemed counter-revolutionary. The memoir vividly depicts how the fervent commitment to education becomes entangled in the political turmoil, leading to the destruction of academic institutions and the suppression of intellectual pursuits. Chang's own experience during this period reflects the tragic perversion of educational ideals. The promise of a bright educational future is replaced by the imposition of rigid ideological conformity. The betrayal of education during the Cultural Revolution becomes a poignant narrative thread, highlighting how political agendas can eclipse the transformative potential of learning.

### **Post-Mao Era: A Journey to Educational Liberation:**

The memoir's narrative extends into the post-Mao era, marked by economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping. This period becomes a crucial juncture where education once again emerges as a portal to a new life. Chang's departure from China and her pursuit of education in the United Kingdom signify a personal journey towards intellectual liberation. The narrative suggests that education, when divorced from political constraints, becomes a transformative force. Chang's academic pursuits in the West represent a quest for knowledge and personal development beyond the confines of ideological orthodoxy. Her journey becomes emblematic of the potential for educational liberation to transcend political boundaries and offer individuals a new lease on life.

### **The Transformative Odyssey of Education:**

*Wild Swans* unfolds as a powerful narrative that underscores the transformative odyssey of education amidst the political upheavals of 20th-century China. From the shackles of traditional constraints to the revolutionary ideals of educational empowerment and the subsequent betrayal during the Cultural Revolution, the memoir navigates the complex interplay between politics and learning.

Education, in its purest form, emerges as a portal to a new life—a gateway to empowerment, enlightenment, and personal liberation. The narrative of *Wild Swans* invites readers to ponder the profound impact of

educational ideals and their tragic betrayal, ultimately affirming the enduring belief in the emancipatory power of learning. As Chang's journey attests, education becomes not only a means of acquiring knowledge but a transformative force capable of transcending the political turmoil that seeks to confine it.

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### **3.5 The Human Cost of Political Movements:**

Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* offers a poignant and personal exploration of the human cost of political movements in China throughout the 20th century. Through the experiences of three generations of women in her family, Chang vividly depicts the profound impact of political ideologies, revolutions, and authoritarian rule on the lives of ordinary individuals.

### **Personal Sacrifices for Revolutionary Ideals:**

One of the central themes in *Wild Swans* is the idea of personal sacrifice for revolutionary ideals. The commitment to political movements often demanded unwavering loyalty and sacrifice from individuals, leading them to endure immense hardships for the sake of ideological goals. For instance, Chang's parents were ardent supporters of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and believed in the revolutionary ideals championed by Mao Zedong. Their dedication led them to make

personal sacrifices, including enduring separation from their children and living through harsh conditions during the Long March. It stands as an exemplar for the human cost of political commitment, as individuals were willing to put the cause above personal well-being and family ties.

The human cost of political movements is starkly portrayed through the shattered familial bonds resulting from political persecution. The ideologies propagated by the ruling authorities often pitted family members against each other, leading to betrayals, imprisonment, and even death.

During the Cultural Revolution, Chang's family experienced severe internal strife. The political fervor of the time led to accusations and betrayals, resulting in the imprisonment, and suffering of family members. The emotional toll on individuals torn between loyalty to their family and allegiance to political ideologies underscores the human cost of political movements that strained the fabric of familial relationships.

*Wild Swans* delves into the psychological trauma inflicted by political repression on individuals who found themselves labeled as enemies of the state. The constant fear of persecution, the loss of personal freedom, and the dehumanizing effects of political campaigns left lasting scars on the mental well-being of countless individuals. Chang's personal experiences during the Cultural Revolution reflect the psychological trauma endured by those targeted as counter-revolutionaries. The struggle to maintain a sense of self, identity, and sanity in the face of relentless political pressure illustrates the human cost of living under the shadow of an authoritarian regime.

### **Displacement and Loss Due to Political Campaigns:**

Political movements often resulted in mass displacement and loss for ordinary citizens. The forced relocations, destruction of homes, and separation of families were common consequences of political upheavals, leaving individuals grappling with the grief of lost homes and shattered communities. The Great Leap Forward, with its disastrous economic policies, triggered a widespread famine that resulted in the loss of millions

of lives. Chang’s family, like many others, experienced the human cost of displacement, hunger, and the death of loved ones due to political decisions that prioritized ideological goals over human welfare.

The human cost of political movements is also evident in the suppression of individual aspirations and dreams. The relentless pursuit of ideological purity often meant stifling personal ambitions, particularly in the realms of education, creativity, and intellectual pursuits. Chang’s personal narrative reflects the suppression of her intellectual aspirations during the Cultural Revolution. The denial of educational opportunities and the forced abandonment of her literary pursuits illustrate how political movements curtailed the individual’s right to self-expression and personal growth.

**Stop to Consider:**

Reflect on instances in the memoir where individuals sacrificed personal well-being for revolutionary ideals. Consider the motivations and consequences of such sacrifices.

**Self-Assessment Questions:**

1. What did these personal sacrifices reveal about the intensity of political commitment? ( 100 words)

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2. How did individuals grapple with the conflict between loyalty to family and allegiance to political ideologies? (100 words)

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### 3.6 Summing Up:

*Wild Swans* powerfully illustrates the profound human cost of political movements in China. Through personal narratives spanning three generations, Jung Chang highlights the sacrifices, sufferings, and enduring trauma experienced by ordinary individuals caught in the maelstrom of political ideologies. The book serves as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit but also stands as a poignant reminder of the enduring scars left by political movements on the lives of countless individuals.

### 3.7 References and Suggested Readings:

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## UNIT - 4

### Sun-mi Hwang : *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* (Background)

#### Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 Biographical Sketch
- 4.4 Placing the Work
- 4.5 Summing Up
- 4.6 References and Suggested Readings

#### 4.1 Objectives:

The objectives of this unit are to–

- *give* you a glimpse of the historical background of South Korea and its literature,
- *present* the author’s personal account,
- *make* you familiarize with the author’s other available literary works.

#### 4.2 Introduction:

Contemporary South Korean literature is often marked by its reflection on subjects like history, war, and colonialism. The fact that Korea was under Japanese colonial rule from 1910 to 1945 brought about significant cultural, political and economic changes in Korean society. The Japanese government in Korea suppressed Korean language, literature, art as a medium of expression. Literary, artistic, and religious expressions in Korea were rigorously controlled and censored by Japanese authorities. In school, Korean children learned Japanese only. Books, newspapers and other means of correspondence were printed or published solely in Japanese language. During the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the Japanese imposed more restrictions on the usage of Korean language, particularly in its literary form. The colonial period ended in 1945, when Japan was defeated in World War II,

resulting in the division of the country into North Korea and South Korea. The legacy of Japanese colonial control, however, has a profound impact on both North and South Korean modern history. And despite facing severe political and cultural oppression from Japanese colonial rule, which ruthlessly suppressed Korean language and literature, Korean modernism managed to flourish itself during this period. Kim Chi-ha, a prominent poet and activist from South Korea, is known for his literary works addressing the social and political issues in South Korea. Kim Chi-ha has encountered censorship and incarceration throughout his lifetime as a result of his views and criticisms of the government. Kim Chi-ha's most famous poem, "Five Bandits," is a satirical and critical piece that condemns political corruption and injustice in South Korea. Ko Un, another significant poet and essayist from South Korea, captures the complex experiences of Korean War (1950-53) in his "Korean War Poems".

Modern Korean literature underwent a significant break with tradition during the 20th century. Traditional Korean literature often centred around Confucian motifs and was written in Classical Chinese. However, in the modern era, Korean writers started to explore new themes and artistic techniques. This shift was recognisable in the literary contributions of authors like Yi Kwang-su, who led the way in using colloquial Korean writing. Later, writers like Hwang Sun-won and Park Kyung-ni addressed a wide range of subjects, effectively capturing the turbulent historical events and sociological changes in South Korea. These shifts mark a divergence from the conventional literary traditions of pre-modern Korea. Writers like Kim Sowol, Choe Nam-Seon, Yu Chin-oh, Hong Myong-hui, Choe Myongik, Chae Man-sik, among others, are known for their works addressing the complex dynamics of power relations and modes of resistance in the face of foreign occupation. Considering the devastating impact of colonization and the significant contribution of Korean literature in sustaining native values and community goals, the emergence of national consciousness appears unavoidable and essential to these writers. Kim Uchang, in his "Art and Politics in Korea", states that "Korean writing in the twentieth century has been obsessively political". The subjects like identity conflict, power politics, geo-political concerns have found their way into modern Korean literature,

which has been both a part of and a product of this social movement towards modernization. In order to highlight the complex dynamics that arise in Korea as a result of its colonial past, E. Taylor Atkins writes: “Although inequality is certainly a persistent characteristic of capitalist modernity, in a colonial modern society the opportunities for advancement and emancipation that modernity promised were systematically circumscribed and unevenly distributed according to the logic of colonial relations: regardless of education, occupation, income, or lineage, Koreans would always be disadvantaged compared to Japanese settlers. Furthermore, in a colonial modern society, Koreans routinely faced hard choices, mundane and monumental, about when and how to comply or resist, or when and how to choose national over personal and familial interests. Therein lie the conceptual essence and key insights of ‘colonial modernity’ . . . The everyday creative and consumptive activities of Koreans reveal multiple complexities of life under colonial rule that are far more compelling— sometimes even inspiring—than a simple account of cultural degradation and atrophy. The mixture of Euro-American, Japanese, and Korean elements made the cultural marketplace vibrant, distinctive, and emblematic of colonial modernity” (Atkins 129, 133). South Korea’s socio-economic modernization and democratization have been the subject of a considerable number of writings.

Along with other genres of literature, South Korean fiction too has expanded the boundaries by venturing into new domains of possibility. Jongyon Hwang, in his article on the “postnational turn” in contemporary Korean literature, asserts that numerous modern novelists are pushing Korean writing away from its previous nationalism and towards a more flexible and inclusive “post-national” era. Kim Tongin’s search for autonomy in literature and art taken from European aestheticism in modern Korea is evident in his critical and literary works which span from 1910s to 1930s. “Passion Sonata” (also known as “Mad Flames Sonata”), serves as a classic example of his philosophy of art, which posits that art is a manifestation of unrestricted autonomy and vitality. The narrative revolves around Paek SOngsu, an exceptionally talented composer, who engages in a sequence of brutal and deviant acts, such as setting fires, necrophiliac rape, and murder, with the intention of deriving artistic inspiration for his works. In this narrative,

Paek's "genius" is linked to concepts like untamed wilderness, feral demeanour, and vicious disposition. The title of the story, "mad flames," alludes to the intense and turbulent emotions conveyed through the music composed by Paek. Upon perpetrating these offences, he appears to attain a heightened state of liberation, characterised as being unrestrained and unrestricted. Considering the varied transnational ideas and multifaceted viewpoints, it is inadequate to place modern Korean literature as a well-defined category. Instead, it is necessary to analyse the field as an ever-developing and dynamic domain, revealing both its internal politics and global interconnections. Getting translated into multiple languages, contemporary South Korean writers like Han Kang, Hwang Sok-yong, Kyung-sook Shin, Cho Nam-joo have gained international recognition. Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007), is the story of a young woman named Yeong-hye who is situated in contemporary South Korea. The narrative begins with Yeong-hye's decision to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle. The apparent ordinary and uncomplicated decision proves to be far from that - vegetarianism is a rarity in Korean culture, and, more significantly, Yeong-hye is on the brink of a severe mental ailment. Yeong-hye's unwavering position encounters opposition from her relatives which causes her to question social standards as well as the dynamics of relationships. The story provides insight into the rigid societal expectations and highlights the complex nature of the lack of empathy endured by Yeong-hye. Hwang Sok-yong's *The Old Garden* (2000) and *At Dusk* (2015), Kyung-sook Shin's *Please Look After My Mom* (2007) and *I'll Be Right There* (2010), Cho Nam-joo's *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2016) are some of the contemporary South Korean writings that have succeeded in taking Korean Literature beyond of its borders through their use of universal themes and ideas. Sun-mi Hwang occupies a significant position among the list of contemporary South Korean authors have effectively transcended geographical boundaries by incorporating worldwide themes and concepts. The plot of her novel, *The Hen Dreamed She Could Fly*, portrays a hen named Sprout who questions the commonly accepted norms of the yard animals. Sprout aspires to incubate her own egg and experience the taste of motherhood. She desires the liberty enjoyed by other organic hens. Hwang's fictions are notable for their allegorical qualities with complex themes written in simple yet profound storytelling technique.



### **Stop to Consider**

As students of literature, you should anticipate encountering questions like: What are the significant shifts that took place in contemporary South Korean literature? What are the diverse themes and styles present in modern Korean literature? How do you evaluate the role of translation in making South Korean literature an accessible field for international readers? Do you agree that translation has helped South Korean literature to create a secure place for itself internationally? If yes, how do you address the risks and challenges that lie in the process of translation? As you can understand from the above discussion, South Korean literature has a rich and diverse background given the complex social and political history of the country. South Korean literature is a dynamic field that reflects the country's complex history and ever-evolving society and culture. Although it is difficult to identify the characteristics that are distinctive to South Korean literature due to the fact that it has been strongly impacted by the literary styles and forms of other nations, try to find out some of the characteristics that are typical of contemporary Korean literature.

### **4.3 Biographical Sketch:**

Sun-Mi Hwang was born in Hongseong, South Korea, in 1963. Hwang is the second among her parents' five children. Her father lamented his poor economic condition and the inability to afford his daughter's education in middle school, despite her intelligence and enthusiasm for learning. Due to financial constraints, she lacked the means to attend middle school. However, a compassionate instructor granted her access to a classroom, enabling her to engage in self-education by reading books. She independently acquired knowledge at her residence and successfully completed the qualifying examination to get admission to high school. Later, she was able to enrol herself in high school and she graduated from the departments of creative writing at Seoul Institute of the Arts and Gwangju University, and the graduate school of Chung-Ang University. During the late 1970s, her father fortunately experienced a period of prosperity after spending three years

working as a construction labourer in Saudi Arabia. He could send money and letters to Sun mi-Hwang and her family in Korea during that time. Even though she obtained degrees in creative writing, she did not start publishing her works until she became a mother. In 1998, Sun-mi Hwang began writing her novel when her father was battling cancer. Hwang desired to record her father's grievous and challenging existence, replete with distressed encounters and destitution.

Instead of known for her personal life like upbringing and family, Sun-mi Hwang is widely known for her literary works like *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* (2000), *The Dog Who Dared to Dream* (2012), *Miracle on Cherry Hill* (2019). She made her writing debut in 1995 and subsequently published more than 30 books in a variety of genres including realistic and fantasy stories. A large number of her fictional works have been translated into various languages such as Chinese, Taiwanese, German, Polish, Indonesian and Filipino. Her initial writing immediately earned critical acclaim, resulting in her receiving the Children's Literature New Writer Award in 1995. Upon its publication in 2000, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* quickly gained popularity and stayed on bestseller lists for a decade. There have been more than 2 million copies of the book sold in Korea since it was released in Korea in the year 2000. Additionally, it was the source of inspiration for the animated picture that has been the most commercially successful in the history of Korea (*Korea Times* 2015). In addition, the story of the novel, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, has been transformed into a comic book, a theatrical production, and a musical, and has been translated into more than twenty-seven languages. After its translation into English and publication by Penguin in 2013, the book quickly gained recognition as the Amazon Best Book of the Month in November of that same year. The novel which was turned into a film as *Leafie, a Hen into the Wild* (2011) also generated significant box office buzz and attracted 2 million viewers in Korea. Kang Byeong-jin says that "the reasons for Leafie's success can be seen in the solid storyline of the original book and the popular tones that were added in the adaptation process as well as the distribution capabilities of the conglomerate affiliate Lotte Entertainment. The success provided the Korean animation industry reason

to regain its confidence, as it finally achieved – and surpassed - its long-cherished ambition of reaching 1 million admissions”. Sun-mi Hwang received the SBS Children’s Media Award in 2001 and the 36th Se-jong Children’s Literature Award in 2003. Hwang currently works as a visiting professor in the Seoul Institute of Arts’ Faculty of Literature.

#### **4.4 Placing the Work:**

*The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* is an allegorical fable that depicts a hen as its protagonist. The portrayal of animal world is one of the common features in Sun-mi Hwang’s works. Hwang’s fictional works mostly explore traditional folklore by focusing on raising ecocritical awareness. Her stories deal with a range of subjects, including the clash and reconciliation between modernity and tradition, the coexistence of humans and nature, which are intertwined with a sense of simplicity. She is mostly recognised as a fantasy fiction writer who critically examines modern civilisation and the diminishing sense of wonder towards nature and its inhabitants.

In her fantasy work, titled *The Adventures of Stubby the Broomstick* (1999), the author employs the character of a doggaebi, which is a traditional Korean goblin, to navigate and reconcile the realms of contemporary, modern, and future Korea. The doggaebi has been condemned to sleep in the ginko tree’s roots for a thousand years as penalty for an imprudent love affair with a human named Beudeul. After a mere 300 years, he awakens to encounter Beudeul’s descendant and observe a world where his existence is no longer believed by anyone. *Capture the Orchard* (2003) too depicts a ginko tree spirit, while placing greater emphasis on the complex and deep interrelationships among human, animal, and plant existence. Both works highlight the rapidity of the societal transformations occurring in Korean society. One of her most popular novels, *The Bad Kid Stickers* (2005), emphatically supports children who have experienced unjust treatment from their instructors. *The Day of Hiding My Diary* (2003) portrays a child who is compelled by his teacher to submit his diary for daily inspection. Dong-min realizes that expressing his true thoughts and feelings through writing leads to negative consequences in his

relationships with both his friends and his mother. However, he is unwilling to compromise his integrity by resorting to dishonesty, so he opts to conceal his diary. *The Dog Who Dared to Dream* was written in 2014. The novel delineates the life of Scraggly, a dog, and her relationships with the owner and other animals. Due to her unique physical appearance, Scraggly lives her life as an outsider; and experiences moments of happiness and sufferings. The novel addresses the complex dynamics of identity, friendship, love, motherhood, and loyalty. *Miracle on Cherry Hill* (2019) presents the story of an old man, Kang Dae-su, who returns to Cherry Hill, a place that cherishes his childhood memories, after being diagnosed with brain tumour. Shattered by an isolated and poverty ridden childhood, Dae-su leads a lonely life. However, after returning to Cherry Hill Dae-su, now a financially successful person, experiences life in a new way that restores his faith in humanity. Along with the advocacy of harmonious human-nature co-existence, the novel delves into the instability of both the natural world and human existence.

#### Check Your Progress

1. Having familiarized yourself with Sun-mi Hwang's literary preoccupations from the discussions attempted above, try to outline her primary concerns and analyze how they are manifested in her literary works.
2. How do you situate Sun-mi Hwang and her *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* in the larger context of Korean literary legacy?
3. How will you assess the impact of Hwang's works on the comprehension of Korean literature among readers from different cultures and regions? What is the place of *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* in this context?

Like her other novels, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* too examines the questions of identity, power structure, loyalty and compassion. The central focus of the narrative revolves around Sprout, a hen confined within the boundaries of a farming facility. Sprout's deepest desire is to break away

from the confines and experience the liberation of nurturing and hatching her own offspring. Upon her successful escape, she is confronted with a strict animal hierarchy that alienates her due to her ailing condition. The protagonist establishes friendship with a duck who lives the life of a wanderer being never accepted as one of the group. Together, they build an alliance to confront adversaries, including a weasel seeking sustenance during the dark hours. Sprout directs her focus towards an abandoned egg that she accidentally encounters, subsequently assuming responsibility for its well-being, despite facing social disapproval.

The novel, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, is often regarded as a fable intended for children due to its use of storytelling technique. The novel can be seen as an example of Bernice E. Cullinan's statement regarding the aim of Children's Literature. Cullinan provides an argument in support of the use of fantasy in children's books by noting: "We want children to know the joy, the laughter, the tears, the daydreams, the escape, the freedom, even the tragedy of life, for it is all of these things that make us human. By instilling some of these experiences and values through literature, we can help children become humane and experience the liberation of spirit that literature is intended to bring"(Cullinan 419). Although it serves as a crucial example of children's literature, the readership of *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* extends beyond the realm of children as it provides possibilities of exploration to the readers of all ages.

Owing to its universal themes and emotional resonance, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* can be regarded as an important work in world literature. It transcends cultural boundaries and resonates with readers from diverse backgrounds. It explores complex power dynamics with cross-cultural relevance. David Damrosch in his *What Is World Literature* writes: "A crucial feature of world literature is that it resolves always into a *variety* of worlds. These different worlds vary by era, region, and cultural prestige, and the works that come to us from these varied worlds can in turn be read in a variety of ways. This sort of variability involves constantly competing ideas of literature, and our contemporary definitional debates can be seen as an episode in the shifting relations among three general

conceptions. Literature in general, and world literature in particular, has often been seen in one or more of three ways: as an established body of classics, as an evolving canon of *masterpieces*, or as multiple *windows on the world*” (Damrosch 9). Today’s world literature often challenges and expands upon traditional literary canons. While classic literary canons have been historically dominated by works from Western authors, predominantly male, contemporary world literature seeks to include broader spectrum of voices, cultures, and viewpoints. This has led to a re-evaluation of what is considered to be “canonical” and thereby, incorporates historically marginalized communities. The emergence of multiple temporal and spatial dimensions has contributed to the considerable expansion of the realm of world literature in contemporary period. Damrosch states that “world literature today actually goes much further back in time than it did a century and a half ago. It now spans more than four thousand years, as well as more regions across the globe, than ever before” (Damrosch 10). An essential characteristic of global literature is that works undergo a transformation when they enter the wider world. To comprehend this transformation, it is necessary to critically examine how the work is reframed in terms of its translations and the cultural settings in which it is now situated. In order to view the literature of the world as a means of understanding diverse regions, it is necessary to consider how its imagery has been altered and influenced through the process of *transculturation*. Hwang’s literary works contain multiple possibilities of engagement and provide the reader with comprehensive insight into the regional values characterized by universal appeals.

### **Stop to Consider**

*The Hen Dreamed She Could Fly* is a fable features a hen named Sprout as its main character along with other animal characters like dog, rooster, weasel, duck etc. As you read the *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, do you find any similarities with other fables you have read? *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (1970), for instance, is a fable by Richard Bach, an American writer; and story revolves around a seagull who challenges traditional norms and yearns for a life outside

the boundaries of its kind. Both *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* and *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* ideas of freedom, self-discovery, courage, conformity etc. Fable is defined in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* as “a short narrative, in prose or verse, that exemplifies an abstract moral thesis or principle of human behavior; usually, at its conclusion, either the narrator or one of the characters states the moral in the form of an epigram. Most common is the beast fable, in which animals talk and act like the human types they represent. In the familiar fable of the fox and the grapes, the fox—after exerting all his wiles to get the grapes hanging beyond his reach, but in vain—concludes that they are probably sour anyway: the express moral is that human beings belittle what they cannot get. (The modern expression “sour grapes” derives from this fable)” Abrams and Harpham, 10). As you go on reading *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, do you find any moral note in story? V. M. Perez Perozo, the author of *Nuevas Fabulillas*, in his essay, “Fables and Fable-writers” (1946), critically examines the limitations of the commonly accepted definition of fables and calls the “fixed tradition of the moralizing function of the fable” a major problem as reduces the possibilities of understanding a fable from multiple perspectives other than the set parameters. Perez’s preferred definition of a fable is as follows: A fable is an “allegorical narrative in which the characters are human or supernatural beings, animate or inanimate, which act and talk like human beings” (Perez 366).

Read the following extracts of Sun-mi Hwang’s interview with *The Korea Times* in Seoul on her novel, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*. The novelist shares some of her personal experiences that influenced her framing of the plot and the process of characterization. This is precisely why she selected Sprout as the main character. She also admits that she modelled the hen’s character based on the strong and courageous personality of her father. This may help you in situating the novel in a specific context. Yet you are suggested to contemplate on the risks that you may encounter in applying the author’s personal notes in analysing a literary text. The author, here, also talks about how the socio-cultural background of a reader seems

influences his/her way of approaching the novel. What type of questions did come to your mind when you read the novel?

People whom I met in Korea asked questions that are directly related to the book's content, such as if there was any actual model that I had in mind for the lead character when I began the book project or how valuable it is for me compared with my other publications.

One British reader was wondering if I was trying to send a certain message about the security stand off between South and North Korea.

I met several Korean ladies, who told me that the first chapter of the book, which had phrases about the fate of an immature egg born without a shell, reminded them of their miscarriage experiences. They said they paused on the page for a while because they became so sad and couldn't turn the page. Such unexpected reactions surprised me because I did not intend to cause such reactions.

My father was a principled man. He was a warm person. He always did his best, but his efforts didn't pay off. I learned that there are people like my father who are diligent and make strenuous efforts to achieve their goals, but the results always betray them... One day, when my father and I passed by the Daewoo building near the Seoul Railway Station, he pointed to the skyscraper and proudly said to me that he was one of the construction workers who built it.

**Self- Assessment Question:**

Do you believe that establishing a connection between society and literature is crucial? If yes, how would justify the social relevance of a fable like *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*? Give a well-argued answer (40 + 80 words)

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#### 4.5 Summing Up:

I provided you with an overview of Sun-mi Hwang's life in this unit, along with a background information on the history of Korean literature and *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*. The unit also sheds light on multidimensional facets of Korean literature which will help you in the placement of Sun-mi Hwang's *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* in a larger context. It describes some of the features of world literature along with the growing tendency of redefining the canon of world fiction in recent times as Hwang's novel can be considered as a crucial part of world fiction. With this background information, we will move on to the second unit, which will give an in-depth account of what takes place in the novel along with the characters portrayed in the narrative. It will be helpful to comprehend some of the novel's main themes in light of Sun-mi Hwang's social and historical context as we continue with exploratory reading of the text.

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## UNIT - 5

### Sun-mi Hwang : *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* (Introducing the Novel)

#### Unit Structure:

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 Summary of the Novel
- 5.4 The Characters
- 5.5 Critical Reception
- 5.6 Summing Up
- 5.7 References and Suggested Readings

#### 5.1 Objectives:

The objectives of this unit are to–

- *describe* the significant events in the novel,
- *introduce* you to the novel’s main characters and incidents,
- *assist* you in assessing the different critical viewpoints associated with the novel.

#### 5.2 Introduction:

The novel, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, by Sun-Mi Hwang can be regarded as a prominent work of Korean children’s literature which explores the dynamic of human-animal relationship in the light of Sprout’s journey of motherhood. Though the text is categorized under the genre of children’s literature, it deviates from certain presupposed norms of the conventional children works in that its themes, motifs, and the imageries often invoke thought-provoking reflections on the adult way of life and the inherent power dynamics of the society. The text follows a distinct narrative style and its distinct mode of representation positions animals as human equivalents, which subtly hints at the interconnectedness of the human and the animal worlds. The novel, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*,

explores the protagonist, Sprout's, transformative journey as a mother in the animal world, while exploring the complexities of the human lives and the society.

### **5.3 Summary of the Novel:**

Sun-mi Hwang's novel, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, consists of eleven chapters, each of which has some illustrations related to the events it describes. The novel uses a third person narrator to narrate the storyline. The chapter, "I Refuse to Lay Another Egg", introduces the reader to the main character and her confined situation from which she wants to free herself. Sprout, an egg-laying hen, never has the opportunity to venture outside the chicken coop. Despite regularly laying eggs for a year, she has never been able to incubate them and witness the birth of her own offspring. She always cherishes a desire to be the mother of her own chicks. However, that appears to be an impossible dream to be realized as the farmer family takes each egg Sprout lays. She grows weary of the farmer's wife asking the hens to eat well so that they can lay "lots of big eggs". Exhausted and frustrated, she starts ignoring the foods offered by the farmer's wife and decides not to lay anymore eggs. To her surprise, however, Sprout lays a tender and small egg the shell of which has not even hardened. Seeing the egg break without making a sound fills Sprout with immense sadness. The white flowers on the acacia tree, however, continue to amaze and inspire her, as does the resilience of the leaves in the face of fierce storms. This is the reason why she calls herself Sprout; she aspires to be like the blossoms on the acacia tree. She despises her confined existence and envies the freedom enjoyed by the yard animals and other hens.

The Chapter "Flying the Coop", portrays Sprout's escaping death with the help of a mallard and her attempt to join the yard animals. When Sprout is no longer useful to the farmer family, they decide to "cull" her. Nevertheless, once inspecting its ailing condition, they abandon her with other dying hens. However, Sprout manages to save herself from the

weasel with the help of Straggler, a mallard. The mutual respect and admiration for each other leads to the formation of a friendship between Sprout and Straggler. Sprout follows Straggler to the barns and requests other animals to let her stay there. Sprout's struggle in finding a space for herself in the barn is delineated in the third Chapter called "Into the Barn". Upon seeing Sprout, the dog, who boasts of calling himself an "excellent guard" of the barnyard, starts shouting at Sprout and asks her to leave the place immediately. Other animals also join the dog and humiliate Sprout revealing their fear that she might spread infection due to her dirty and sickly condition. Straggler expresses his helplessness in the matter as he himself is considered an *outsider* by the rest of the animals of the barn. Eventually, the rooster, who identifies himself as the head of the barn, arrives at the scene to resolve the problem after listening to the pleas made by Sprout. Sprout is permitted to pass the night inside the barn with an instruction to depart as soon as the rooster declares dawn. The rooster's hen doesn't want any disturbance from Sprout since she is on the process of incubating her eggs. Although Sprout is reluctant to leave the comfort and security of the barn, she knows that it will be pointless to approach either the rooster or the dog to reconsider their decision. The next day, as Sprout's looking for food continues, she finds a "compost pile" in the garden and starts digging it. But the rooster's hen rushes over and gives Sprout a quick peck claiming that the area belongs to her and the rooster. Despite this, Sprout is filled with a sense of self-assurance and pride after the realization that she is surrounded by enormous fields and that the rooster and his hen cannot "rule over" all of that.

"The Egg in the Briar Patch" describes the challenges and hopes experienced by Sprout as she embarks on new journey outside the coop. After spending the whole day outside the barn, Sprout decides to return to it despite enduring disdain and embarrassment from the yard animals. The moment the dog sees her, he warns Sprout not to cause any *trouble* by "hanging around" there. The dog asserts his responsibility to keep everything calm for the rooster's hen for she is in the process of hatching her eggs. He reminds Sprout of the rules and responsibilities that the animals should abide by, emphasising his role as the gatekeeper. He

points out that Sprout's duty is to lay eggs in a *cage*. Sprout, however, confronts the dog bravely and challenges the commonly accepted norms of the barn before leaving the barn. Then Sprout creates a small hole by scratching a spot under the acacia tree in order to spend the night because she has no desire to return to the coop. Seeing the rooster's hen sitting on her eggs evokes feelings of envy in Sprout. Furthermore, she has to be alert throughout the night due to the weasel. Sprout has to face a life devoid of any sense of safety, which causes her to momentarily yearn for the coop. Meanwhile, Straggler, whom she regards as a friend, befriends a white duck and regularly roams with her. Feeling isolated and dismayed, Sprout keeps staring at the barn.

One day, after hearing Straggler's scream, Sprout rushes to inspect the problem. Instead of catching any sight of Straggler, Sprout spots a warm egg inside a briar patch. Sprout looks around to ascertain whether the mother of is around, but sees none. Sprout has already developed an affection towards the egg and starts incubating it at the patch. The realization that her long-held aspiration of becoming a mother is about to be fulfilled fills her with immense joy.

The chapter titled "A Farewell and a Greeting" depicts the birth of Sprout's baby and the death of Straggler. In this chapter, Sprout is amazed by Straggler's strange behaviour and actions. He guards Sprout from the weasel at night and arranges fish for her every day without asking anything about the egg she is consistently incubating. He also asks Sprout to go the reservoir rather than to the yard once the baby is born. Sprout appreciates Straggler's company even though she cannot understand him fully. Sprout admits that it would be extremely challenging for her to successfully hatch the egg without Straggler's assistance. The chapter ends with Straggler selflessly sacrificing his own life to the weasel in order to protect Sprout before the birth of the baby.

The chapter titled "A Disgrace to the Comb" portrays the challenges encountered by Sprout following the revelation of the baby's true identity. It is not a chick but duckling. And it is the offspring of Straggler and his mate, who is killed by the weasel. Sprout now understands the reason

behind Straggler's constant involvement during her incubation of the egg. The fact that the egg she had been incubating all those days was not of a hen but a duck's does not alter Sprout's maternal feelings towards the duckling. But other yard animals consider her to be a "disgrace" to the chicken community for hatching "a baby of another kind". The dog and the rooster immediately dismiss her request to let her stay in the barn. The farmer's family, however, makes the decision to keep Sprout and the duckling, whom she names Baby, in the barn. Nevertheless, Sprout decides to flee the barn after overhearing the farmer's wife saying that she is going to either put Sprout in the coop again or prepare her as a meal the following morning.

The chapter titled "Certainly a Duck" highlights the strong affection of a mother for her child. The yard ducks claim the duckling to be one of their *family* saying that "[even]though a hen hatched him, a duck is a duck". They insist Sprout to have Baby's wings clipped, as otherwise Baby, being the offspring of Straggler, a wild duck, may eventually fly away. They also demand for allowing Baby to join them because he may probably never acquire the skill of swimming if he continues to live with a hen. These external issues, however, do not affect the pure bond between Sprout and her son. Although Sprout has to constantly relocate her sleeping spot in order to protect Baby from the weasel, days at the reservoir pass happily. And the baby too, eventually, learns swimming all by himself.

To live at the reservoir proves difficult for Sprout due the summer's heavy rains. The reeds that serve Sprout as nests are now entirely underwater because of the rising water level. Meanwhile, in order to keep themselves safe from the weasel, she requires to find a new spot each night. Still, Sprout and Greentop get captured by the weasel. But the weasel shows no interest in Sprout, who has grown skinny caused by her hard work and the unfavourable weather; he instead pursues Greentop. In the course of rescuing himself from the weasel, Greentop finds out that he can fly. This expands his world "from the ground and water to the sky". Greentop's growing identity crisis driven by his desire to be accepted by other ducks "as one of them" is depicted in the chapter titled "Joining the Brace".

After Greentop joins the yard ducks, Sprout, with an overwhelming sense of loneliness, takes residence in the hills to keep an eye on her son. Everything, initially, seems quite usual for Greentop until the farmer's wife catches and ties him up with the purpose of domestication. Greentop attempts to flee but is unable to move. When it gets dark, the weasel comes for Greentop taking advantage of the situation. But Sprout bravely fights against the weasel, blinding one of its eyes by pecking it and saves her son. The following day, the weasel returns and succeeds in capturing the cockerel, an offspring of the rooster and his hen. Recognizing the fact that Greentop's exposure outside has led to the weasel's frequent intrusion, the farmer's family decides to tie Greentop up in the barn. The moment the farmer's wife unties Greentop, Sprout quickly flies over and delivers her a sharp peck that compels her to release Greentop. Greentop hastily" flies off with the cord still dangling from his leg". Rescued by his mother, Greentop learns a profound lesson of life's complexities.

**Stop to Consider:**

Here is a quotation from Sun-mi Hwang's novel, *The Dog Who Dared to Dream*, where the novelist reflects on the journey of a dog named Scraggly, exploring the themes of motherhood and human-animal relationships akin to her previous work, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* :

Scraggly was tied up and shut in the cage. Her bowl was full of food but she hadn't touch it. She paced, her chain rattling. She didn't take her eyes off Grandpa Screecher, who was busy fixing the roof. He had hired men to fix the neighbour's roof but was repairing his own. Scraggly growled, unable to forgive him. She wanted her babies back. She was hoarse from shouting and barking, but she refused to stop.

The old cat walked up and down the top of the wall. 'Listen to yourself. Now you really sound frightful. This is what life is, you know. You say goodbye, they die, and life goes on. I know how it goes. I've never known a dog who lived with all her pups.'



‘Shut up!’ Scraggly shouted.

‘I am telling you, it’s no use. You know what that old man is like. Dogs are pocket money for him. They’re gone, Scraggly. They’re never coming back. Ever.’

‘Shut up, I said!’

‘Goodness, my ears! All right, do what you want. I am just trying to help. I am trying to be a good neighbour. You’re really so very dense sometimes.’ The cat leaped of the wall.

Was this winter’s doing again? She didn’t want to listen to that stupid old cat, but she had to wonder why winter brought her such bad things. Scraggly continued to pace, breathing raggedly. If she were not tied up and in this cage, she would bound over to Grandpa Screecher and bite him. He was crouching, his back to her. She hated him.

Grandpa Screecher had been welding all morning to secure the slate roof. He smelled more metallic than usual. Sparks flew; bluish smoke hung in the air. Scraggly heard the music coming from the church. It sounded very far away. Her heart ached. Sorrow rushed up from inside her. She remembered how she’d felt when she met the white dog. She remembered how her mother looked up at the sky and howled when Baby died. She felt she knew how her mother must have felt. She looked up at the sky, like her mother, and howled. ‘Shut up, Scraggly!’ Grandpa Screecher shouted. Ignoring him, Scraggly howled even louder and longer. ‘Shut up! A dog making those sounds brings bad luck.’

Scraggly continued.

‘You little –’ Grandpa Screecher put down his welding tools and stood up.

Scraggly kept howling obstinately. Stupid old man. He had given all her babies to the thief. How could he have done such a thing? ‘You barked all night long so nobody could sleep. Now you’re really pushing my patience to the limit.’ Grandpa Screecher pushed the black face shield up onto his head and glared at her.

Scraggly wasn't afraid. She glared back and howled again; this was the only way she could get him to look at her.

'Damn it,' snapped Grandpa Screecher. 'I told you to shut up! You're getting on my nerves.'

Scraggly refused to stop. She was angry. This was unfair.

Grandpa Screecher's face was red as he strode over. He picked up the broom leaning on the persimmon tree. 'How dare you!' He opened the cage and brought the broom down onto Scraggly. She had never seen him look so ferocious.

Scraggly avoided the blows, barking, glaring and baring her teeth. Her heart throbbed with each blow to her back, behind and calves. The chain was tight around her neck. It would have been better if the thief had taken her along with her mother and siblings.

After leaving the yard following his escape from the weasel, Greentop opts to live alone at the reservoir leaving Sprout in a state of melancholy. Despite the challenges of sustaining her own well-being caused by the weather and loneliness, she dedicates herself entirely to caring for her baby. Amidst the harshness of winter and fatigued from eluding the hunter, painstakingly pecks the cord entwined around her Greentop's foot. During the silent depths of the winter night, as her offspring rests, the mother tirelessly pecks at the restraining rope, labouring throughout the night to ensure her baby's liberation. Sprout longs for the companionship and conversation they once shared. However, she is powerless to alter the circumstance; she is aware of the fact that it is "hard for him to accept that they were not the same kind". Meanwhile, an unusual event occurs at the reservoir, causing both Sprout and Greentop to feel anxious. A large number of wild ducks from the winterlands venture into the reservoir. Sprout quickly identifies that they are the family of Straggler, who had once urged Sprout to bring Greentop to the reservoir so that his son could join them in flight. These are some of the events and developments that are depicted in the chapter titled "Travelers from Another World".

The final chapters titled “The Bone-Weary, One-Eyed Hunter” and “Aloft Like a Feather” depict the selfless love of Sprout for her son. Sprout sets her son free to fly away with the wild ducks and sacrifices herself to the weasel. Here, we get an alternative picture of the weasel who was previously been portrayed as Sprout’s rival. Knowing that the weasel too is a mother and her “four-legged babies [are] whining in hunger in the hidden cave”, Sprout, whom the weasel has never been able to catch, gives up her life.

#### **5.4 The Characters :**

In this section, we will look at different traits or qualities of the characters presented in the novel, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*. You will be familiarized with their thoughts, actions and interactions with others which will help you in understanding how they contribute to the development of the plot later. The definition and types of character are described in *The Dictionary of Narratology* like this: “Characters can be more or less major or minor (in terms of textual prominence), dynamic (when they change), or static (when they do not), consistent (when their attributes and actions do not result in contradiction or inconsistent) and flat (simple, two-dimensional, endowed with a very few traits, highly predictable in behaviour) or round (complex, multidimensional, capable of surprising behaviour)” (12). We do not have too many characters in *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*. As you get to know more and more about the characters in the novel, try to figure out what type of character they represent.

#### **Sprout:**

A hen named Sprout is the central character in *The Hen Who Dreamed She Fly*. Sprout is characterized by her strong motive and determination for breaking away from the restrictions imposed on her as an egg-laying hen. Unaware that the eggs she lays will never hatch because she is not a native organic hen, Sprout is driven by the desire of raising chicks of her own. The plot centers round the challenging journey that Sprout undertakes from the confinement of the cage to the outside world of

freedom. Initially she is shown as “a scrawny, soaking-wet chicken missing all her neck feathers” who is envious of the beauty of the rooster’s hen with a “voluptuous body, lustrous feathers, and neat comb”. Sprout lives mostly a sickly life due to the harsh circumstances she endures. But she always deals with the given hurdles with confidence and grace. She epitomizes courage and bravery in pursuing her aspirations. Unable to raise her own chicks, she nurtures a duckling and fulfils her life-long desire of experiencing motherhood. Sprout’s character exemplifies the essence of unconditional love, friendship and sacrifice.

### **Straggler:**

Straggler is a mallard who lives in the barnyard after being separated from his family. The wings of Straggler are different from those of other yard ducks; his wings are “bigger and more powerful”. But he cannot fly because his “right wing doesn’t open fully” resulting from the weasel’s attack. Straggler plays a crucial role in the novel contributing to the development of the plot. He forms a strong friendship with Sprout, the main character of the novel, and they confront the complexities of life together. Considered an outsider by other yard animals, Straggler, reflects a departure from the traditional and predictable dynamics that can be commonly found in a farm. The unconventional bond between a hen and a duck defies social conventions, highlighting the significance of pure relationships that move beyond conventional limitations. Moreover, he plays the role as a father and friend at the cost of his own life.

### **The Farmer and His Wife:**

The farmer and his wife are the only human characters in the novel who play crucial roles in the lives of the farm animals. As the owners of the farm, their actions and decisions significantly determine the course of the animals’ lives. This is evident in the way they restrict Sprout in the coop for laying eggs; and when Sprout can no longer lay eggs, she is left among other ailing animals to perish. However, the farmer and his wife are also the provider of foods and shelter to the yard

animals. Their presence in the narrative encapsulates the complex relationship between the farm animals and their human caretakers, highlighting the interplay of control and care marking both tension and harmony between humans and animals.

### **Greentop:**

Biologically an offspring of Straggler and his mate, the white duck, Greentop is raised by Sprout. Sprout hatches a duck's without knowing it. When her baby is born, she still perceives him as a chick "[having] never seen a chick up close", and after observing that other chicks possess yellow fur, she assumes "her baby's light brown fur would turn yellow in time". Even after discovering the truth, Sprout's love for her son remains unaffected. She calls him Baby initially. But as he turns out to be an "adolescent duck", "she [names] him Greentop, after his coloring". Inheriting the distinctive qualities of a wild duck from Straggler sets him apart from the other ducks in the yard. Raised by a hen and somewhat detached from the duck community, Greentop struggles with an identity crisis as he grows up. Upon mastering the arts of swimming and flying, his horizons broaden, transforming him from a protected baby into a protector his own mother. Greentop's character undergoes a dynamic evolution as he experiences life from diverse standpoints.

### **The Weasel:**

The weasel, in the beginning, serves the role of an antagonist in the story. The weasel represents the predatory aspects of the natural world and can be seen as a metaphorical depiction of the barriers and hardships that one encounters in the pursuit of freedom and self-determination. He has been portrayed as a swift, proud and angry predator in the story. The white duck, Straggler, the reed warbler, and the cockerel fall victim of the weasel's attack, losing their lives at his hands. The weasel becomes an obstacle for Sprout that determines and shapes the course of her journey making it more complex. During a fight between the weasel and Sprout, the weasel gets blinded by the latter. Later in the story, it is shown that she too faces obstructions and endures troubles as a mother in feeding her children.

**The Rooster:**

The rooster occupies a major role in the farm's hierarchy as "the head of the barn". He is projected as "greedy and ferocious" with a *commanding voice* that no one in the barn dares to confront. He embodies power and dominance in the setting of a domestic environment. He fosters terror among the yard animals and seems to hold the highest authority when it comes to making collective decisions. Despite belonging to the same community, he categorizes Sprout as an outsider based on her appearance. His presence in the barn is characterized by a directive force that determines Sprout's position within the hierarchy.

**The Hen:**

Although, the rooster's hen appears to occupy minor role in the narrative, primarily depicted through her connection with the rooster, she plays a crucial role in Sprout's journey. She is beautiful and "elegant", "a lovely companion to the gallant rooster". Her shiny feathers make Sprout "ashamed" of her "bare neck". Benefiting from her association with the rooster, the hen experiences a secure and contented life within the barn. She exercises dominance over Sprout, ruthlessly pecking her when Sprout ventures into the "territory" of the rooster and his hen in search of food. Witnessing the hen peacefully hatching eggs in a cozy environment, makes Sprout filled with feelings of envy, yearning for the same sense of freedom, security and comfort that the hen enjoys. The hen's presence, though seemingly peripheral, becomes instrumental in shaping Sprout's aspirations and desires.

**The Dog:**

The character of dog, who proudly declares himself to be an "excellent guard" of the barn, has a complex positioning in the narrative. As a domesticated animal with the role of maintaining order on the farm animals, the dog symbolizes authority and control. Its interactions with other animals, including Sprout, reflect the established hierarchy within the farm community. The dog, "fearful of the hen's bad temper" and not wanting "to be bossed around by a chicken", always aligns with her

against Sprout. He is well aware of the rooster's power over other animals in the barnyard that makes him consistently favour the rooster family. At times, the dog serves as an obstacle to Sprout's aspirations, particularly when she attempts to explore beyond the confines of the coop. Simultaneously, he is also depicted as a guardian figure who protects the yard inhabitants from the weasel and other forms of danger.

### **The Leader of the Ducks:**

Even though the leader of the yard ducks holds a relatively minor role in the narrative, he serves as the embodiment of adhering to the rules and regulations prescribed for the yard animals. He often reminds Sprout and Straggler of their status as "outsiders" and highlights the roles they are expected to fulfil.

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

Q.1. How does Hwang situate the dynamics of human-nature relationship in the *Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*? Give a well-argued answer.

Q.2. Critically analyze Hwang's depiction of the barnyard as a reflection of power-relations that exist in the world of animals.

Q.3. How do you perceive the narrative techniques employed by the author in *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*? Give reasons for your answer.

### **5.5 Critical Reception:**

*The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* by Sun-mi Hwang has garnered positive critical acclaim, particularly for its distinctive narrative style and thought-provoking themes. Chi-Young Kim's English translation of Hwang's novel has also been recognized for its clear and poetic motives, successfully preserving the style of the original Korean text. Chi-Young Kim's lyrical translation makes the tale available to the English-speaking public, and lovely line drawings by Nomoco enhance the edition. Hwang

has written an achingly beautiful allegory that is sure to become an international classic (Mujica, 2014).

As a modern fable, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* deviates from the conventional presuppositions associated with Children's literature. Sun-mi Hwang challenges the ingrained perception that children's stories must end happily. The central character, Sprout, serves as a poignant embodiment of this departure from the norm. In a profoundly selfless act, Sprout pursues her son to take flight with the wild ducks, prioritizing his happiness over the preservation of their immediate bond. Furthermore, she willingly confronts her own death, offering readers an exemplary illustration of selfless love. In doing so, Sun-mi Hwang redefines the preconceived ideas regarding the structure of children's literature, weaving a narrative that sheds light on the complex realities of existence rather than adhering to a predetermined and idyllic conclusion.

Hwang's novel, through its distinctive modes of representation, provides an avenue for the critics to position it in the broader context of children's literature. While critic like Barbara Mujica situates the novel in terms of existential themes calling it a "long meditation on eternal human questions such as the burdens and rewards of freedom and parental love" (Mujica, 2014), Sarah Yoon tries to comprehend the novel through larger frame of references by making a contrast between the Western fables like Hans Christians Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling" and Hwang's *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*:

Whereas animals are seen as allegorical equivalents or substitutes for humans in many Western folk tales and children's stories, they occupy a somewhat different (but nonetheless anthropomorphic) role in Korean children's literature. Animals do not merely stand in for humans or represent comic extensions of human behavior in Korean children's stories, as they often do in Western fairy tales. Rather, they gesture to a worldview in which humans rediscover an interconnection with other species and with nature, arising from cultural memory. Specifically in Hwang's story, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, the animal becomes a pivot towards a reimagined connection



with nature that distinctly contrasts with a brutal and inhumane society dominated by humans (Yoon 2-3).

This approach not only enriches the understanding of Hwang’s novel but also places it in conversation with established Western literary traditions, offering a crucial exploration of cross-cultural perspectives. A tale of freedom, love, motherhood, sacrifice and even the acceptance of mortality, it has been described in foreign media as belonging on a bookshelf “somewhere between the innocent frivolity of ‘Charlotte’s Web’ and subliminal politics of ‘Animal Farm’” (Park Hyunki, 2015).

**Self Assessment Questions:**

As you read the novel, have you noticed that each chapter of the novel is followed by some illustrations? Do you see any symbolic connection between the illustrations and the titles of the chapters? (Give your answer in 80 words)

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**5.6 Summing Up:**

In this unit, I have given you a brief synopsis of the plot, highlighting major events and the roles played by the characters, with an emphasis on Sprout’s transformative journey and her pursuit of freedom. An attempt has been made to examine the complex positioning of the characters like Sprout, Straggler, Greentop and the weasel. While analyzing the relationships between characters and their significance, I have also discussed their roles and contributions to the narrative development. The central themes such as motherhood, freedom, and individuality addressed by the Hwang in the novel are examined. I have tried to give you a glimpse of Hwang’s writing style, emphasizing the simplicity and poetic qualities she effectively uses as narrative techniques.

Overall, the unit provides you a comprehensive understanding of various aspects of Sun-mi Hwang's novel, offering insights into its characters, themes, literary style, and critical reception that will help you in further exploration of the novel. In the next unit, you will be provided an in-depth examination of the multifaceted layers that that are integral to critical understanding of the novel.

### 5.7 References and Suggested Readings:

Hwang, Sun-mi. *The Dog Who Dared to Dream*. (2012). Trans, Chi-Young Kim. Abacus, 2016.

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## UNIT- 6

### Sun-mi Hwang : *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* Themes and Techniques

#### Unit Structure:

- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 Introduction
- 6.3 The Title
- 6.4 Major Themes
  - 6.4.1 Motherhood and Sacrifice
  - 6.4.2 Human-Animal Relationship
  - 6.4.3 Class Division, Hierarchy and the Animal World
  - 6.4.4 Identity Conflict
- 6.5 Narrative Technique
- 6.6 Images and Symbols
- 6.7 Summing Up
- 6.8 References and Suggested Readings

#### 6.1 Objectives:

The objectives of this unit are to—

- *involve* you in a more critical interpretation of *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*,
- *analyse* the significance of the novel's title,
- *discuss* the narrative techniques, including the images and symbols employed by the author.

#### 6.2 Introduction:

Up to this point, you have been introduced to some of the major features of Sun-mi Hwang's novel, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*. However, to engage yourself in a more critical interpretation of the novel,

a comprehensive understanding of the underlying themes and motifs is required. To achieve this, an endeavour is will be made in this unit to uncover the layers of meanings associated with the modes of representation used by the author in the novel. In this unit, we will try to have a thorough comprehension of the novel from multiple perspectives widening the scope of our means of inquiry. Additionally, our focus will extend to an analysis of the author's application of images and symbols as narrative devices.

### **6.3 The Title:**

In this section, we will discuss the significance of the title of Sun-mi Hwang's novel. The full title of the novel is *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly: A Novel*. In order to press the importance of the title of a text, Gerard Genette writes: "The title addresses itself to many more people than does the text, people who in one way or another receive and transmit it, and thereby contribute to its circulation. For, if the text is an object of reading, the title, like the author's name, is an object of circulation or if one wishes, the object of communication" (Genette 707). More than this, 'the title can "indicate," about its text, something more than its "content," factual or symbolic' (Genette 708). The title of Hwang's novel, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, bears a symbolic importance, serving as a thematic foundation for the narrative in terms of the journey undertaken by the protagonist, Sprout. Sprout is a hen whose course of life is shaped by her desire of becoming a mother. She also wants to free herself from her confined existence. The plot recounts the challenges Sprout endures in fulfilling her dreams. Sprout's aspiration for freedom is narrated in the opening lines of the second chapter of the novel as follows: "Sprout liked to stare out into the barnyard. She would much rather watch the ducks scuttle away from the dog than peck at feed. Closing her eyes, she imagined herself wondering freely about. She fantasized about sitting in a nest, on an egg, about venturing into the fields with the rooster and about following the ducks around. She sighed" (Hwang 15).

In the novel, flying serves as a symbol of freedom and sense of autonomy. It becomes a metaphor for breaking free from societal norms and pursuing one's aspirations. Usually, a hen cannot fly; it's pointless for a hen to dream about flying. Sprout knows that even though chickens possess wings, they are "useless against the hunters" (Hwang 94) because of their incapability of using them for flying. For Sprout, even the prospect of hatching her own eggs is an "impossible dream" because the farmer family has "tilted forward so the eggs would roll to the other side of a barrier, separating them from their mothers" (Hwang 6). However, Sprout is unaware of the fact that she is not a native organic hen; and having raised as an egg-laying hen, to have her own chicks is an unattainable aspiration. But Sprout is conscious of the potential freedom that can be attained through flying. She opposes the idea of clipping the wings of Greentop as it would curtail the strength and power of her son. When the leader of the yard ducks sarcastically notes that Sprout's ancestors could fly like birds, Sprout becomes exhilarated, visualizing the possibility of flying. She "couldn't believe her ears. Flying with these wings that only scattered dust? She had seen the rooster jump down from the stone wall with his wings outstretched, but that couldn't be flying. At the very least, flying required floating up higher than a tree and traveling elsewhere, managing to be afloat for a long time. It would be wonderful if she could fly" (Hwang 81). The ability to fly holds the power of expanding one's horizon. The weasel loses her power over Greentop once he masters the art of flight, positioning himself beyond the weasel's reach. Top of Form Greentop's ability to fly alters the nature of the relationship with his mother—"Greentop loved flying. Not only did he stop worrying about the weasel, but he could also go from one end of the reservoir to the other in an instant. And he could coast over the reed fields to pick out a good sleeping place. His world expanded, from the ground and water to the sky. While Sprout envied Greentop, she missed him" (Hwang 94). Moreover, once the protector, Sprout now finds herself under the protective wing of her son in their struggles against the weasel. Even Straggler's tragic fate is also conditioned by his inability to fly.

In numerous ways, the dreams that Sprout nurtures appear unachievable in reality. But fighting against all the obstacles, Sprout fulfils her “single wish to sit on an egg and see the birth a baby” by raising a duckling. She overcomes the challenges that arise during the pursuit of her aspirations. As a selfless mother to Greentop, witnessing his accomplishments in swimming and flying brings immense joy to Sprout. Even though she never experienced the sensation of flying herself, the liberation of her son through his ability to fly gives her a sense of fulfilment. It’s only after Greentop leaves for the winterlands with other wild ducks, Sprout realizes that she “desperately wanted to go with her baby. She wanted to fly alongside the mallards. She feared being left alone; she hated what was happening. [...] She flapped her wings. Why hadn’t she practiced, when Greentop started clumsily on his own? She’d never realized that she harbored another wish. It was more than a wish: it was something she physically longed for” (Hwang 133). Although, her dream of flying is never fulfilled, sacrificing her life to the weasel can be regarded as a symbolic realization of it. In the end, she offers herself to the weasel in order to get rid of the emptiness caused by the separation from her son. Sprout’s encounter with death is compared to the experience of taking a flight, described being *aloft* “like a feather” (Hwang 134).

#### **6.4 Major Themes:**

In this section (which is divided into four subsections), we are going to examine some of the relevant themes associated with the novel, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*. However, it is recommended not to limit your exploration of the novel to the themes discussed here. Please read the novel attentively and endeavour to uncover additional facets related to the novel if you can find any. Literary works often contain possibilities for multiple interpretations depending on the modes of inquiry one employs.

##### **6.4.1 Motherhood and Sacrifice:**

*The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* is widely regarded as a fable that celebrates maternal instincts and love. Sprout’s character serves as

an embodiment of the complexities, joys, and challenges of motherhood. Sprout nurtures a deep yearning to experience the joys of raising her own offspring. This maternal instinct becomes a driving force behind many of her actions and decisions throughout the story. Sprout's journey to the unknown world is characterised by a sense of responsibility towards her son. Her ability to navigate challenges, adapt to new circumstances, and persevere in the face of adversity mirrors the strength often associated with the experience of motherhood.

Sun-mi Hwang, through the character of Sprout, also problematizes the image of an ideal mother. Apart from being driven by innate maternal instinct, Sprout's longing for motherhood is also heightened by her witnessing the rooster's hen incubating eggs. Sprout tastes both joys and sufferings conditioned by her motherhood. She nurtures her son at the cost of her physical, mental and emotional health. At times, she misses her previous secure life in the coop. She also develops mixed feelings of happiness and envy towards Greentop as he grows up and learns swimming and flying that leads to their eventual separation. In the end, the liberation of her son comes at the ultimate cost of Sprout's own life. Sprout's decision to sacrifice her own life is motivated by two central motifs: her death serves as a means of freeing her son from their bond, and she discovers that the weasel, much like herself, is a mother struggling to nourish her hungry babies.

(For more instances of the parenthood of Sprout and Straggler, please go to the previous unit where incidents related to the sacrificial dimension of parenthood have been thoroughly described.)

#### **6.4.2 Human-Animal Relationship:**

Reflection on the complex dynamics of human-nature relationship is a pertinent theme in Sun-mi Hwang's novels. Considering the given modes of representation, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* can be analyzed from an ecocritical perspective. Ecocriticism is a study of literature that "analyzes the ways in which literature represents the human

relation to nature at particular moments of history, what values are assigned to nature and why, and how perceptions of the natural shape literary tropes and genres. In turn, it examines how such literary figures contribute to shaping social and cultural attitudes toward the environment” (Levin 1098). In *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, the portrayal of the human-nature relationship is multifaceted which explores the complex relationship between the human world and natural environment. Hwang’s depiction of the barnyard in the novel serves as an effective setting for representing the dynamics of human-animal relationship; it becomes a complex site of power-politics. The farmer and his wife represent the authority and control of humans over nature, determining the fates of the animals of the farm. The relationship between the farmer family and the yard animals is characterized by both tension and harmony, as the humans provide food and shelter but also impose restrictions on the animals. The farmer’s wife feeds the animals so that she can derive benefits from them. Every time she offers foods to the hens, she utters the same words to them – “Go on, eat so you can lay lots of big eggs!” (Hwang 8). When Sprout fails to give them any egg for five consecutive days, the farmer family decides to “cull” her. Eventually, they leave Sprout with other ailing hens to die. The sharp contrast between Sprout’s desires and the obstacles imposed by human control on her highlights the complex dynamics of the human-nature relationship. *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* opens up the avenue for ecocritical examination, offering a platform for the “study of literature as a site of environmental-ethical reflection – for example, as a critique of anthropocentric assumptions” (Laurence Buell 1091). The farmer family’s perceptions of the animal world are shaped in terms of its utility to human beings. The disparity lies in the contrasting views of the farmer’s wife, who sees eggs as a commodity, and Sprout, for whom eggs hold the essence of life. When she discovers the white duck’s egg inside the briar patch, Sprout immediately calls it her “baby”. She embraces the egg and says, “You almost got into trouble, little one. I will keep you warm. Don’t be scared” (Hwang 43).



However, the world of the animals is not a passive presence in the novel. It is shown to have an autonomous existence which goes beyond the reach and control of human beings. This is evident in the way Sprout survives against all the obstacles imposed on her and frees her son, Greentop, from the farmer's wife. Additionally, the novel introduces elements of the wild, such as the weasel and the wild duck, Straggler, further emphasizing the dichotomy between the domesticated farm life and the untamed natural world. These wild elements disrupt the established order of the barn, challenging the human-centric perspective and introducing a sense of unpredictability that exists in the world of nature.

**Stop to Consider :**

The following excerpt from Sun-mi Hwang's *Miracle on Cherry Hill* provides insight on Nature as possessing an independent and mysterious existence. The quotation illustrates a rich man named Kang Dae-su's unsuccessful endeavour to assert control over his property on Cherry Hill by: As someone who liked to follow rules, Kang didn't know what he was supposed to do. He was dumbfounded at the sheer gall but amazed at the sight of the fresh vegetables. There was lettuce. What was this? And that? They all looked different. The gardener clearly had green fingers. But how long had this been here? He hadn't received any sort of report on this activity. Perhaps that meant it had been there the entire time. Did that mean that these were his vegetables? Or were they considered the gardener's? Park would have yet another task. He needed to find out who was responsible for this. This was beyond sneaking on to his property. He would issue a stern warning to ensure that the situation didn't continue. Here he was, on a small hill in the city. From the outside it looked peaceful but he was starting to realise that it wasn't so. Every step he took he discovered something else, whether it was yet another problem or an amazing view. This place was alive, like Pierre's father said. Alive and open to the outside world (Hwang 77-8).

### 6.4.3 Class Division, Hierarchy and the Animal World:

The novel sheds lights on the possible complexities that may exist in the world of animals. The animal world in *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* is presented as having its own rules and regulations prescribed for the inhabitants which give rise to the class-division and social hierarchy. The animals occupy distinct positions in this hierarchy, reflecting power dynamics and complex relationships. The rooster, as the head of the yard flocks, holds a prominent position. Sprout, having lived mostly inside the coop as an egg-laying hen, is given an inferior status by the yard animals; and her relationship with others is dictated by this hierarchy. The dog, serving as the gatekeeper, also plays a significant role in maintaining order and reinforcing the established structure. The given circumstances of the barnyard and its hierarchical structure play crucial roles in shaping the characters' identity in the novel. Here is an extract from the novel that reflects the way other inhabitants of the barnyard treat Sprout as an *outsider* when she approaches for shelter after escaping from the weasel with the help of Straggler:

“What a terrible smell!” the dog growled, stepping forward.

Sprout sidled closer to the mallard.

“No need to do that. It’s just a hen,” the mallard said gently so as not to offend the dog.

The dog frowned and circled Sprout, as though waiting for a chance to snatch her up in his jaws. “I can’t let just anyone by. I am an excellent guard!” The dog bared his teeth.

Hearing the commotion, several ducks stuck their heads out of the barn. “So he didn’t leave after all?” one duck groused.

“Oh, no,” another duck lamented. “what’s he dragged in?”

“What a mess! A plucked chicken. It must have run away from the weasel’s dinner table.

The ducks quacked with laughter.

The mallard was quiet, but his feathers stood on end and trembled. Sprout felt sorry that he was the butt of their jokes.

“Hey Straggler!” a duck called. “You’re too much of a burden for us as it is. And now you’ve dragged some sick chicken along with you?”

“Shoo her away! She’ll infect us all.”

In chorus, the brace of ducks agreed that Sprout should leave immediately (Hwang 25-6).

This established hierarchy of the barn, nonetheless, is a subject to obstructions. When the dog reminds Sprout of the “rules” of the yard and orders her to perform her duty to lay eggs in the coop, she bravely challenges the supposition by asking him questions like “What if I don’t like the rules? What happens then?” (Hwang 39). The operation of the power-politics shown in the novel is layered and elusive in nature. The farmer’s wife, for instance, thinks of replacing the dog, who proudly claims to be an “excellent gatekeeper” in the presence of Sprout and Straggler, calling him *old* when he fails to protect the cockerel from the weasel. Thus, the dynamics of power-relations which are conditioned by the given circumstances of the barnyard and modes of resistance applied by its inhabitants constantly shift.

#### **6.4.4 Identity Conflict:**

Identity conflict is one of the significant themes in *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*. Sun-mi Hwang reflects on the layered dimensions of the characters’ identity formation in the novel. Sprout’s defiance of the established rules and her pursuit of autonomy contribute to the thematic exploration of identity and the challenges that arise when one’s true nature conflicts with societal norms. The tension between her instinctual desires and the given societal norms highlights the complex nature of identity conflict. Sprout faces identity crisis having been assigned the role of an egg-laying hen which goes against her desire for motherhood and individual existence. Sprout finds herself in a situation where she experiences inner struggles in terms of difference between how she perceives herself and how she is perceived by others based on the social norms. The life that the rooster’s hen leads stands in sharp contrast to

Sprout's own. The rooster's hen's presence serves as a marker of the inequalities and varying degrees of privilege and power that exist between two hens. The rooster's hen consistently looks down upon Sprout, fostering a sense of insecurity in her. The following statement is made by the rooster's hen against Sprout which shows how she exerts power over her when she arrives at the barn with the duckling:

One hen in the barn is enough. And I have six chicks. There isn't room. I am also worried about the chicks' education. I know they'll keep asking 'Why does he quack and call a hen Mom?' 'Why is he different from us?' Some of them might even try to quack. I can't raise my chicks in a chaotic environment like that. We need to send the foolish hen and the duckling pecking (Hwang 68).

Issues related to identity conflict also emerge from an individual's yearning for social approval, exemplified in the case of Greentop. His sense of loneliness originates from the realization that he isn't embraced by the yard ducks as one of their own. To gain insights on how the perceptions of others impact Greentop's self-awareness, consider the following extract from the novel:

Greentop was silent for a moment. "Mom, I've been thinking," he said with difficulty. He was quiet again for a while. Sprout grew nervous. "How about we go back to the barn? I don't like being by myself all the time."

Sprout's heart sank. This was the first time he'd said something like that. He must be wrestling with these feelings. "Back to the barn?"

"I am a duck anyway. All I can do is quack."

"So what? Even though we look different, we cherish each other. I love

you so much. Sprout parroted what the mallard had told her a long time ago. She'd understood the mallard, so she hoped Greentop would understand her.

But Greentop shook his head. “I don’t know, Mom. What if the ducks never accept me? I want to be one of them.” He started to weep (Hwang 94-5).

The development of individual identity is significantly shaped by the need for social acknowledgment and acceptance. Sprout’s love and affection for Greentop seem insufficient in the context of societal perceptions which determine the destiny of their relationship. Similarly, Straggler mostly lives a solitary life due to his distinctiveness as a wild duck, never finding acceptance among the yard ducks. Straggler’s position in the barnyard is defined by the factor that he doesn’t belong to the place. He is a displaced mallard, accidentally departed from his mates. Hence his existence is one of helplessness and voicelessness. Even though he wants to help Sprout by providing her a secure spot in the barn, he is powerless to do so. Whenever he attempts to raise his voice, other inhabitants of the yard silence him; the leader of the yard ducks even threatens him like this: “You’re an outsider. How dare you insult us? Don’t forget we let you in the barn. You should be grateful” (Hwang 27). Thus, Straggler’s lack of belonging to a certain group of the barn makes his lived experiences more difficult.

While the identity conflict emerges from Sprout’s encounter with the societal norms of the barnyard, her dreams of flying represent a metaphorical longing for autonomous existence and self-discovery. Sprout’s questioning the predetermined roles assigned to her as a hen becomes a powerful mode of resistance against the established power-structures of the barnyard that gives a new direction to the formation of her individuality.

**Self Assessment Question:**

How does the novel explore the tension between individuality and conformity? (Explain in 120 words)

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## 6.5 Narrative Technique:

*The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* is commonly categorized as a fable within the domain of children's literature. However, upon closer examination of the novel, you can see that Hwang's specific mode of characterization serves a strategic purpose in questioning some of the taken-for-granted assumptions regarding animal world. Positioning of a hen as its protagonist makes it convenient for the novelist to question the human-centric considerations of animal world that often place animals in the margin. The novel's mode of representation is largely allegorical in nature. An "allegory is a story or image with several layers of meaning; behind the literal or surface meaning lie one or more secondary meanings, of varying degrees of complexities" (Cuddon 21). Allegory is defined as "a narrative strategy, which may be employed in any literary form or genre"(9) in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*.

The novel uses a third person narrator; yet, the story unfolds mostly from the point of view of Sprout. The use of an omniscient narrator, "who knows practically everything about the situations and the events recounted" (Prince 68), helps the novelist in effectively introducing an inclusive view of the animal-world which otherwise would prove difficult. But Hwang's employment of the omniscient narrator is distinct as narrative does not solve all the mysteries at once. The story unfolds gradually, unveiling new dimension at every step which makes the reading experience a gripping one. Each chapter of the novel contains elements of surprise. The narrator, for instance, identifies the weasel as 'he' and a persistent rival to Sprout throughout the novel; it's only in the last two chapters, the true identity of the weasel as a mother is revealed. Such take on by the author opens up the possibilities for examination of the shifts in perspective applied in *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*.

Granting a voice to a hen enables Sun-mi Hwang to introduce an alternative frame of references in which the animal world no longer occupies a subordinate position. Fables typically convey moral lessons or ethical principles through the experiences of their characters. Even though *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* exhibits several

characteristics of a fable, including animal characters with human traits and simple storytelling technique, it will be limited to confine its meaning to the moral lessons the novel seems to offer. Apart from the moral implications, the novel provides glimpses of the natural world, not subject to human control. There are descriptions of the unpredictable yet beautiful aspects of nature which are beyond human reach.

**Self Assessment Question:**

Read the opening lines of the novel. In what ways does the narrative technique contribute to the reader’s engagement with the novel?  
(Write in 80 words)

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**6.6 Images and Symbols:**

In this section, we will look at the images and symbols used as narratorial devices by Sun-mi Hwang in her *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*. A symbol is “an object, animate, or inanimate, which represents or ‘stands for’ something else” (Cuddon 699). The symbols, however, mentioned in this discussion cannot be considered exhaustive. Therefore, it is anticipated that you will try to find out additional symbols and images used in the novel and explain their relevance in the larger context.

The coop serves as a symbol of confinement, functioning like an imposition that limits individual freedom. Within this structured environment, the hen faces restrictions on her aspirations and dreams. The coop becomes a metaphor for societal conformity that stands as a barrier between Sprout and her aspiration for the pursuit of dreams. The wire mesh encircling the coop acts as a boundary for Sprout that stops her from exploring livelihood outside the limited space she has been put into. Sprout’s desire to surpass this barrier is evident in the following lines: “With a sigh, she peered outside. Because her cage was near the entrance she could see out beyond the wire mesh walls. The door to the coop

didn't quite fit its frame; through the gap she could see the acacia tree" (Hwang 5). This signifies her aspiration to free herself from the confinement of the coop.

The acacia tree, "blooming with flowers, the green leaves, the wonderful scent", operates as a source of inspiration for Sprout. Sprout, after witnessing its "leaves stand strong against rough winds and heavy rains", finds in it a guiding principle to overcome the challenges she faces in her life. Sprout experiences moments of self-love and gains confidence just by looking at it. She admires the tree so much that she names herself after its sprouts. "Sprout was the best name in the world", she thinks, "A Sprout grew into a leaf and embraced the wind and the sun before falling and turning into mulch for bringing fragrant flowers into bloom. Sprout wanted to do something with her life, just like the sprouts on the acacia tree" (Hwang 7). The tree becomes a guiding principle for Sprout in her journey towards freedom and self-discovery. The acacia tree serves as a powerful symbol of resilience and transformation.

In the novel, the reservoir is a water source situated beyond the reach of human beings. It symbolizes the abundance of opportunities and the vitality of the natural world. Depicted as a vast open space in contrast with the controlled environment of the coop, it simultaneously denotes risks and dangers for a hen like Sprout who can neither swim nor fly. Sprout undertakes the journey to the reservoir only for the sake of her son in spite of the fact that the "road to the reservoir was rugged. It marked the beginning of their wretched life in the fields without the protection of the gatekeeper or the barn, the weasel always on their minds" (75). The reservoir is not just a tranquil body of water, it's also home to various predators and potential dangers. Sprout encounters threats from other animals in the wild, underscoring the risks associated with venturing beyond the safety of the coop. The unfamiliar landscape, filled with obstacles and potential hazards, tests her ability to adapt and overcome adversity. Sprout's journey to the reservoir is driven by her sense of responsibility to secure the life of her son. This represents a significant emotional challenge as she grapples with the sacrifices



required for the well-being of her offspring. Nature, with its ever-changing conditions, presents Sprout with unpredictable challenges. Here are a few lines from the novel which describe how difficult life becomes for Sprout in the reservoir during rainy season: “The reservoir was so high that the reeds were almost completely submerged. These were difficult days for Sprout. It was hard to find a dry place, and because her feathers were always damp, she suffered from continuous cold” (89). The journey to the reservoir becomes a test of Sprout’s maternal devotion and the lengths she is willing to go to ensure a comfortable life for her son. The reservoir appears to be not only a physical destination but also a metaphorical space where Sprout confronts and overcomes various obstacles on her quest for a different life.

The cord,”dangling from his leg”as a result of the farmer’s wife’s attempt of tying up Greentop bears a major symbolic significance in the novel. It represents the subjugated condition of a bird under human control. The cord is the marker of how human beings try to exert power over other birds and animals. It can be seen a manifestation of the power dynamics between humans and animals. Greentop, being the offspring of a wild duck, stands apart from the yard ducks, possessing a strength and uniqueness that distinguishes him from the rest. Greentop’s presence in the barn, although just for a while, gives a stark contrast to the domesticated life of yard ducks leading to a striking juxtaposition the untamed, free existence of the wild and restricted condition of the domestic ducks. But the unsuccessful attempt of the farmer’s wife to domesticate Greentop leaves a mark on him which later impacts the way his identity is perceived by the wild ducks. When Greentop’s family, the flock of wild ducks, arrive at the reservoir, they show reluctance to accept him as one of them due to the cord hanging round his foot: “Having grown up in the reed fields, he didn’t have to worry about smelling like a domestic duck, but the cord around his foot gave the impression that he had run away from a human, so the wild ducks were wary of him” (Hwang 115). Sprout, after realizing this, painstakingly dedicates an entire night to peck at it in order to free Greentop from the cord. She

successfully tears up the cord; but due to her inability to loosen the knot she leaves it on his foot encircling like a ring. This can again be seen as a marker of Greentop's lived experiences in the barn carrying it to the winterlands, the unknown; it becomes a testament to his attempted domestication. Furthermore, it transforms into a powerful symbol of the complex yet beautiful bond between Sprout and her son. Even as he flies away from his mother, the ring on his foot becomes a constant reminder of the profound sacrifice she made for him.

**Stop to Consider:**

(Read the following passage from *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* carefully. What symbolic values do you find in it?)

On nights when the moon was particularly bright, Straggler ran around flapping his wings. This was new – he'd never done that in the yard. The first time she witnessed Straggler waddling around as fast as he could, Sprout told the egg, "Baby, Straggler's right wing doesn't open fully. I wonder what happened. But his left wing is bigger and more powerful than I thought. His wings don't look like other ducks' wings." On the nights Straggler ran around like that, Sprout told the egg numerous stories. Or she sang lullaby after lullaby in the case the egg was startled by Straggler's loud quacks ringing through the hills. Straggler looked like he was dancing, and Sprout couldn't help but be concerned. His behavior was becoming more and more erratic. But she didn't ask him about it. She didn't want to embarrass him, especially when he was so kind to bring her food each day. As the full moon started to wane, Straggler's dancing became more frequent, and Sprout's worries more pronounced. She had been sitting on the egg since the moon was a crescent; the baby inside was almost all grown, its heartbeat strong. Soon the shell will crack, but Sprout worried the mallard would frighten the baby. A few more days passed. Straggler skipped some nights, but his odd dance continued. Sprout watched patiently (Hwang 49-50).

### **Check Your Progress:**

1. Critically examine Sun-mi Hwang's specific use of fable as a narrative technique.
2. Do you agree that the novel "breaks down the boundaries between the animal and the human"? Justify your answer in the context of power-relations addressed in the novel.

### **6.7 Summing Up :**

In this section, I have attempted to discuss some of the crucial thematic and symbolic aspects of the novel. The unit is divided into some sections and subjects for your convenience each of which focusses on some of the key dimensions of the novel. However, the inherent flexibility of literary works contains the prospect of generating multiple meanings of a text. The discussion is just an attempt to acquaint you with the possible means of interpretations. You are recommended to enhance your own critical reading of the novel by using different analytical frameworks.

### **6.8 References and Suggested Readings:**

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