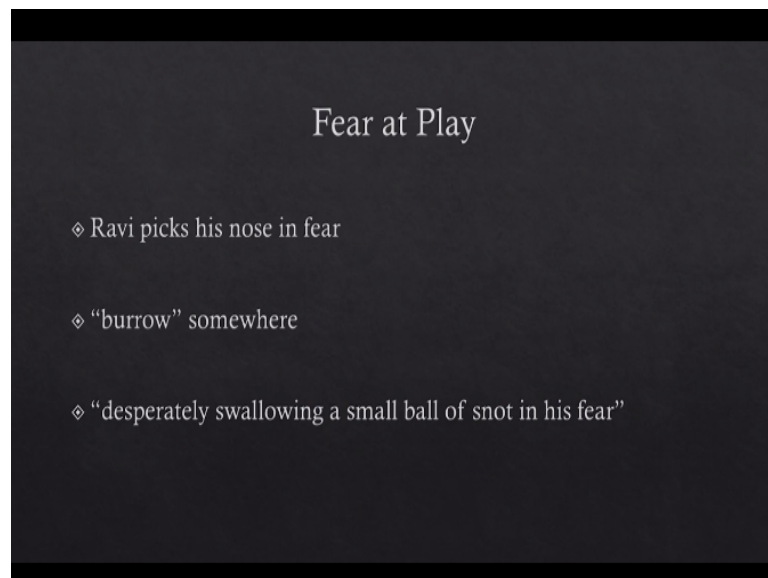


Short Fiction in Indian Literature
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Lecture – 12A
Childhood Anxiety at Play in Anita Desai's Games at Twilight - II

Hello and welcome back, so let us continue the lecture on childhood anxiety at play in Games at Twilight. In the previous lecture, I gave you a sense of the mood, the pessimistic brutal mood that is there in the story in the context of the children's game and we also got a sense that Raghu is a figure who is really feared by most of the children in the household in this particular narrative okay. So we saw that Manu was spotted by Raghu at the beginning of this game of hide and seek.

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And Manu gave a brief sense of again the fear that is there surrounding the figure of Raghu and we get another small boy who kind of expands this narrative of fear that many of the children in this house have about Raghu. So what are the activities that Ravi does while he is hiding from Raghu? So Ravi picks his nose in fear and he wants to burrow somewhere so that he is not spotted by Raghu.

And he desperately also swallows a small ball of snot in his fear. There is a sense of comic as well as a tragic aspect to the set of anxieties that these children have regarding the figure of Raghu. So it is almost as if the children look at him as they would look at a really terrible scary father figure.

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So while they are hiding while Ravi is hiding from Raghu, he gets a frightening glimpse of this figure and Raghu is combing the hedge of the crotons. So he is kind of combing, the activity of combing a particular space in order to find someone out is a really very anxious you know activity at least on the part of the person who is hiding from Raghu.

So can we also suggest that this has a kind of a military metaphor that can also be suggested in this particular context especially when we connect this combing of a particular landscape to the trampling that Raghu does to the delicate ferns, so the ferns are delicate but Raghu without any sensitivity towards these delicate plants tramples them because he is serious in the business of finding out his victim.

So we have an invader like figure in Raghu and we have an invasion like situation in the context of the fear psychosis that these kids have especially Manu and Ravi and also the other children at least one other girl who is also caught by Raghu before the end of the day. So the terror that Raghu spreads amidst the community of young children, smaller children can be compared to the fear that is kind of among the population in a country that is invaded by a colonial or a foreign empire.

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Cleaning of the Shed

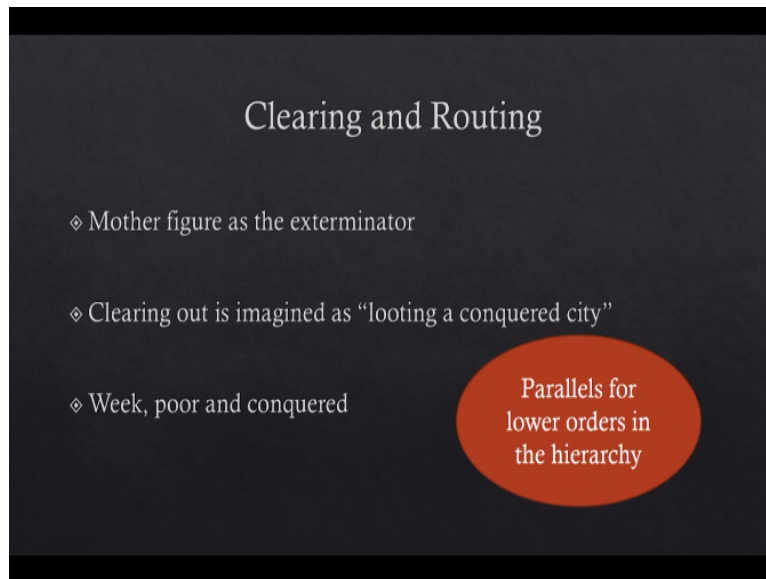
- ◆ Shed with unused stuff
- ◆ Opened once a year for cleaning
- ◆ “Ma turned out all the old broken bits of furniture and rolls of matting and leaking buckets, and the white anthills were broken and swept away and Flit sprayed into the spider webs and rat holes so that the whole operation was like the looting of a poor, ruined, and conquered city.”

So what Ravi does is he enters a shed, a really old, decrepit shed which has a lot of unused stuff. So this is the hideout for Ravi for most of this game of hide and seek which occupies the majority of the narrative of this particular story and this shed is open only once a year for cleaning by the mother.

And the narrator says Ma turned out all the old broken bits of furniture and rolls of matting and leaking buckets and the white anthills were broken and swept away and Flit sprayed into the spider webs and rat hole so that the whole operation was like the looting of a poor, ruined and conquered city. So once a year she takes out all the stuff and sprays a disinfectant into all the cobwebs that are there and rat holes that are there.

And her activity resembles the activities of a set of conquerors who are looting a poor, ruined and conquered city. So very, very interesting image which again takes this back to the previous idea of invasion that is taking place in this particular garden, the invasion of Raghu in his attempts or trajectory to seek out all the victims who are hiding in their various hideout, so again that idea of conquerors is played out in this particular episode too.

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So the mother figure that is very interesting, it is the idea of the exterminator or the conqueror is kind of transferred to the mother figure. So she is the one who is doing the conquering. She is the one who is looting this poor, ruined and conquered city. So again all the figures, all the older figures, the figures of authority have a kind of an aura of violence, cruelty and brutality and that is what is communicative in this particular narrative.

So the mother figure is the one who acts as the role of the exterminator in cleaning the shed and as I mentioned little while ago the clearing out, cleaning the disinfecting of a place is compared to looting a conquered city and the parallels that are drawn here are between the weak, the poor and the conquered and the really vulnerable creature such as spiders and rats they become vulnerable in relation to the really powerful human beings.

So you know human beings chase out or clear out all these insects and vermin that are there in the shed. So the comparison is between the weak and the powerful here. So the weak are the ones who are eliminated by the powerful and again we have parallels for the low orders in the hierarchy. So the spiders or the vermin or the rats are compared to the weak and the poor and the conquered people in the society. So that is the most important parallel there.

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Shed

- ◊ “Decrepit shed
- ◊ “rusty” hinges
- ◊ “gap between the door and the wall”
- ◊ Rats, dogs and, possibly, Ravi to slip through”

Parallels between creatures and small boy

So what is this shed look like? As I mentioned, it is a decrepit shed, it has rusty hinges and there is a gap between the door and the wall and through this gap rats and dogs and possibly Ravi could slip through and Ravi indeed does a slip through in order to avoid being spotted by Raghu. So again the comparison is between rats and dogs and Ravi. So how can the narrator put all these beings on the same level playing ground?

The author can do that because in the grand scheme of things in which powerful human beings are at the top of the pyramid, people like Ravi, young boys like Ravi and rats and dogs are at the mercy of the really powerful human beings such as Raghu, so that is why they have been put on the same level playing ground. So as I said there are parallels between vulnerable creatures and the small boy here.

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The Shed

- ◊ “dark and depressing mortuary”
- ◊ “Defunct household goods”
- ◊ “unspeakable and alarming animal life”

haven

Now the shed itself is an interesting space in this particular story because the interiors of specialty especially domestic space are not very clearly mentioned here. There is only one reference to the wardrobe of the mother in which Ravi hides one day and he you know gets locked inside and then it is a difficult time for him and that is the only description of an interior domestic space that we get.

The other descriptions are about the garden and this particular shed which is an interior space. So this space becomes very, very interesting because it contained all the unused domestic stuff and defunct, something which is no longer functional or useful and the narrator says that it is a dark and depressing mortuary. Mortuary is a space which contains the dead bodies which houses the dead bodies for a short period.

So it is absolutely bizarre and really bleak to compare the shed to mortuary and this is where Ravi spends quite a lot of time in this particular story and there is a lot of interesting associations that are being woven between defunct domestic stuff and Ravi's presence in the shed and you know and he is hiding himself from this powerful figure of Raghu, so the shed becomes a heaven, it becomes a heaven as well as a mortuary.

So death itself somehow is a sanctuary for some that idea is also kind of suggested there, so we need to also remember this is a highly imagistic fiction. There are lots of layers of figurative language that Desai employs really powerfully and so many associations and ideas are kind of touched upon here and the narrator also says that Ravi is scared to be in the shed not only because it is dark and depressing because it is also unconducive for him because there could be lots of unspeakable and alarming animal life.

You know creatures that could be really scary for a young boy, unspeakable something that cannot be mentioned because mentioning them would perhaps bring them back to life here, so all these childhood fears are also hidden in that phrase unspeakable and alarming animal life.

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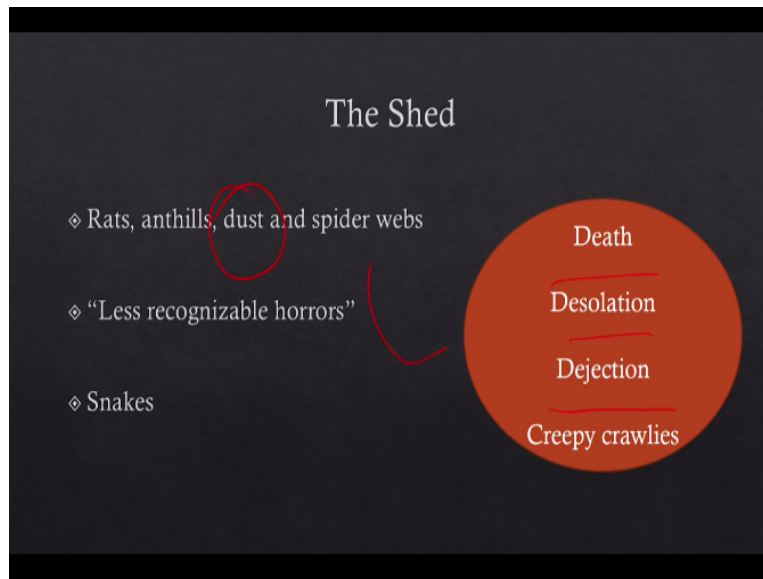


So this shed is dark, it is scary, it is spooky and what is spooky again suggests supernatural associations and again the idea of death is evoked a time and again because the narrator says that the shed has a muffled smell and that muffled smell is a smell that is apparently associated with graves. So again the shed becoming a grave for Ravi for a short while is highlighted there.

It is an idea that is repeatedly kind of mentioned by the writer because while Ravi is there in that shed all the children are forgotten him. In fact, even the parents are forgotten him. So it is almost as if he is dead. Again a sense of claustrophobic emotion is also communicated through the presence of Ravi's emotions while he is inside that really small confined space and he is there coffin-like in that particular shed.

He could almost reach out and touch the ceiling of that shed. So it is almost like a coffin that particular shed there.

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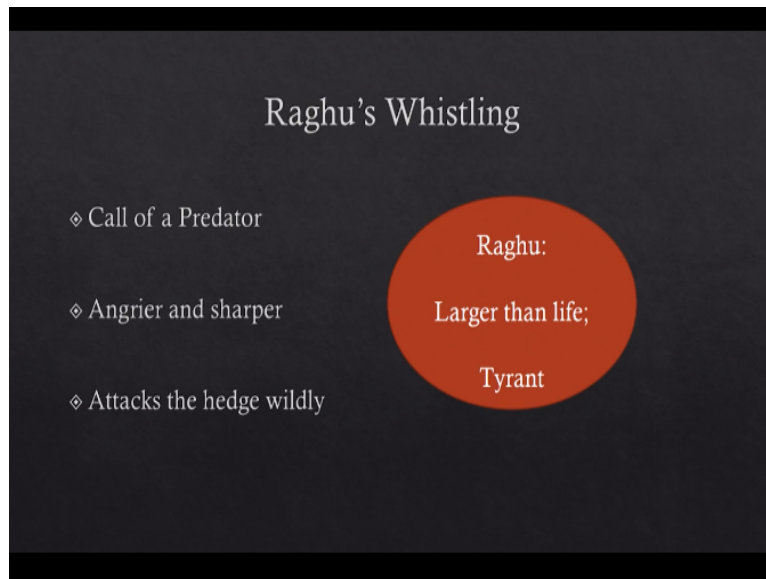
And the creatures that are there include spiders, ants and rats and you know there is also of course a lot of dust. So it is again very, very uncondusive and one thing that is very significant in this list is the idea of dust and again if you recall the beginning of the story, the children want to get out of the house and they want to get out into the open because otherwise they would feel as if the dust is choking them.

So again we have a slight parallel between the shed and the home there, both the spaces seem to be confining spaces, anyway that is the subtle comparison that I want to highlight and the less recognizable horrors for Ravi include the idea of snakes slithering about him. So it is this place of lot of fears for a young boy and those fears and how they are expressed in the language also bring about a related set of notions about death, desolation especially spider webs indicate disuse.

And disuse also brings to mind the idea of desolation, lack of habitation by human beings, again dejection spider webs have that aura too, spaces that have been left behind by people who are dejected by life and then again the creepy crawlies you know indicate lack of human presence and the absence of human presence is again a very, very depressing notion and we get a sense of that space have been left behind for the creepy crawlies to you know flourish and dominate.

So all these ideas are communicated, conveyed in a very, very subtle manner in this narrative okay.

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So let us go back to Raghu who is wandering here and there whistling and that whistling itself is a scary noise released by or you know uttered by Raghu who kind of occupies the shoes of a horrible conqueror and it is almost as if it is the call of a predator and his whistling the narrator says becomes angrier and sharper and again like a blunt object or like a weapon and he uses a stick and attacks the hedge wildly because he is unable to spot any of the hider.

So we get a sense that Raghu is (()) (15:58) life at least through the eyes of a young boy like Manu or Ravi. So we also get a sense that he is a tyrant to those who are subordinate to him. So all these aspects are communicated through the manner in which he moves about or navigates the space of the garden. He is very, very rough, he is brutal, he is harsh. He pushes the children around.

And he attacks even the plants, he attacks the hedge wildly that also suggest a slight you know brutality to him okay.

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Raghu's beating

- ◆ “He leapt up as Raghu whacked the wall with his stick—then, quickly realizing what it was, felt almost relieved to hear Raghu, hear his stick. It made him feel protected.”

He leapt up as Raghu whacked the wall with his stick. Raghu is attacking the wall with his stick and we need to remember that Ravi is inside the shed. Then, quickly realizing what it was, felt almost relieved here Raghu here his stick, it made him feel protected. So this is Ravi who is realizing what the noise is about. So Ravi is inside the shed imagining all sorts of slithery creatures you know moving about him.

And suddenly he hears this noise outside and he does not realize what it is but then he gathers that it is Raghu beating his stick against the wall and once he realizes what it is, he feels protected that is very important to note.

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Fear and Protection

- ◆ Known persecutor
- ◆ Unknown threat
- ◆ Stick becomes welcome

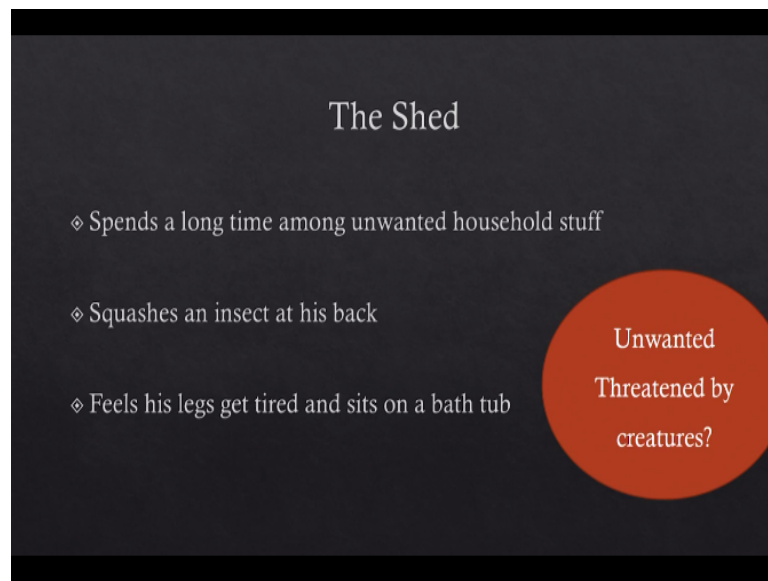
Comforting
Protected

So we have a known persecutor in the figure of Raghu and an unknown threat in the notion of snakes which could be there in the shed. So there are two persecutors, one is known and the

other is unknown and once Ravi knows realizes that it is a known prosecutor who is hanging about outside the shed. The sense really comforts him, he feels very, very protected by that and the stick almost becomes a welcome object that is very interesting.

Because things that are scarier than Raghu could be out there inside the shed and that puts everything in perspective and he welcomes Raghu with his known horrors.

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So Ravi spends quite a long time amidst the unwanted household stuff and as time progresses he also get some of the insects on him and he squashes an insect at his back and he thinks that it could possibly be a spider and again that idea of squashing a spider that is there at his back is very interesting in the sense that even the young ones are capable of violence against the really vulnerable creatures in this scheme of things in this cycle of life.

And he also realizes that he feels his leg get tired and he takes rest on a bathtub and as time progresses he realizes that just as these household stuff have been thrown away, hidden out of sight in a shed he too is out of sight hidden in this particular shed, so is he also unwanted, is he also unwanted by the society and again the spider attack, the insect attack could also be interpreted to suggest that even the creatures are threatening this particular boy who has intervened in their specialty and they want him out of it okay.

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Desire to be free

- ◊ Escape from the shed
- ◊ “the milling crowd as long as he could be in the sun, the light, the free spaces of the garden, and the familiarity of his brothers, sisters and cousins.”

So there is this desire to be free from the shed. He thinks that it is time that he left it and he desires to be part of the milling crowd as long as he could be in the sun, the light, the free spaces of the garden, the familiarity of his brothers, sisters and cousins. So since he is confined for a long time inside the shed, he wants to be outside amongst his brothers and sisters and cousins.

And it is a very positive image that he has in his mind, the sun and the light and the free spaces they are all about liberty, about open air and about the comfort of family.

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Freedom and Reality

- ◊ Envisioning freedom versus reality

- ◊ Loot of mulberries

- ◊ Teeth-splitting jamun

Legitimate
games are
rough/laced
with threat

So he envisions a sort of freedom in his mind in terms of his family and the family space but then we realize this is just a vision that he has in his mind and that the reality is completely different. So if you look at the activities that these children would usually carry out in the

evening with the parents about them the activities would involve the looting of mulberries again the idea of looting or plundering nature is communicated.

So even an innocent child would play at close analysis at a closer look would reveal the violence that they inflict on the surrounding environment and even the Jamun that they would eat is not a very joyful exercise because it is teeth-splitting, it is a painful experience. So everything that they do in relation to play in this household has a subversive subtext. There is violence laced in the activities.

And even the legitimate games are rough or laced with threat for the inferior or the weaker elements of nature and human society.

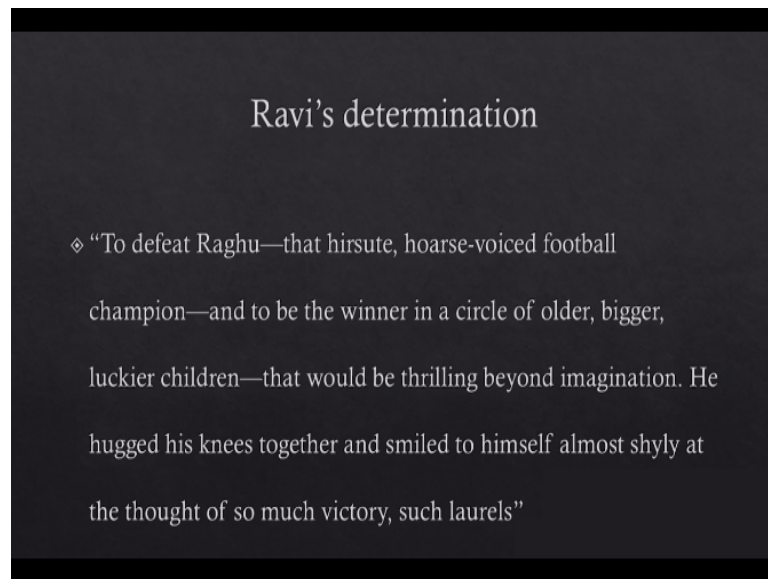
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So when Ravi is contemplating the notion of getting out in about and rejoining his society, Raghu finds one of the girls and that you know moment is a very, very harsh, brutal, scary moment because there are screams involved, there is the sound of a crash and there are people rolling about in the bushes. So the children are rolling about in the bushes and shrubs. There are accusations, there are sobs.

So it is a very, very disturbing image that is carried to Ravi from the outside world and Ravi is inside the shed and he is thinking about joining his family. So at that moment he hears all these noises and accusations and crying and that is the reality of the world outside. So he thinks that okay maybe it is not the time to go out, maybe he has to wait for some more time because he wants to be the victor, he wants to make Raghu lose.

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So this is his ultimate desire to defeat Raghu that hirsute, hoarse-voiced football champion and to be the winner in a circle of older, bigger, luckier children that would be thrilling beyond imagination. He hugged his knees together and smiled to himself almost shyly at the thought of so much victory, such laurels. So this is the heart's desire of Ravi this young boy, this small child.

And therefore he you know sits quietly back in the shed and he is almost tasting the victory that he would get and that anticipation is palpable in the last line of that paragraph there and there is so much laurels to be won by this boy Ravi and it makes him shy, that is very, very sweet in terms of the character of the boy.

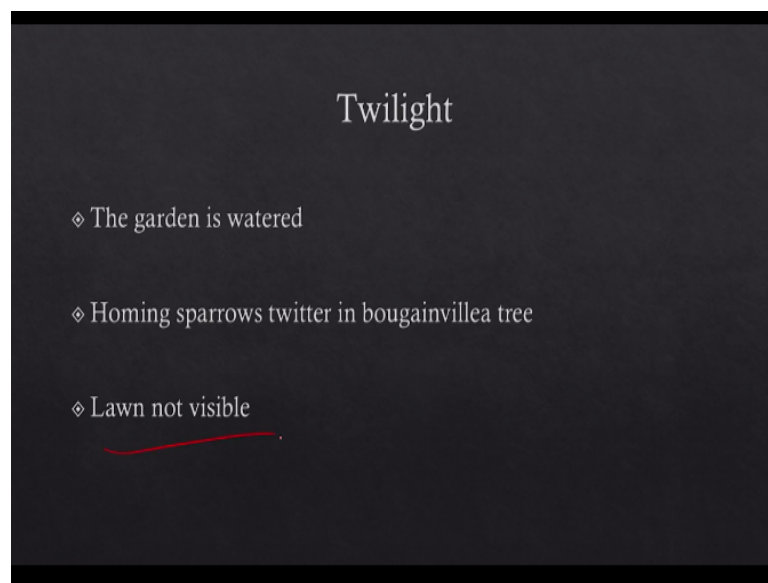
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So we have two contrasting ideas brought out here, one is the weak against the strong, the weak being people like Ravi against stronger folks like Raghu the young like Ravi and Manu and the girl who has been caught and the old like Raghu, very strong, very powerful, the inexperienced like these young children and girls, the very experienced children like Raghu who stands in for authority and then you know the weakness of the present.

The present that is forming now newly congealing against the past which has formed and congealed and is kind of entrenched in its interest and activity. So these two sets of ideas are contrasted with one another in this particular story.

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So we have twilight now on the scene, the sun has gone down, the garden is being watered by the gardener and homing sparrows make noise in the bougainvillea tree and Ravi is still inside that shed and he tries to look at the landscape outside in line of the shed and he could not see the lawn, the lawn is not visible and that in itself is very, very symbolic in the sense that he is not able to get at human society from where he is.

As the setting is coffin-like, it is almost as if he is dead and gone and not in contact with human society. So while there is a kind of a congenial atmosphere building up through the watering of the garden and Raghu is still far away from that experience of peace.

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Twilight

◇ “Could he hear the children's voices? The lawn was shut off from his view. Could he hear the children's voices? It seemed to him that he could. It seemed to him that he could hear them chanting, singing, laughing. But what about the game? What had happened? Could it be over? How could it when he was still not found?”

Now these are some of the questions that pass through Ravi's mind as he waits inside the shed. Could he hear the children's voices? The lawn was shut off from his view. Could he hear the children's voices? It seemed to him that he could. It seemed to him that he could hear them chanting, singing, laughing but what about the game? What had happened? Could it be over? How could it when he was still not found?

So this set of words communicated through the third person narrator also could be the thought process of this particular boy Ravi who is there. So we have this free indirect discourse going on in this particular extract and he is worried because he is able to hear the children's voices and the children's voices seem to be doing a lot of things such as chanting singing and laughing.

But they are not worried about Ravi who is missing. Raghu does not seem to be seeking him so what happened to the game? Has it been stopped? But how could it when he is not found? So these are some of the questions that are running through Ravi's minds. Let us look at the rest of the story in terms of the childhood anxiety that is running through Ravi in the next session. Thank you for watching. I will catch up with you in the next session.