

Short Fiction in Indian Literature
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Lecture-08
"Summer Vacation" Overview

Hello and welcome to the session this is going to be conversation between me and Miss. Arya who is a M.A student from Pondicherry University. She is an intern on micro short fiction in Indian literature and today we are going to talk about the summer vacation by Kamala Doss. So, this is going to be discussion of some of the aspects that are present in the story in terms of narrative and theme.

“Professor-student conversation starts”

So, Arya what are your thoughts in the story, summer vacation is I think it is a typical Kamala Doss story. But here I found that the narrator or the child in the story is a something different from Kamala Doss usually she use to identify herself with the child figure or the narrator. And it is about like it I think there it use a climbs of Kerala life and about the closed relation between Muthassi, the grandmother and child.

And I found it to be very interesting, very good okay. So, what are the puzzling aspects of the story in your perspective one thing she is very anxious about her Muthassi that to a child worrying about death. I founded to be bit absolutely that contrast is very very interesting because young children do not worry about death, unless there is such a tragedy within that particular family.

So, a small child, a growing child worrying about or obsessing about the death of the grandmother, it mix the situation very very vulnerable and hot trending. So that the contrast is very evident there and one more is that the child actually questions Nani about stealing the tamarind, again I found that to be puzzling. Because right the child like for an adult is usual that they will watch over others.

But for a child to do that at something that is not very usual okay, okay some children can be very very authoritative. Because they pick up that authority from the elders that they are associating themselves with, so perhaps in the case of this girl she has picked up on this element of power from her grandmother who runs the household like a ship like a tide ship right.

So, that is the source of her power the fact that she can kind of the become a standard for her grandmother. And perhaps she is also read somewhere that whether the injustice you just stop and ask about it or query about it which is probably why she is asking all this questions to Nani Amma hope some shall I move it this. So, first I would like to know about the significance of summer, in summer vacation, yeah summer vacation it is a interesting title is not it.

And it summer vacation always indicates a break from the routine and it is for her for the girl narrator it is a break from the siri, it is a break from her school time. And where life becomes kind of like a you know a flowing you know time . So, she can be experimental, she can be herself in a different place. So, summer is also associated with something being perfect in and many people life.

So, you know in times of acridities it is associated with you know happiness, stability vitality, formation of family and things like that. And in the case of summer vacation of Kamala Doss summer vacation always hints at break rupture. Because she is coming from a different place to this place, so those are some of the associations are we can have about the story okay mam.

And summer vacation is actually said in an ancient Kerala house, so can you speak about the ethos house of Kerala life that is reflected in this short story okay. So, the house especially is very very interesting in that regard because it has a separate quarters right what I balcony, thekkini and all these are associated with the typical Nair household. And again the meteoric is a very very interesting aspect of society in Kerala.

So, Muthassi as you mentioned is a very interesting figure and she is at the head of the household and that is very unique to Kerala is not it. And we can also see the girl kind of following the steps of her grandmother there. So, that element is pretty clear and I am sure there are also references

in terms of the names various names. And the way they spend the time and the snacks that they eat everything kind of relates to the cultural peculiarities of life in Kerala.

And even I think that the Language also to giving a feel of life we have Malayalam words in the words first with the usual English words which is something that Kamala Doss used to do and in this one it is very evident and it is very fascinating, can you pick out some of the language which is kind of indicative of that, yes one is obvious reference to naval tree. Novel is something that is I think unfamiliar to others.

But for Kerala it is like a kind of mycological association then we have the reference to the places thekkini, vadakkini, varadha she have not used any other words. She use the words as such even Muthassi, Ammu the word the names everything okay very good okay mam. Next question there is a process of growth in the child by acquiring knowledge that takes place throughout the story.

She not only earns learns about the specialties of Naval tree but also about cost, class and many more. So, according to you how does this informal education shape the psyche of the study okay, yeah if you notice the way that 2 female characters move about in the landscape of this particular narrator. The girl constantly follows the grandmother around even if she wakes up she immediately calls for her grandmother right.

And the 2 women are at least Muthassi is very very protective, she is constantly picking up stuff, she constantly thinking about the things that she is going to make. You know the wigs for all the lamps in how she is going to make oil and this in that and the girl kind of tries to follow her grandmother as well. She is kind of mirroring her grandmother in some sense and Naval tree is very very interesting.

Because it represent something very specific and let us read the extract about the naval tree to get the sense of the message that Kamala Doss probably wants to communicate. And this is the first reference to the tree that we have. And she says it was always there as long as I could remember a small emaciated tree, somewhat bend and with shrilled up branches.

It was a summer with no hint of rains that is again very interesting in a context of a question about the significance of summer rain. It was a summer with no hint of rains there is no suggestion of fertility, life is aired there probably because women, women at the prime or absent from the landscape. Ammu's mother is dead and the son-in-law refuses to come home.

So, that kind of canjica domestic life is missing and that could kind of relate to this idea of aridity in the story in the association with summer rain I watched the tree it leaves and about the few leaves. The spider's web hanging from a bare sickle shaped branch in this tree is very interesting because again this is not in its prime. This is a bent emaciated tree it is almost near its end and we can everybody can sense of this is a kind of a reflection of or a symbolic reflection of the grandmother Muthassi rain.

And it is almost anthropomorphic rain it resembles the human being who is bent and shriveled and these words we usually use to describe all people shrivel then bent. And the spider's web on the tree is very very interesting because if we see cobwebs and spider's web. Then we can sense that place has not been used it is unused places which get all cobwebs is not it. So you know that indication on a tree on a naval tree again axe to that idea of decrypt nature is not it.

And this particular image of a sickle shape branch perhaps very symbolic suggestion that it is going to be cut down at some point either by natural death or by some human being. So, the death is looming in the story is not it. So, we have had several deaths and then probably the grandmother's death is going to happen at some point and which is what where is Ammu yes. So, lot of symbolic associations their surroundings this naval tree which as you mention is very very iconic of the element of nostalgia in Kerala.

And the idea about summer the summer without any rain it again it makes a big statement about Kerala with its monsoon rains and other things rain, what if there are no monsoon, what if there are no rains imagine the landscape there becomes very arid just as the aridity in Muthassi's home with no young daughter. You know going about in the house okay mam summer vacation it is seriously discuss the problem of death and old age.

But interestingly here Muthassi wants to die that people want to live, but she wants to die and consider her survival as a result of the sins committed by her. So, what is the importance of the constant of birth and death in the story, you right. She does not like to survive, she does not like to live and that is very understandable. Because at one point in the story she says that everybody has whom in a around her is dead.

And she gives a list, so to speak right and this is what she says my mother died when she was 40 , my uncle at 45. They all die young and grandmother if I remember correctly did not quiet reach 50 and as for Kamalam and she stops there and that is probably her daughter right. And she does not even want to mention the number of years that has daughter has lived and she says I am a sinner that is why I stay alive to witness the deaths of so many people.

You know you do not like to see your beloved you know people die before you. So, which is she says I am a sinner that is why I got escape me alive. And I often wonder what further sufferings are in store for me before I die again this fore boarding of other deaths, future deaths full of you know fore boarding's of this kind of tragic laws. So, which is probably why she does not want to survive and the other thing is that, if you look at this philosophically or symbolically you can see these deaths as the passing away of tradition.

People of the past you know traditions are dying out one by one and she is like last guardian of that kind of past. The only one remaining like the naval tree which is again very decrypted, very old and can die any moment or be eradicated at any moment. And Ammu does not want to let the happen right she is the present the morning one was clinging onto that past. So, that kind of suggestion also there okay.

So, the story of summer vacation can be said to be centered around mother figures, we have Muthassi and her dead mother. So, up to what extent does this short story upon and reminder size the idle of mother who yeah you are right it there are several things here. I am trying to see which one I should respond to first this story is centered around mother figures and the most dominant mother figure who is survived is Muthassi right.

And on this little girl kind of clings to Muthassi as she would cling to her own mother and but there also clichés about motherhood in the story. At one point in the story one of the village gossip says that motherhood in moonlight like, you know you cannot survive without you know either moonlight or without motherhood that kind of clichés are also there, you know.

So, it is very very important and the loss of a mother is **is** something that is the context. The sub text for this entire story and perhaps motherhood itself has become a symbol for the age-old past okay. So, if you reject the past then somehow your symbolically kind of rejecting your own mother. So, it is become mired in tradition and clichés and stereotypes and reality as well.

I mean mothers are really important for the children and for the daughters and for their sons. But then you have additional associations that are kind of embedded associated with his mother figure and there are so many of them. So, if grandmother is also a mother then she is also representative of tradition of the past of the *agua* customs of a particular way of life of a lifestyle which is passing away.

And the girl does not want to let go of that, so it is too complicated to find a distant angle from one thing after another, mam can you speak on the figure of death mother because she I think I consider her as an absent presence throughout the story. So, how significant is she even though she is dead yeah she is very significant. Because if we look at the closing exchange between the mother in-law and the son in-law.

He says something like shall we check that passage to read for our listeners he says we used to come here right. My father said I should come next year definitely I do not know I do not yet have the courage, please do not take it a mess remember how we used to come every year the two of us to that house and now how to come there all by myself pleased do not misunderstand me mother I just cannot do it as get.

So, when she asks somewhere you cannot coming the house any longer and he says that it so painful it is so difficult to go through that house which has the images of his wife for him. So,

she constantly present for him in that house visiting that house will be like a meeting those you know past images of his wife. So, it is very very painful so, she is present in some sense and she is also present through Muthassi for the little girl.

So, cling to her grandmother is a way clinging to her mother as well, so that absent mother is kind of providing the household. And even the gossips the village gossips when they look at Ammu, they constantly or reminded of the death of her mother right. So, they say both she does not have a mother which is why she is behaving or thinking in these ways. So, that presence always there okay.

Mam Achutan Muthassi servant is actually presented as a lazy figure with the beedi, so at this portrait product of this stereotypes about proletarian life and can you interesting the household that we have in summer vacation it is a fewer of household, it is a (()) (16:09) setup with this grandmother as the boss as the employer and if we look at the way Muthassi responds to those around her.

She is very very authoritative, she is very bossy and she constantly finds fault with the servant and she says that he is lazy but we do not see any indications of his laziness in the narrator right. So, her accusation is not proved, he is clean that he is lazy and she says that he so lazy after go check-in on him and then she goes inside the kitchen and everything is neatly laid out, the bananas, the milk is boiling, the kettle is on the fire everything is setup.

And she tries to look for any particular fault that she can find with him and she says why do not you clean this lamp there is the only thing that she can you know find fault with. So, she has her own predigests but at the same time she has a softer side to her as well and that becomes evident in the case of Nani Amma remember she says I mean I cannot give you work all the time, you are coming to me quite often you know do not expect me to give you money you know rise.

But then she ends up doing what she says she would not do it, she just takes the kid in and she tries to feed the kid you know she changes the food that she has that she gives her and she also makes a work. And then at the end of the ratio also gives rise, so we see like contrasting you

know aspects of this grandmotherly figure. It is not a 1 dimensional rough abrupt figure that we get throughout this story, there are no answers to her.

So, that is something we need to pay attention to and I am not sure whether it is a proletarian you know master divide that is quite evident there. But universe of you it will set up and no doubt about it okay. Mam thekkini and vadakkini are 2 contrast one can you consider them as faller opposite in the stories. So, they are part of the same house but again they appear to be a part of different sets social set up.

So, how do you analyze the dynamics of these 2 spaces. So, tell me what function do they serve in the story thekkini is a place for enjoyment of elite women they come there for gossip and even we have reference that Achutan room like going there. And whereas vadakinni is referred to as dark room the smell of jack fruit and it is a place where food served to people like Nani and the food that is served there is very lineal.

So, I found them to be very one representing an elite aristocratic life whereas the other representing the life among the loading. Actually it leave you put it neatly there and can you also talk about why she does not want her granddaughter to be part of the group that is there in thekkini do you have any idea about that, I do not know mam because that is the place where women adult women come share their ideas gossip and all .

I think that maybe the reason there yeah if we go back to that conversation there if you remember that exact exchange we have these 2 women the fat women Bharathi I think who says that you know this child has lost her mother which is probably why she does not understand you know the way women talked to their children, the way mother's talked to their babies.

And Muthassi I think has got really offended by that remark and she wants to save her grandchild from all these remarks by these women from the village. So, she says curtly, abruptly I have work to do, I think my servant is you know doing no job he is very lazy, I need to go check-in on him. So, with that abrupt curt remark, she just gets up takes the girl and walks out and she is very

very upset by the remarks made by these gossiping village women about the loss of the mother of Ammu.

So, which is why the next time there is an opportunity for Ammu to come in contact with these women at vadakinni she does not let her go there. She wants to protect her and she makes a stay in the kitchen her snack there with the servant Achutan right. So, it **it** is a protective gesture there it can be interpreted as that way but she does not go into a deeper explanation of all her reasons as to why she is not letting a child go there to these women.

So, there are no answers as I said to her character and about vadakinni mam yeah vadakinni again it is a dark space and it is very symbolic as well. So, the lower orders get the lowest of the spaces, the darkest of the spaces and the worlds are dark and these dark women are associated with that places and we can also speculate about the community identities of these poor folk and this Nani Amma who visit all these people.

And what happens in these dark places, real hard work, physical work happens in these dark, dirty places you know. So, that association is also there and if you remember Achutan's dhoti I think it is also very dark of the walls of the kitchen space right. So, darkness and labor are associated in this work and both are associated with you know people who are at the lowest of the low in terms of societal order okay.

So, are they association that come to mind in summer vacation through her narration we can see that Kamala has drawn a pen pictured of each and every corner of the answers strip to her. So, what is your opinion on this mode of narration and do they spatial aspects contribute to the conveyance of the central message of the story, spaces in there okay. There are several questions you know tied up there.

One is the question about narration and the other is the question about specialty can we talk about first the different spaces that crop pop when we think about this household of Muthassi. We have vadakinni, we have thekkini what do the other spaces that you can think about 1 is

veranda where she reads Ramayana. There is a religious education that is happening over there, we have the courtyard and where she dogs whether we meant.

And that is also a reference about the place and which the ancestors are parades which is closer relate to the theme of death in the story. So, these are the different places like with these places we will get a glimpse of a that house which is situated in Kerala with a lot of trees with Muthassi, Ammu and everyone perfect yeah talk to me about the veranda where Ramayanam is recited to the little girl by the grandmother, what are the symbolic significance that you derived from that space.

Veranda I think like in Kerala it is brief to an auspicious place like where we will always we will either we will pray or these only auspicious things are happen there. And even girls are not allow to enter in the veranda during menstrual period and all. So, I think that place is has become a as I mentioned earlier a place it religious education where she is taught about where yeah yeah Ramayana and also about the importance of being following dharma.

Even in Muthassi is reference to birth and death, I found that there is she tied up in a circle of karma, dharma believing there we will get paid for that for or these to the present and afterlife very good very **very very** good interpretation. Because right after that scene we have the interaction with Nani Amma and Amini which kind of forms the climax of the story isn't it and then we have a resolution other railway station.

So, after listening to this set of religious versus she thinks that it is her righteous position or task to kind of question in justice when it happens to her family. So, there could be a connection there and there is also communion with nature she looks at a sky there seems to be a connection to the cosmos there while the religious was is being recited to her, so yeah you are quote right okay mam.

Next question Nani the saboltant women who tiles heard to me the 2 ends of her life is one of the most striking figures in the story, is she foil to Muthassi who enjoys all the boundaries of her life and respected by which of her past and plus yes good question yes. She is a foiled to Muthassi I

mean the immediate parallel that strikes me is the fact that both of them are with daughters right granddaughters in the case of Muthassi.

But we have a kind of a mother daughter mirror image in Nani Amma and Ammini right. So, and 1 women is very very wealthy and powerful and authoritative and it is a big presence in the story, she dominates the story. And there is we have another women who is very week, vulnerable but then she tries to get by with whatever she has and at one point in the story when she first comes to Muthassi to ask for work.

Muthassi is kind brisk you know she is very abrupt and if you look at the reaction of Nani Amma, she is not disappointed, she is not obsessed. She is just stands there simply smiling and kind of you know caressing her daughters head. So, just is very very important I thought because she is not in a position to even react with displeasure, she just have to take everything with equanimity.

And that is very sad, the fact that you cannot even show your real emotions because you cannot afford to. So, that contrast is brought at really well in that particular scene and you can see Ammu looking at her ring, that she wears in and she says with the very interesting ring and she is really fortunate where that ring the that particular remark can be interpreted with so many ways you know why cannot that women wear a ring I mean does not she have aesthetic taste, why she is fortunate to wear that ring, is she fortunate because she is wearing that ring.

So, you can ask multiple questions about that women, so yes she is a foil to Muthassi and because Muthassi commands the respect wherever she goes and she is totally the recipient of the opposite set of emotions isn't it. And she has a space of her own yes absolutely she has a space of her own spaces are discriminated and set part for each and every community and walk of you know people from different works of life, so yes she is quite powerful okay mam.

The child is a witness to the unfolding of the power relations between Nani, Achutan and Muthassi in this story. In by being these notions she watches Nani with an eye of suspicion. So, it is try to say that and consciously she also said sir our system of surveillance to watch over the

actions of the novel plants. Absolutely to want to elaborate more on that as I said earlier she even when she watches over Achutan when Muthassi leaves that place.

But again we can feel her presence through this time, she watches even his conversations there actually very discriminated and she analyses each and every words said by him and with Nani she watches over and she accuses her of stealing the tamarind. So, I think she as you said earlier she is trying to imitate her Muthassi in that manner absolutely. But we also should remember that when Muthassi is trying to feed her those steel, those she steps and says.

You cannot give this kind of food to a young child, she might probably fall sick and I mean so you should you cannot see that she has a kind of a moral compass you know a system a black and white system model system, a black and white set of ideas about what is right and wrong. And she kind of applies in blindly and when she says that the grandmother changes you know her choice of the food that she gives the child.

But the funny thing about Ammu is that she is not very well aware of the way of the workings of the world. She does not know how a village community functions, she does not know the various layering's, she does not have a great idea about the rich and the poor and the dynamics behind that. So, for her a thief as a thief that is it that is the end of the story, a thief needs to be punished.

And which is why when Nani Amma reacts, she reacts really pretty harshly to the girl right you keep her stuff, you are rich, you can afford to be very very self righteous. So, all these remarks, so that is a big learning point a big you know a turning point in Ammu's life because she has been in a protected in my man. We can imagine her to be in a protected in my man where the Muthassi protects her from all these gossips, village gossips.

Somebody kind of brings her from the train station you know we have Muthassi and the driver and the steer bringing her from the railway station. So, she has lived a really protected lifestyle and for the first time she comes across peoples who are completely different from her who come from a completely different set of value system and lifestyles. And that jarring moment is realized in the story.

And she feels guilty as a very very interesting emotions in she feel guilty she has not committed any crime except accuse somebody rightly you know. That is what the narrator suggest except he is rightly somebody has stolen grandmother's tamarind. Then why does she have to feel guilty it is she becomes guilty for being rich and that is moment she feels sorry for the other women and the child and people like her.

So, we can see new emotions form in a minds of the girl there, so it is a really interesting point in the story okay mam. There are many instances in summer vacation which presence at disciplinary mechanism in the house. So, mam according to you what is the impact of this system of discipline on the child okay. We did talk about certain points in the story where Ammu is discipline right.

So, one such incidence when the grandmother refuses to have this girl you know have a tea with the other women in thekkini that is one place where she disciplines for her the other places she discipline sir is when says no you are not you know you not fat, you thin, you dark. You know in each will look the after. So, she kind of puts the foot in comments that way.

And what are the other places where she disciplines her or disciplines somebody else we have Achutan being disciplined there . We have the village gossips being disciplined in a indirect way when she just leaves them and goes away and we have her disciplining those around her. For example she refuses to talk to the clerk at the train station right the clerk who issues the ticket.

So, refuses to make small talk with him she refuses to even to look at the Brahmin lady who wants to catch her I and strike a conversation in the waiting room she kind of disciplines what is his name on the home and says that you know you better buy a good book for the kid do not buy all these vulgar books. She constantly kind of you know bringing everybody into order putting them in their place.

So, that is being you know continuous on her part okay mam the railway station and which Ammu's father needs Muthassi is one of the most fascinating phrases in the story according to

me. So, her father appears to have a sense of repulsion towards her maternal room. So, how does a public space like railway station service as a perfect place to said to the ending of the story okay yeah it is a very very interesting space and I did take some time to you know workout the significances of that railway station in the story.

And train stations and trains are representation of modernity they symbolize progress they symbolize the idea of going forth leaving behind something and in the context of this story is the grandmother and her household and her way of life that is left behind. That is one way to look at it but there is also the promise that is made by the father who is on the train who is taking his daughter over away from the grandmother.

That the grandmother will never die and she will never die and very interestingly the wheels of the train seem to pick up that child you know Muthassi will never die, she will never die. So, the engine of modernity literally and metaphorically seem to kind of give us this assurance that the past will not go away, it will be there somewhere he did can return to during summer vacations, during all those brakes to revisit it to enjoy it is luxuries.

At the same time also see it is inequities that it kind of shows to the people who are vulnerable. So, the passage going to be there is not going to become cliché erase but they are not going to stick to that we are going to move ahead, move forward okay, that is all mam, thank you for watching I will catch up with you in the next session.

“Professor-student conversation ends”