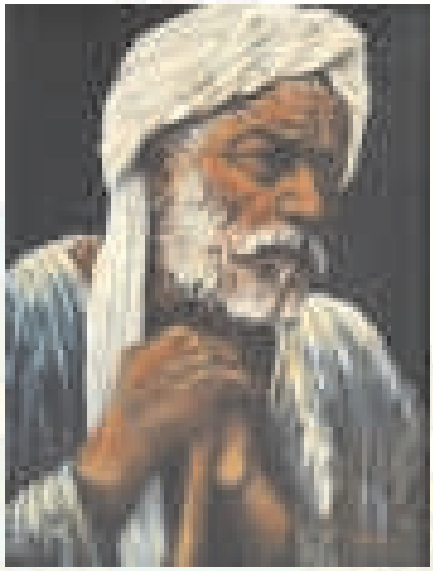
Fiction

UNIT 3

F.3 The Letter

By Dhumaketu

1. **Look at the picture of the old man given below:**



Working with your partner note down the feelings of the old man.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

2. **Can you think of reasons for these feelings? Discuss with your partner and note down possible reasons.**

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

3. **Now read the story given below. Your teacher will use a variety of techniques for different parts of the story e.g.**

- Silent reading
- One student reading aloud to the whole class
- Students reading in small groups
- Dramatised reading in small groups

1. In the grey sky of early dawn stars still glowed, as happy memories light up a life that is nearing its close. An old man was walking through the town, now and again drawing his tattered clothes tighter to shield his body from the cold and biting wind. From some houses came the sound of grinding mills, and the sweet voices of women singing at their work, and the sounds helped him along his lonely way. Except for the occasional bark of a dog, the distant steps of a workman going early to work, or the screech of a bird disturbed before its time, the whole town was wrapped in deathly silence. Most of its inhabitants were still in the arms of sleep, the sleep which grew more and more profound on account of the intense winter cold; for the cold used sleep to extend its sway over all things even as a false friend lulls his chosen victim with caressing smiles. The old man, shivering at times but fixed of purpose, plodded on till he came out of the town-gate on to a straight road. Along this he now went at a somewhat slower pace, supporting himself on his old staff.

2. On one side of the road was a row of trees, on the other side the town's public garden. The sky was darker now and the cold more intense, for the wind was blowing straight along the road, on which they fell like frozen snow, only the faint light of the morning star. At the end of the garden stood a handsome building of the newest style, and the light gleamed threw the crevices of its closed doors and windows.



3. **Beholding**[1] the wooden arch of this building, the old man was filled with the joy that the pilgrim feels when he first sees the goal of his journey. On the arch hung an old board with the newly painted letters "Post Office." The old man went in quietly and squatted on

1 **Beholding :** taking a look at; seeing

the veranda. The voices of two or three people busy and their routine work could be faintly heard threw the wall.

4. "Police Superintendent," a voice called sharply. The old man started at the sound, but composed himself again to wait. But for the faith and love, that warmed him, he could not have borne the bitter cold.

5. Name after name rang out from within as the clerk read out the English addresses in the letters and flung them to the waiting postmen. From long practise he had acquired great speed at reading out the titles - Commissioner, Superintendent, **Diwan Sahib**[2]**,** Librarian - and in flinging the letters out.

6. In the midst of this procedure a jesting voice from inside called, "Coachman Ali!" The old man got up, raised his eyes to heaven in gratitude and stepping forward put his hands to the door.

7. "Gokul Bhai!"

8. "Yes who is there?"

9. "You called out coachman Ali's name didn't you. Here I am I have come for my letter."

10. "It's a mad man, sir, who worries us by calling everyday for letters that never come," said the clerk to the postmaster.

11. The old man went back slowly to the bench on which he had been accustomed to sit for five long years.

12. Ali had been a clever shikari. As his skill increased so did his love for the hunt, till at last it was as impossible for him to pass a day without hunting as it is for the opium-eater to forgo his daily portion. When Ali sighted the earth-brown partridge, almost invisible to other eyes, the poor bird, they said, was as good as in his bag. His sharp eyes saw the hare crouching. Even when the dogs failed to see the creature cunningly hidden in the yellow brown scrub, Ali's eyes would catch the sight of his ears; and in another moment it was dead. Besides this he would often go out with his friends, the fishermen.

13. But when the evening of his life was drawing in, he left his old ways and suddenly took a new turn. His only child, Miriam married and left him. She went off with a soldier into his regiment in the Punjab, and for the last five years he had no news of this daughter for whose sake alone he dragged along a cheerless existence. Now he understood the meaning of love and separation. He could no longer enjoy the sportsman's pleasure and laughter at the bewildered terror of the young partridges bereft of their parents.

14. Although the hunter's instinct was in his very blood and bones, such loneliness had come into his life since the day Miriam had gone away, that now, forgetting his sport, he would become lost in the admiration of the green cornfield. He reflected deeply, and

2 **Diwan Sahib :** a senior government official

came to the conclusion that the whole universe is built up through love and that the grief of separation is inescapable. And seeing this, he sat down under a tree and wept bitterly. From that day he had risen each morning at 4'oclock to walk to the post -office. In his whole life he had never received a letter, but with a devout serenity born of hope and faith, he persevered and was always the first to arrive.

15. The post office, one of the uninteresting buildings in the world, became his place of pilgrimage. He always occupied a particular seat in a particular corner of the building, and when the people got to know his habit they laughed at him. The postmen began to make a game of him. Even though there was no letter for him they would call out his name for the fun of seeing him jump up and come to the door. But with a boundless faith and infinite patience, he came everyday, and went away empty-handed.

16. While Ali waited, peons would come for their firms' letters and he would hear them discussing their masters' scandals. These smart young peons in their spotless turbans and creaking shoes were always eager to express themselves. Meanwhile, the door would be thrown open and the post-master, a man with a face as sad and as inexpressive as a pumpkin, would be seen sitting on his chair inside. There was no glimmer of animation in his features; such men usually prove to be village schoolmasters, office clerks or postmasters.

17. One day, he was there as usual and did not move from his seat when the door was opened.

18. "Police Commissioner!" the clerk called out, and a young fellow stepped forward briskly for the letters.

19. "Superintendent!" Another voice called. Another peon came. And so the clerk, like a worshipper of Vishnu, repeated his customary thousand names.

20. At last they had all gone. Ali got up too and saluting the post-office as though it housed some precious relic, went off. A pitiable figure a century behind his time.

21. "That fellow," asked the post-master "is he mad?"

22. "Who, sir? Oh, yes," answered the clerk "no matter what the weather is he has been here everyday for the last five years. But he doesn't get many letters."

23. "I can well understand that! Who does he think will have time to write a letter everyday?"

24. "But he is a bit touched sir. In the old days he committed many sins; and maybe he shed some blood within sacred precincts and is paying for it now," the postman added in support of his statement.

25. "Mad-men are strange people," the postmaster said.

26. "Yes. Once I saw a postman in Ahmedabad who did absolutely nothing but make little heaps of dust. And another had a habit of going to the river bed in order to pour water on a certain stone everyday!"

27. "Oh! That's nothing" chimed in another. "I knew one madman who paced up and down all day long, another who never ceased declaiming poetry and a third who would slap himself on the cheek and then begin to cry because he was being beaten."

28. And everyone in the post office began to talk of lunacy. All working class people have the habit of taking periodic rests by joining in general discussion for a few minutes. After listening a while, the postmaster got up and said, "It seems as though the mad live in a world of their own making. To them perhaps we too appear mad. The mad-man's world is rather like the poet's, I should think!"

29. He laughed as he spoke the last words, looking at one of the clerks who wrote indifferent verse. Then he went out and the office became still again.

30. For several days Ali had not come to the post-office. There was no one with enough sympathy or understanding to guess the reason, but all were curious to know what had stopped the old man. At last he came again; but it was a struggle for him to breathe and on his face were clear signs of approaching end. That day he could not contain his impatience.

31. "Master Sahib", he begged the post-master, "have you a letter from my Miriam?"

32. The postmaster wanted to get out to the country, and was in a hurry.

33. "What a pest you are, brother!" he exclaimed.

34. "My name is Ali," answered Ali absent-mindedly.

35. "I know! I know! But do you think we've got your Miriam's name registered?"

36. "Then please note it down, brother. It will be useful if a letter should come when I am not here." For how should the villager who had spent three-quarters of his life hunting know that Miriam's name was not worth a pice to anyone but her father?

37. The postmaster was beginning to lose his temper. "Have you no sense?" he cried.

38. "Get away! Do you think we're going to eat your letter when it comes?" and he walked off hastily. Ali came out very slowly, turning after every few steps to gaze at the post office. His eyes were filled with tears of helplessness, for his patience was exhausted, even though he still had faith. Yet how could he still hope to hear from Miriam?

39. Ali heard one of the clerks coming up behind him, and turned to him.

40. "Brother!" he said.

41. The clerk was surprised, but being a decent fellow he said, "Well!"

42. "Here, look at this!" and Ali produced an old tin box and emptied five golden guineas into the surprised clerk's hands. "Do not look so startled," he continued.



43. "They will be useful to you, and they can never be to me. But will you do one thing?"

44. "What?"

45. "What do you see up there?" said Ali, pointing to the sky.

46. "Heaven."

47. "Allah is there, and in His presence I am giving you this money. When it comes, you must forward my Miriam's letter to me."

48. "But where---where am I supposed to send it?" asked the utterly bewildered clerk.

49. "To my grave."

50. "What?"

51. "Yes. It is true. Today is my last day: my very last, alas! And I have not seen Miriam, I have had no letter from her." There were tears in Ali's eyes as the clerk slowly left him and went on his way with the five golden guineas in his pocket.

52. Ali was never seen again, and no one troubled to inquire after him.

53. One day, however, trouble came to the postmaster. His daughter lay ill in another town, and he was anxiously waiting for news of her. The post was brought in, and the letters piled on the table. Seeing an envelope of the colour and shape he expected, the postmaster eagerly snatched it up. It was addressed to Coachman Ali, and he dropped it as though it had given him an electric shock. The haughty temper of the official had quite left him in his sorrow and anxiety, and had laid bare his human heart. He knew at once that this was the letter the old man had been waiting for: it must be from his daughter Miriam.

54. "Lakshmi Das!" called the postmaster, for such was the name of the clerk to whom Ali had given his money.

55. "Yes, sir?"

56. "This is for your old coachman, Ali. Where is he now?"

57. "I will find out, sir."

58. The postmaster did not receive his own letter all that day. He worried all night, and getting up at three, went to sit in the office. "When Ali comes at four o' clock," he mused, "I will give him the letter myself."

59. For now the postmaster understood Ali's heart and his very soul. After spending but a single night in suspense, anxiously waiting for news of his daughter, his heart was brimming with sympathy for the poor old man who had spent his nights in the same suspense for the last five years. At the stroke of five he heard a soft knock on the door: he felt sure it was Ali. He rose quickly from his chair, his suffering father's heart recognizing another, and flung the door wide open.

60. "Come in, brother Ali," he cried, handing the letter to the meek old man, bent double with age, who was standing outside. Ali was leaning on a stick, and the tears were wet on his face as they had been when the clerk left him. But his features had been hard then, and now they were softened by lines of kindliness. He lifted his eyes and in them was a light so unearthly that the postmaster shrank back in fear and astonishment.

61. Lakshmi Das had heard the postmaster's words as he came towards the office from another quarter. "Who was that, sir? Old Ali?" he asked. But the postmaster took no notice of him. He was staring with wide-open eyes at the doorway from which Ali had disappeared. Where could he have gone? At last he turned to Lakshmi Das. "Yes, I was speaking to Ali," he said.

62. "Old Ali is dead, sir. But give me his letter."

63. "What! But when? Are you sure, Lakshmi Das?"

64. "Yes, that is so," broke in a postman who had just arrived. "Ali died three months ago."

65. The postmaster was bewildered. Miriam's letter was still lying near the door, Ali's image was still before his eyes. He listened to Lakshmi Das's recital of the last interview, but he could still not doubt the reality of the knock on the door and the tears in Ali's eyes. He was perplexed. Had he really seen Ali? Had his imagination deceived him? Or had it perhaps been Lakshmi Das?

66. The daily routine began. The clerk read out the addresses- Police Commissioner, Superintendent, Librarian - and flung the letters deftly.

67. But the postmaster now watched them as eagerly as though each contained a warm, beating heart. He no longer thought of them in terms of envelopes and postcards. He saw the essential human worth of a letter.

68. That evening you could have seen Lakshmi Das and the postmaster walking with slow steps to Ali's grave. They laid the letter on it and turned back.

69. "Lakshmi Das, were you indeed the first to come to the office this morning?"

70. "Yes, sir, I was the first."

71. "Then how…. No. I don't understand…."

72. "What, sir?"

73. "Oh, never mind," the postmaster said shortly. At the office he parted from Lakshmi Das and went in. The newly-wakened father's heart in him was reproaching him for having failed to understand Ali's anxiety, for now he himself had to spend another night of restless anxiety. Tortured by doubt and remorse, he sat down in the glow of the charcoal sigri to wait.

About the Author

Dhumaketu (1892-1965) was the pen name of Gaurishankar Govardhandas Josh, a prolific writer, who is considered one of the pioneers of the Gujarati short story. He published twenty-four collections of short stories, as well as thirty-two novels on historical and social subjects, and plays and travelogues. His writing is characterized by a poetic style, romanticism and powerful depiction of human emotions.

4. Answer the following questions by ticking the correct options:

(a) Ali's walking to the Post Office daily even in biting cold weather shows his _____.

(i) courage

(ii) optimism

(iii) foolishness

(iv) strength of will

(b) The Post Office is referred to as Ali's "place of pilgrimage" as he_____.

(i) visited it daily

(ii) came there to pray for a letter from his daughter

(iii) went there with faith and hope

(iv) believed God would bless him if he went there

(c) The Post Master's rudeness to Ali reveals his _____.

(i) lack of empathy

(ii) preoccupation with his work

(iii) preconceived notions

(iv) sensitivity

(d) Ali did not come to the Post Office for several days as _____.

(i) he had given up hope

(ii) he was upset by the Post Master's rebuke

(iii) he was unwell and not able to walk to the Post Office

(iv) he was busy hunting

(e) "Tortured by doubt and remorse, he sat down in the glow of the charcoal sigri to wait." The Post Master was waiting for_____.

(i) a letter from Miriam

(ii) a letter from his own daughter

(iii) a letter from Ali

(iv) Ali to deliver Miriam's letter to him.

5. Answer the following questions briefly.

(a) Who was Ali? Where did he go daily?

(b) "Ali displays qualities of love and patience". Give evidence from the story to support the statement.

(c) How do you know Ali was a familiar figure at the post office?

(d) Why did Ali give up hunting?

(c) What impression do you form of the postmaster after reading the story 'The Letter'?

(f) The postmaster says to Ali, "What a pest you are, brother!" Do you agree with the statement? Give reasons for your answer.

(g) "Ali came out very slowly, turning after every few steps to gaze at the post office. His eyes were filled with tears of helplessness, for his patience was exhausted, even though he still had faith." Why were Ali's eyes filled with tears of helplessness? What had exhausted his patience but not his faith?

(h) "Tortured by doubt and remorse, he sat down in the glow of the charcoal sigri to wait." Who is tortured by doubt and remorse? Why? What is he waiting for?

6. **The writer carefully builds up an atmosphere of loneliness and grief in the story. Working in groups, pick out words/ phrases from the story that build up the atmosphere. Copy the following table in your notebook and complete it.**

Loneliness	Grief
• An old man was walking through the town, now and again drawing his tattered clothes tighter to shield his body from the cold and biting wind • his lonely way	• the whole town was wrapped in deathly silence

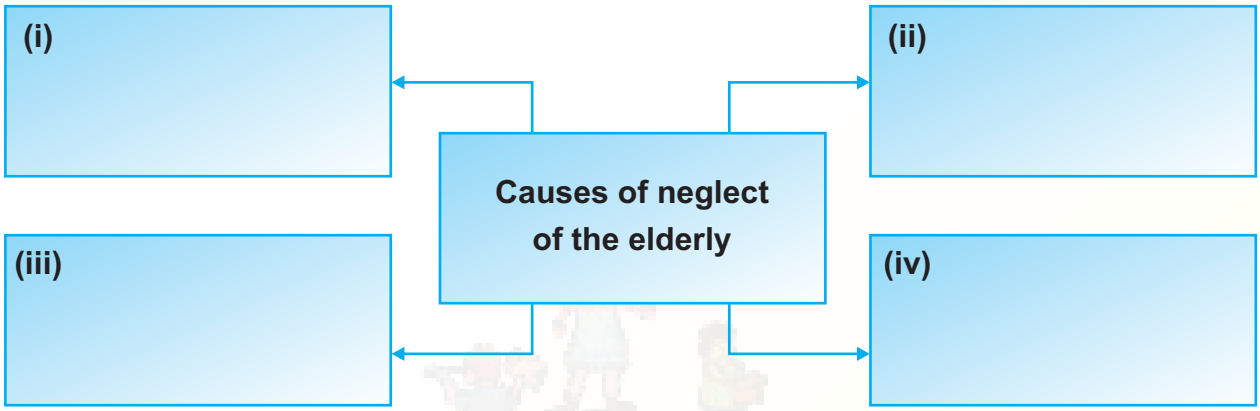
7. **Complete the table by explaining the following phrases/ sentences in your own words:**

Phrases	Meanings
happy memories light up a life that is nearing its close	
the sounds helped him along his lonely way	
the cold used sleep to extend its sway over all things even as a false friend lulls his chosen victim with caressing smiles	
when the evening of his life was drawing in, he left his old ways and suddenly took a new turn	
the whole universe is built up through love and that the grief of separation is inescapable	
the post-master, a man with a face as sad and as inexpressive as a pumpkin, would be seen sitting on his chair inside	
And so the clerk, like a worshipper of Vishnu, repeated his customary thousand names	
The haughty temper of the official had quite left him in his sorrow and anxiety, and had laid bare his human heart	

8. LISTENING TASK

Now you are going to listen to an article about the break-up of the Joint Family system in India.

As you listen to the passage complete the boxes given below.



9. WRITING TASK

Tortured by doubt and remorse, the postmaster sits in the glow of a charcoal sigri that night, waiting for news of his daughter. As he sits, he writes his diary.

As the postmaster, write a diary entry in about 150 words outlining your feelings about the day's events.

10. SPEAKING TASK

(a) The postmaster believes that he saw Ali. What do you think? Discuss with your partner and present your views in front of the class.

(b) The postmaster was anxiously waiting for his ailing daughter's news. On not getting any news he visits his daughter's town. Now construct a dialogue between the postmaster and his daughter and enact it.