

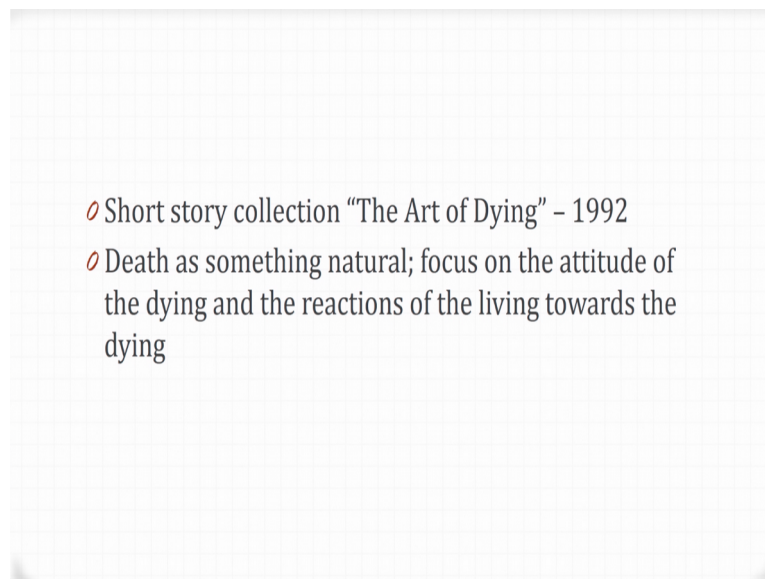
Indian Fiction in English
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Module - 10
Lecture - 34
Remains of the Feast by Gita Hariharan

Good morning everyone. Welcome to today's session of the NPTEL course Indian Fiction in English. We look at this short story by Gita Hariharan titled Remains of the feast and we base this lecture focusing on some of the interesting ways in which Indian fiction can be read. We had been taking a look at different frameworks through which we can approach in this body of writing known as Indian Fiction in English.

Today we particularly look at 1 essay by Susie Tharu which is read The Remains of the feast, in the context of a comparative reading by comparing this short story with another short story written by a Dalit writer. The short story Remains of the Feast is from this collection;

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Published in 1992 by Gita Hariharan titled The Art of Dying. In this collection there are a set of stories, a series of stories where she looks at death as something natural. The focus is on the attitude of the dying and not on the funeral rites or rituals. And she also takes into account the reactions of the living, towards the dying. The entire collection has been much applauded and it has been seen as a different way of looking at death, not necessarily always in a mournful lamenting way but also looking at death from the perspective of life.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:41)

Remains of the Feast

- o A short story anthologized by Rushdie
- o About a ninety-year old grandmother - her story narrated by Ratna, great granddaughter - Their special bonding
 - o We were not exactly room-mates, but we shared two rooms, }
one corner of the old ancestral house, all my 20-year-old life }
- o The narration begins after the grandmother's death the previous month

Remains of the Feast incidentally is also the short story anthologised by Rushdie, Vintage book of Indian writing, a controversial introduction of which we also had taken a look at in one of introductory sessions. And this is how he introduces Gita Hariharan along with the other contemporary writers such as Padma Perera, Anjana Appachana and Gita Hariharan who according to him are less well known than Sidhwa and Mehta. But they confirmed the quality of contemporary writing by Indian women.

So, this can be taken as a representative text in that sense where we look at the quality of Indian writing produced by women. This story is about a 90-year-old grandmother who remains unnamed. And her story is narrated by Ratna, her great-granddaughter. This is about their special bonding and the many minute details that we get to know in this process of narration. This is how Ratna the great-granddaughter talks about the relation she has with her grandmother.

We were not exactly room-mates, but we shared 2 rooms, 1 corner of the old ancestral house, all my 20-year-old life. The narration begins interestingly after the grandmother's death, the previous month. So, it is a selective recollection of certain significant things that happened in this great-grandmother's life, especially towards the end of her life. That this narration is from the perspective of a younger generation and that about 2 generations have passed in between makes this rendition all the more interesting. The grandmother had died of cancer;

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- o Cancer ✓
- o Craving for forbidden food – “a brahmin widow who had never eaten anything but pure, home-cooked food for almost a century” – cakes from a christian shop, coca cola, ice-creams, biscuits, samosas – “lemon tarts, garlic, three types of aerated drinks, fruit caked baked with brandy, bhel-puri from the fly-infested bazaar nearby”

But what becomes central to this plot, central to the progress of the story is not the event which comes in the form of cancer, but the way in which the great-grandmother begins to respond after she has been diagnosed with cancer. The family tries to keep this away from her. They diagnose her with cancer but they also think that it would be wise to keep this away from her as a secret.

They also decide not to let the extended family know, to provide, to avoid the series of visitations from them. While Ratna the great-granddaughter fears that the great-grandmother will call her and ask about what the Doctor had suggested; we find that the great-grandmother the figure of the Brahmin widow, she chooses to completely ignore the visit made to the doctor. She chooses completely not to talk about the visit to the doctor.

On the other hand, she begins to crave for all kinds of forbidden food, all kinds of food which were taboo for her due to caste restrictions. And this is how Ratna talks about this sudden shift. She is a Brahmin widow who had never eaten anything but pure home cooked food for almost a century. And we find that all of a sudden without any immediate propagation the great-grandmother begins to crave for different kinds of things.

Cakes from a Christian shop, made by a Muslim cook, for Coca-Cola, ice creams, biscuits, samosas. And this, there is a way in which the desire begins to present itself in more varied forms, in more articulate forms. She begins to crave for lemon tarts, garlic, 3 types of aerated drinks, fruit cakes baked with brandy, bhel-puri from the fly-infested bazar nearby. So, she is

willing to break out of all kinds of caste restrictions and also the notions of purity, pollution, the notions related to hygiene.

And there is an interesting way in which this narration takes us forward through these graphic representations of the new-found desires and the new-found cravings that the great-grandmother has. And the climax comes across as all the more interesting.

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Climax

o Red colour saree with a big wide border of gold and peanuts with chilli powder from the corner shop. Onion and green chilly bondas deep fried in oil ✓

Baby Kochamma - *The God of Small Things*
Living like a young woman at the age of eighty-three

"Lipstick. Kohl. A sly touch of rouge. And because the house was locked and dark, and because she only believed in 40-watt bulbs, her lipstick mouth had shifted slightly off her real mouth"

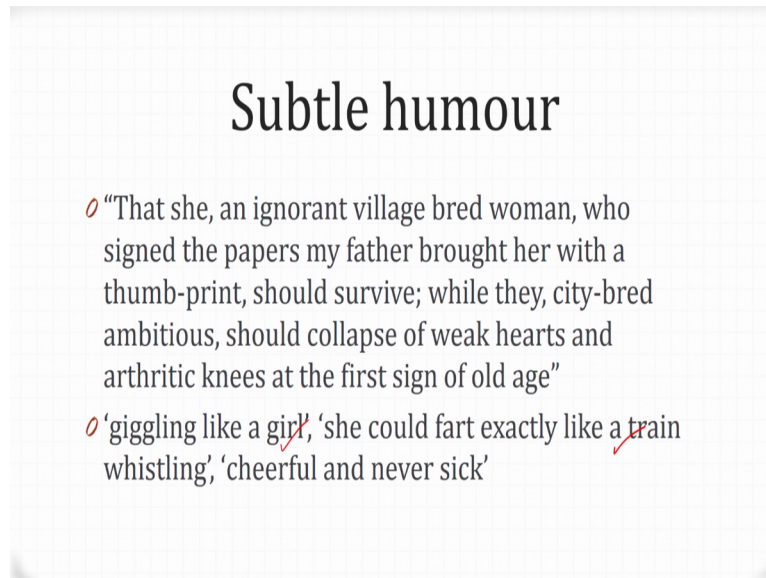
This is a present and almost like a death wish. This is the last statement that the great-grandmother uttered before she died. She asks for a red colour saree with a big wide border of gold. And she also craves for peanuts with chilli powder from the corner shop and onion and green chilli bondas deep fried in oil. This comes across as very significant when she asks for the red saree. Of course, Ratna the great-granddaughter, she agrees because she has been a partner for fulfilling all of these new-found desires and cravings.

But her mother, Ratna's mother who comes across is more conventional. She rubbishes this wish off and they do not drape her in the red coloured saree during the funeral. We can find certain illusions with some other characters. I am reminded of the character of Baby Kochamma, from the God of Small Things, where she is living like a young woman at the age of 83. Rahale, one of the twins. She notices that Baby Kochamma had suddenly begun to wear makeup.

Lipstick, khol, a sly touch of rouge. And because the house was locked and dark and because she only believed in 40-watt bulbs, her lipstick mouth had shifted slightly off her real mouth.

These are certain interesting ways in which Indian Fiction portrays desire in the context of ageing, desire in the context of gender and desire in the context of breaking out of certain taboos and breaking out of certain co-social conventions within which they were always forced, within which the women were always forced to live.

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This is such a humour which marks this story, *The Remains of the Feast*. Right at the outset we get a taste of how Gita Hariharan is going to process the story, going to present this story. We know that it is about death. But the title implies otherwise it is about the remains of a feast. And we are told about the death of the grandmother which happened the previous month. And soon after that, while talking about the early demise of her son and daughter-in-law and the way the 90-year-old grandmother survived all of them.

Gita Hariharan resorts of this interesting narrative strategy where she infuses humour into this otherwise not so humorous situation. That she an ignorant village bred woman, who signed the papers my father brought her with a thumb-print, should survive. While they, city-bred ambitious, should collapse of weak hearts and arthritic knees at the first sign of old age. She is bringing in a contrast between tradition and modernity and also about the differing views of health.

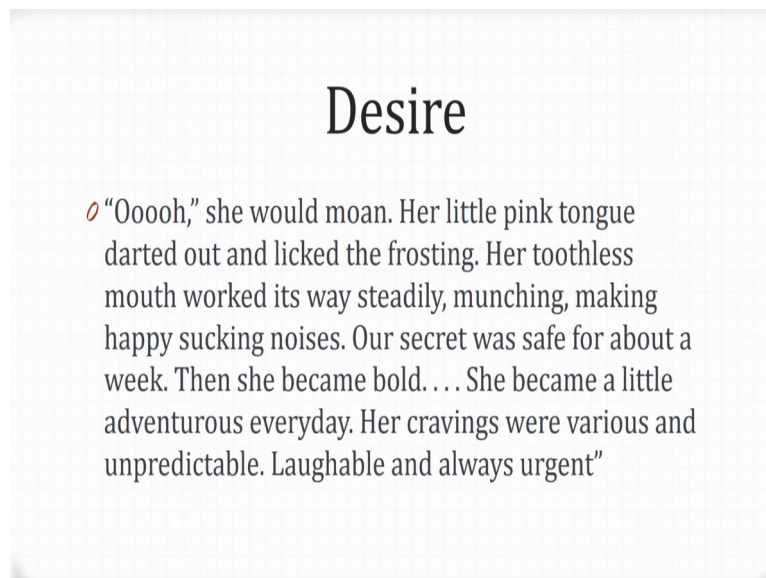
And that Ratna is a medical student herself, that accentuates the irony of this situation. And the grandmother, the great-grandmother, this 90-year-old widow, she is presented in a very different way. Not like the way in which usually 90-year-old widows are presented. She is

said to be giggling like a girl. And there is a brief description of how she could fart exactly like a train whistling.

And about how the grandmother as far as Ratna could remember, at least in the last 20 years. She was always cheerful and never sick. So, this is how the figure of the grandmother, the figure of this 90-year-old Brahmin widow is presented before us. And this is a very, a different kind of a rendition but at the same time the natural language and the naturalness with which Gita Hariharan presents this image; it does not come across as being a big deal.

She talks about, Hariharan talks about this 90-year-old Brahmin widow as if this could also be the norm. Particularly find it interesting that Gita Hariharan's story has brought together the aspects of desire, gender in the context of food. I read to you this excerpt from the story where the grandmother is actually responding to food. But the kind of terms used, the description used, the flow with which language goes here, it talks about a different kind of a carnal desire as well. This is how the excerpt reads.

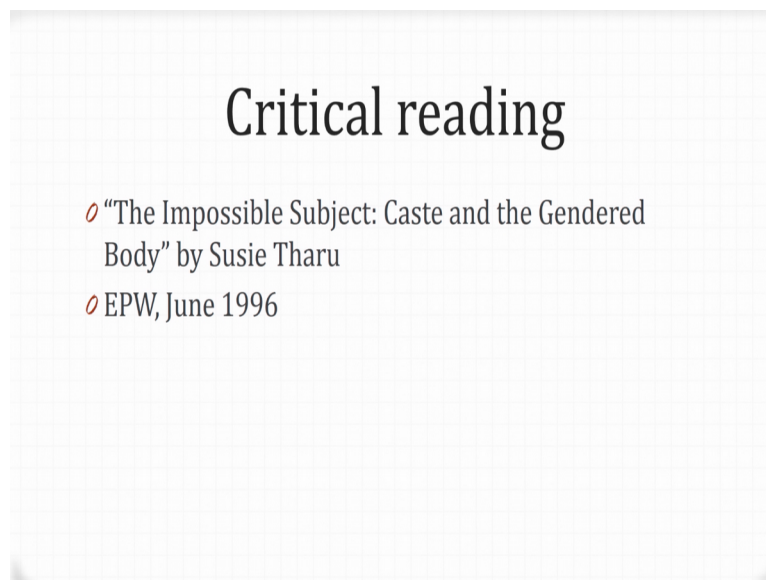
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Ooooh, she would moan. Her little pink tongue darted out and licked at the frosting. Her toothless mouth worked its way steadily, munching, making happy sucking noises. Our secret was safe for about a week. Then she became bold. She became a little adventurous everyday. Her cravings were various and unpredictable, laughable and always urgent. Look at the sexual undertone over here where Hariharan also makes his bold attempt to bring in desire and food in the context of this almost end of the life scenario of a 90-year-old widow.

The story would easily come across as a feel-good read. As one of those stories said, you can read, feel good and perhaps even forget about. Notwithstanding the happy feeling that it would leave behind you. It is in this context that I introduce you to a critical reading by Susie Tharu where she focuses on this story from a different angle, from a different perspective altogether.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:12)



Tharu's essay was first published in EPW in June 1996. It is titled The Impossible Subject: Caste and the Gendered Body. And I bring this reading to you, to also showcase the multiple ways in which you can enter the writings of, produced from Indian Fiction in English and to see how they can also be made to lend themselves to aspects which are not really centrally part of the story.

And this is what Tharu's essays will do to you and I hope this will also open up your avenues for you to look at Indian fiction more critically. This is a context in which Tharu presents her essay. She talks about how the figure of the;

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Context

- o The figure of the Hindu widow in Indian literatures - 'widow stories' and their framing
- o "After all when one thinks of a widow, one thinks of a Hindu widow, in the last century no more than now, one means brahmin widow"
- o Minimal plot - to be enjoyed in passing - "the seriousness with which I approach this text is a misreading"

Hindu widow in Indian literatures have always found to be looming large. She recalls how she noticed that even while she was co-editing women writing in India along with K. Lalitha. She talks about very briefly, she talks about the widow stories and their framing within this nationalist or context. And she also makes this succinct statement, after all when one thinks of a widow, one thinks of a Hindu widow, in the last century no more than now, one means a brahmin widow.

This is the envy point of Tharu's discussion where she brings into focus 2 major stories.

1. Remains of the Feast by Githa Hariharan and the other Mother by Baburao Bagul. And she first talks about Gita Hariharan's story, The Remains of the Feast. She refers to the minimal plot which she also agrees is something which is intended to be enjoyed in passing. And then she marks her intervention of the statement.

Seriousness with which I approach this text is a misreading. And this is what makes this really extremely important and extremely significant and different. Because Tharu is able to bring in a very serious reading into this story which could otherwise be perhaps put away as yet another story which just made you feel good. Susie Tharu's reading forces us to look at the story from a different perspective. She tells us that this is a typical widow in a certain way.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:24)

The widow in the story

- o A costumed, 19th century subject of the colonial social reform movements
- o Not the victim of a cruel, superstitious society - unlike her predecessor
- o a personhood that exceeds discipline - makes farting a musical event, indecorous laughter, body odours
- o Caste-gender taboos, middle class propriety - forced to move aside
- o Grossly irreverent appetite

It is a costumed 19th century subject of the colonial social reform movements. But what makes the grandmother figure, the Brahmin widow figure in this story different is the fact that she is not presented as a victim of a cruel, superstitious society and this is quite unlike her predecessor who had to fight it out through various colonial and Nationalist reform movements.

She does not really recall the history of those movements but she in a certain way invokes those colonial Nationalist straight jackets within which these reform movements were placed initially. She enables us to look at the widow, the figure of the widow as a person that exceeds discipline. It is the figure of the widow, a Brahmin widow, which we get to know through many markers but interestingly and significantly not the widow figure who is a victim of a caste-ridden society.

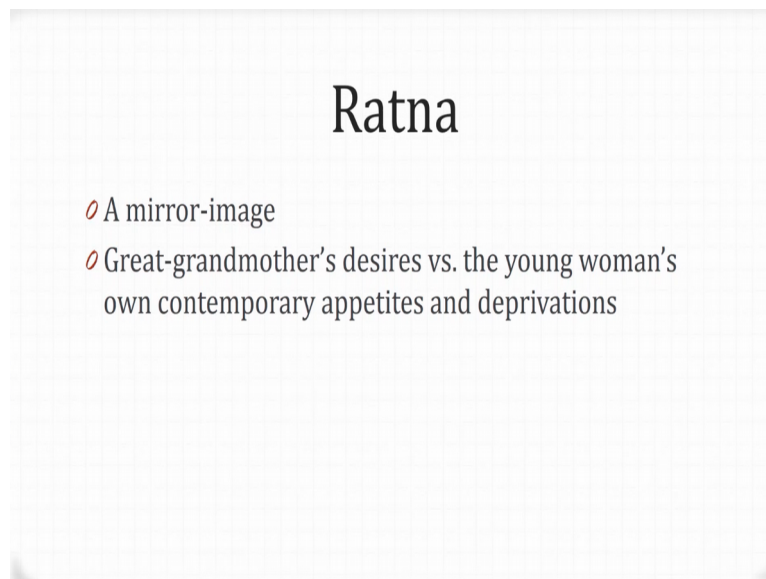
How is this person, who is made to exceed discipline and come out of these barriers of propriety and discipline. Gita Hariharan includes these very interesting and hilarious situations through which she allows this Brahmin widow, allows this figure of the grandmother to make farting a musical event or to produce indecorous laughter. And there is a talk about body odours without really making it sound offensive.

What happens here by introducing certain indecorous ways of performing within the family, within the society. What Gita Hariharan does is to force certain caste-gender taboos and middle-class propriety to move aside. And it is in that space where the grandmother figure

pushes aside all kinds of propriety and taboos. It is in that space that she begins to exist and enjoy this feast.

And what becomes central to this plot, central to this entire storyline is this grossly irreverent appetite which also comes across as being irrelevant at times. And how this is accommodated in this story, without really disturbing the family status, without really disturbing the caste status. That is what Susie Tharu is interested in looking at.

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And Ratna who is really a narrator, a modern figure in the story. Susie Tharu sees her as a mirror-image of this figure of the grandmother and we also find a certain way in which the great-grandmother's desire, the openness with which the great-grandmother expresses her desires. And the young woman's old contemporary appetites and deprivations are presented. There is a brief instance where Ratna talks about how she should be devouring her books, while that night she would rather prefer to cuddle with her grandmother.

And there is a way in which we find some kind of a tussle between the personal desires, the personal space and the expectations of the society and the family also comes in. Ratna is also not presented as a female who is oppressed within a certain restrictive system. She on the contrary comes across to someone who has enough freedom to bring in, to fulfil the cravings that her great-grandmother has.

Of course, her mother does not agree with all the things that she has been doing but nevertheless we do find that Ratna is given the space to move around and do certain things.

And what significant even at this point is that we do not find things being unsettled in a major way. The status quo is maintained in terms of gender, in terms of caste, in terms of the societal structure.

Tharu will soon also show us how she looks at the status quo from a different perspective altogether. Susie Tharu, successfully brings in a feminist reading to the story. And in her own words;

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Feminism in the story

- o Reading this story as 'an intervention in a long-standing debate in Indian feminism' ✓
- o What kind of a feminist statement?
- o A feminist body
- o The enemy is not patriarchy - but a social world that fails to sustain the spirit
- o Victim - fleshly nature - not women

This story is read as an intervention in a long-standing debate in Indian feminism. And if you are familiar with the plot of the story, if you have already read the story which is barely 6-7 pages. It is difficult to find any articulation of a political feminism over here. So what kind of a feminist statement is being made here. Tharu forces us to look at the feminist body in the figure of the, this old Brahmin widow.

And here she also reminds us to focus, pay attention to the fact that unlike the usual rhetoric, unlike the usual conventional narrative, the enemy here is not patriarchy, but a social world that fails to sustain this new spirit that the great-grandmother brings in. And it is different kind of feminism in that sense. Here the victim is a fleshly nature, not women.

The cravings, the desires and the new kind of appetite, this grossly irreverent appetite the figure of the great-grandmother develops becomes perhaps unacceptable or even a little obscene for a more conventional case. It is not just because she is a woman it is also because

it is an articulation of the fleshly nature. So, what is being victimised here is the body and not necessarily a feminist body.

And this shift that Tharu notices from patriarchy to a social order, to a social world is peculiarly interesting in looking at the story from a fresh perspective and also in bringing in a fresh approach of a feminist reading. And she moves on to lead us to the caste politics of the story;

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The caste politics of this story

- o A Hindu brahmin widow
- o Upper caste status - the family owns property in the village; part of Indian officialdom for two generations
- o Son an administrator, grandson an accountant, great-granddaughter studying medicine
- o The hunger and cravings - 'updated to include others excited by the more modern pruderies of a colonial middle class' - alcohol, street food, body noises, make-up, female desire

Which is subtle, which is not right on your face, that is of course the figure of the Hindu Brahmin widow but that does not necessarily alert us to look at caste. And here is where Tharu's reading comes in to play a significant world where she unravels the superficial understanding and enforces us to look at the inherent caste politics here as well. Tharu tells us how we are able to know about the upper caste status about the family in terms of the minute details which come through.

The family owns property in the village. And we get to know that they were also part of the Indian officialdom for 2 generations. The son, this grandmother's son was an administrator, the grandson an accountant and the great-granddaughter Ratna we get to know is studying medicine. So, there is a way in which they have been incorporated into the many benefits of the new-found state.

And the hunger and cravings that this grandmother has all of a sudden. In Tharu's words, the hunger and cravings have been updated to include others excited by the more modern

pruderies of a colonial middle class. For instance, alcohol or street food, body-noises, make-up, female desire. These are the things which would come across as being inappropriate and in Tharu's words grossly irreverent.

It comes across as irreverent or gross or being out of place. Only when you look at it within the context of the way in which the colonial middle class emerged. It comes across as taboo. When you placed it in a certain context, these are not items which are inherently taboo, which are inherently evil, but when the subject position of this grandmother, of this widow, expects her to behave in a different way.

And when she ends up articulating things which really do not sit in comfortably well with the subject position and becomes taboo, it becomes irreverent and gross. And the family's modernity is also exemplary. We do not find them practicing any kind of caste or gender-based discrimination. And the way in which they are able to allow, they are able to accommodate the new-found desires and cravings of the grandmother.

And how the young daughter, the young female in the family is allowed to go and pursue medicine, allowed to go and study medicine. These are certain markers of the exemplary nature of the family's modernity.

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The family's modernity

- Exemplary - no caste-gender based discrimination
- The scope of an Indian modernity that can accommodate tradition without compromising its humanism
- Doctor not a priest; no opposition for studying medicine
- a close fit between tradition and modernity; brahminism and secularism

But this is also about the scope of an Indian Modernity that can perhaps accommodate tradition without compromising its humanism. So, we find them being traditional, rooted in the caste rituals, otherwise there is no need for them to talk about that. Otherwise there is no

need for Ratna to be shocked at the scandalous new desire and the cravings that the grandmother is expressing.

Had this been a normal thing in their family that was no need for Ratna to smuggle these forbidden food from the street into the space of this Brahmin home. But at the same time, it is not a family who is willing to compromise its humanism to preserve certain age-old traditions. We find a fine mix of which makes this family and these characters endearing to us. But what interests Susie Tharu is the way in which this is placed politically in the context of the modern instinct.

And talking about the way in which they accommodate tradition without compromising humanism. Tharu refers to the way in which they bring in a doctor and not a priest when the, when this grandmother is dying, when the grandmother is about to fall sick. And there is no opposition for studying medicine. And there are no caste occupations. There are no prescriptions about what one should do in this modern society.

We find here a very close fit between tradition and modernity and brahmanism and secularism. This could be dichotomous concepts, but we find this sitting together very comfortably in this family and by extension in perhaps any typical Indian middle-class modern family which also has a relatively upper caste status. And how do we engage with the question of caste in this context.

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The question of caste

- o Caste makes an appearance as caste system and not as caste discrimination, oppression or expropriation
- o The older woman can 'break' the hold of caste by consuming the proscribed food - 'consumes her way to freedom'
- o The transition from brahminism-tradition to secularism-modernity seems so smooth that there is no reason to presume any substantial conflict there

Tharu reminds us that caste makes an appearance here as caste system and not as caste discrimination, oppression or any other form of things that, what we would rather not associate with. This is in stark contrast with the way in which we have looked at caste within the space of Indian English Fiction. We have been looking at caste when it makes an appearance in the form of untouchability.

When it makes an appearance in the form of a practice which essentially becomes violent or violating. But here, Tharu is able to identify caste as a system, as a hierarchy which it was originally meant to be. And in Tharu's words, the older woman, the image the figure of this brahmin widow. She is able to break the hold of caste by consuming the proscribed food, thereby consuming her way to freedom.

In this caste system there is this freedom, there is this allowance, which is there, the mobility to break the hold of caste by doing certain things, by being a part of the globalised consumerist culture in a minimal way, though she is able to break out of the things which were originally restricting her. And this Tharu finds very fascinating and interesting. And this transition which is what Tharu begins to focus on. This transition from Brahminism tradition to secularism modernity. It comes across as being very smooth.

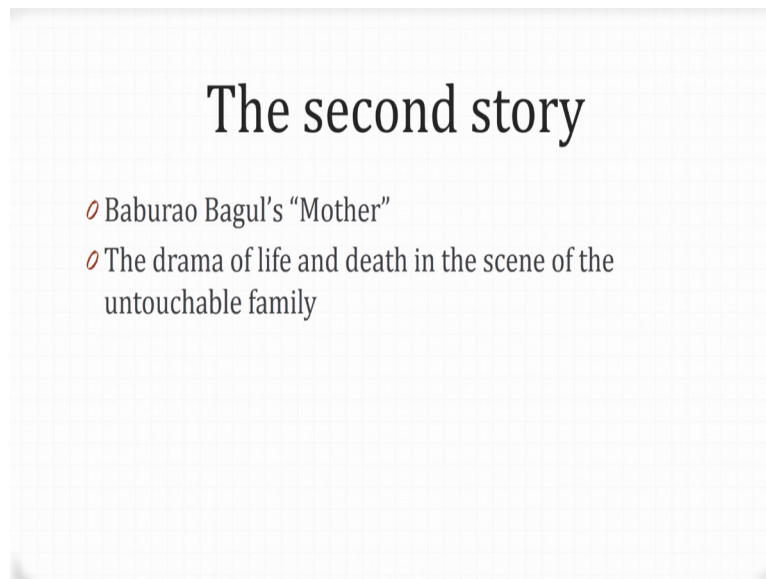
If you recall, Tharu had already referred to the way in which the tradition and modernity, there is a close fit. And in Brahminism and secularism, there is a close fit. But when the grandmother begins to express certain forbidden desires and express these irreverent cravings, we find that this transition from the brahminical traditional self to the secular modern self. It is being accommodated without any crisis.

There is no reason to presume any substantial conflict within the family even when we know that the Ratna the great-granddaughter. She had to smuggle in food. We do not find it leading to any major conflict within the family or in their immediate social circle. And this translation is what makes the caste in the modernity of this modern secular family important for Tharu's reading.

Because there are certain things available to them, because of their hierarchical positioning in the caste system and those transitions which are easily made available to them are perhaps not really available to the ones who are in the lower runs of this hierarchy. This transition

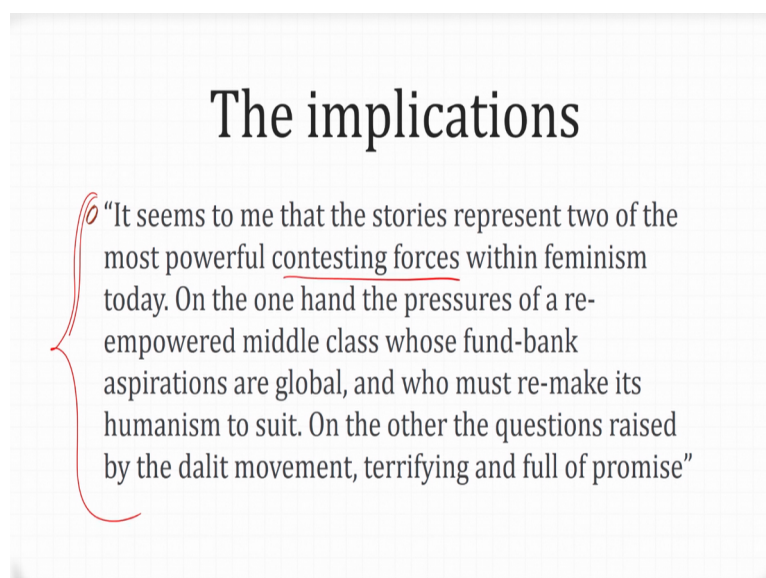
becomes easier on account of the way they are placed in this system, in this system of caste divisions. Tharu takes us to the second story;

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Which is discussed in this essay, which is Baburao Bagul's mother, where she talks about the drama of life and death in the scene of an untouchable family. As this is also slightly outside the scope of our course discussion, we will not get into the details of the second story and how a comparative analysis brought in. But the implications of Tharu's essay, the implication of reading these 2 works together;

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As Tharu who herself lays them out. Towards the conclusion Tharu argues, it seems to me that the stories represent 2 of the most powerful contesting forces within feminism today. On the one hand the pressures of a re-empowered middle class whose fund-bank aspirations are

global and who must remake its humanism to suit. On the other, the questions raised by the Dalit movement, terrifying and full of promise.

One thing that we can perhaps take away from this reading, from this different unique kind of a reading is the need to bring in other frameworks to look at the writings produced by the Indian Fiction in English. The need to bring in a comparative outlook. The need to look at concepts which is feminism, from an altogether different perspective. The need to look at something like caste is being seen in a redundant fashion.

But to totally reinvent totally reshape and refashion the perspectives with which one can approach. The many concepts and the many themes which are presented within this space. And this is perhaps would widen the scope of our reading and also help us to read across cultures, read across text and translations and languages.

And these approaches would also perhaps begin to bridge this undeniable gap which as of now exists between Indian fiction written in English and the other literatures, other kinds of fiction and the other kinds of literature which are produced and published in different languages within India. And I hope this reading has been useful for you.

I hope that you will be able to access the short story as well as Susie Tharu's critical take on it, to see how it is possible to bring in perspectives which are not sitting comfortably well with this space, which are challenging certain frameworks and certain concepts within which Indian fiction is forced to survive and forced to thrive. I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.