Chapter 6: Poets and Pancakes

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Exercise 6.1 — Understanding the Text

Q1 The author has used gentle humour to point out human foibles. Pick out instances of this to show how this serves to make the piece interesting.

SOLUTION

Asokamitran uses gentle, self-deprecating humour throughout to expose the petty vanities and contradictions of studio life. The first instance is his description of the make-up department as practicing 'national integration' long before All India Radio and Doordarshan — because the staff included a Bengali, a Maharashtrian, a Dharwar Kannadiga, an Andhra, a Madras Indian Christian and an Anglo-Burmese. The irony is that this diverse team's shared achievement was turning 'decent-looking persons into hideous crimson-hued monsters.'

The office 'boy' — a man in his early forties — is another comic portrait. He had joined the studios dreaming of becoming a star actor, director, or lyricist; instead he was slapping thick layers of paint on crowd players with a giant vessel. He vents his frustration at Subbu, the supremely talented No. 2, as if Subbu alone is responsible for his own unfulfilled ambitions.

The legal adviser provides a third comic vignette. Officially a lawyer, he is 'referred to as the opposite by everybody' — the phrase lightly captures his ineffectuality. He stands apart in 'pants and a tie and sometimes a coat that looked like a coat of mail' among a crowd of khadi-clad Gandhians, looking 'alone and helpless — a man of cold logic in a crowd of dreamers.' His accidental silencing of the temperamental actress, and the irony that a lawyer lost his job because the poets were sent home, adds further wry comedy.

Finally, the reception for Stephen Spender is treated with gentle absurdity: The Boss delivered a speech 'all in the most general terms' peppered with 'freedom' and 'democracy' — revealing he knew 'precious little about the poet.' The audience could not understand Spender's accent, and the poet himself looked 'pretty baffled.' This incongruity — an English poet addressing Tamil film workers — and the narrator's eventual discovery of who Spender was through a fifty-paise footpath book, round off the humour. These instances make the piece charming rather than bitter, inviting the reader to laugh at a world the author clearly loved.

Answer: Humour runs through the portrait of the make-up 'boy', the inept legal adviser, the clueless reception for Spender, and the narrator's own trivial job — each episode gently mocking human pretension without malice.

Q2 Why was Kothamangalam Subbu considered No. 2 in Gemini Studios?

SOLUTION

Subbu rose to the position of No. 2 at Gemini Studios because of a unique combination of loyalty, creativity and adaptability that made him indispensable to the Boss (S. S. Vasan). Unlike the office boy, Subbu had started his career when the film industry was still unsettled and film-producing companies were not yet firmly established — yet he thrived where others struggled.

His most striking quality was his creative versatility on demand. When a producer said he did not know how to shoot an impossible scene, Subbu could instantly offer four different approaches; if those were found insufficient, he would produce fourteen more alternatives. His creativity was not personal ambition but was entirely directed at his principal's advantage: 'his sense of loyalty made him identify himself with his principal completely and turn his entire creativity to his principal's advantage.'

Beyond professional skill, Subbu was a many-sided talent — a significant poet who composed original story-poems in folk refrain and diction, the author of a sprawling novel, and a gifted actor who consistently outperformed the lead actors in whatever subsidiary role he took. He also had a warm, generous personality — his house was a permanent home for dozens of relations and acquaintances — which kept him surrounded by goodwill. All these qualities together — tireless creativity, total loyalty, literary achievement and personal generosity — made Subbu the studio's essential man and its second-most important figure.

Answer: Subbu was No. 2 because his total loyalty to the Boss, on-command creativity (offering multiple solutions to any problem), multi-faceted literary and acting talent, and generous personality made him irreplaceable to the running of Gemini Studios.

Q3 How does the author describe the incongruity of an English poet addressing the audience at Gemini Studios?

SOLUTION

The author builds the incongruity gradually and then makes it explicit. The Gemini Studios staff were Tamil film workers catering to 'the simplest sort of people' whose lives 'least afforded them the possibility of cultivating a taste for English poetry.' When word arrived that a poet from England was visiting, the most they could recall were Wordsworth, Tennyson, Keats, Shelley and Byron; only one or two had 'faintly come to know of someone by the name Eliot.'

On the day, the Boss read a long, vague speech 'all in the most general terms' peppered with 'freedom' and 'democracy' — revealing he too 'knew precious little about the poet.' The poet then spoke to what the author calls 'a more dazed and silent audience' — no one understood what he was saying, and 'his accent defeated any attempt to understand what he was saying.' The event lasted about an hour and ended with everyone dispersing 'in utter bafflement.'

The author then voices the comic absurdity directly: 'What is an English poet doing in a film studio which makes Tamil films for the simplest sort of people?' He notes that the poet himself

'looked pretty baffled too,' sensing 'the sheer incongruity of his talk about the thrills and travails of an English poet.' The whole visit is summed up as an 'unexplained mystery' — a phrase that captures both the cultural gulf and the institutional confusion that produced such an encounter.

Answer: The author shows the incongruity through the audience's total incomprehension of the English poet's accent and subject matter, the Boss's vague speech revealing his own ignorance, and the mutual bafflement of both speaker and listeners — ending with the narrator calling the visit 'an unexplained mystery.'

Q4 What do you understand about the author's literary inclinations from the account?

SOLUTION

The account reveals that Asokamitran had serious and self-aware literary ambitions. Despite holding an apparently trivial job — cutting newspaper clippings — he was, as he says, 'the most well-informed of all the members of the Gemini family.' He read widely enough to follow contemporary literary culture and was willing to invest in it: he visited the British Council Library to examine copies of The Encounter before spending on postage to send a manuscript to England.

His self-description as a 'patient, persistent, persevering drudge' who pursues prose-writing — 'not the true pursuit of a genius' — is gently ironic and self-deprecating, but it also reveals a genuine commitment to the craft: he was actively writing and submitting work to international literary journals. He contrasts this persistence with poetic genius, suggesting he considers himself a careful, hardworking writer rather than a natural talent.

His immediate emotional recognition upon seeing Stephen Spender's name — 'I heard a bell ringing in my shrunken heart' and the sense of having 'found a long lost brother' — shows that he felt a kinship with serious literary figures even from a distance. Years later, stumbling on a fifty-paise copy of The God That Failed and reading it carefully enough to connect Spender's political journey to the visit to Gemini Studios, he displays the habits of a reflective, curious reader. Together these details show an author who was literary by temperament, earnest in his craft, and quietly attentive to the larger world of ideas.

Answer: The author emerges as a dedicated, self-aware prose writer who read widely, actively submitted work to international journals, and felt a deep kinship with literary figures — someone whose serious literary inclinations sat incongruously, and humorously, within a Tamil film studio.

Exercise 6.2 — Talking about the Text

Q1 Film-production today has come a long way from the early days of the Gemini Studios.

SOLUTION

The account of Gemini Studios in the early 1950s reflects a film-making world that was labour-intensive, hierarchical and largely indoor. Filming was done mostly on studio sets under fiery incandescent lights that required thick layers of make-up to make actors look presentable on screen. A strict hierarchy governed even the make-up department: the chief make-up man handled the lead actors, his senior assistant the 'second' hero and heroine, and the office boy was responsible for plastering make-up on entire crowds using a giant vessel.

Today, digital cinematography has eliminated much of the need for heavy pancake-style make-up. High-definition cameras and advanced lighting technology reproduce natural skin tones accurately, reducing both the discomfort for actors and the large teams required. Post-production digital effects, colour grading and CGI have replaced many in-studio sets and artificial crowd scenes. Outdoor shooting, once limited to five per cent of a film, is now common and technically seamless.

The hierarchical, feudal structure of the studio system described by Asokamitran — where hundreds of permanent staff including poets, lawyers, and clerks all existed within one studio — has given way to project-based production houses that assemble specialised crews for each film. Yet some continuities remain: the central role of a creative 'right-hand man' like Subbu, the culture of celebrity, and the coexistence of commercial and artistic aspirations are recognisable features of the film world today as well.

Answer: Early Gemini Studios relied on heavy make-up, indoor sets, large permanent staff and a strict feudal hierarchy, while modern film production uses digital technology, location shooting and project-based teams — though the interplay of commerce and creativity remains unchanged.

Q2 Poetry and films.

SOLUTION

The relationship between poetry and films at Gemini Studios was an uneasy but productive coexistence. The studio was, as the author notes, 'the favourite haunt of poets' — S. D. S. Yogiar, Sangu Subramanyam, Krishna Sastry, and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya all gathered there. Subbu himself was a recognised poet who composed original story-poems in folk refrain and diction, and the Story Department was filled with poets and writers.

Yet the chapter also gently mocks the incongruity. The office boy who dreamed of becoming a star or lyricist ended up as a glorified brush-wielder on crowd players. The khadi-clad poets of the Studio 'radiated leisure' — a pre-requisite for poetry — but had little deeper political or intellectual engagement with the ideas their poetry might have addressed. And the visit of Stephen Spender, an actual English poet of substance, ended in mutual bafflement because neither side could communicate with the other.

This suggests that in the commercial film studio, poetry was valued as atmosphere, sentiment and song-lyric rather than as serious literary art. Films gave poets an audience and a livelihood, but often at the cost of the deeper complexity their work might have achieved — a tension the author captures in his observation that Subbu's 'success in films overshadowed and dwarfed his literary achievements — or so his critics felt.' The relationship between poetry and films is therefore one of mutual use: films needed poets for emotional texture; poets needed films for reach and income.

Answer: Gemini Studios was full of poets who supplied emotional texture to films, but the commercial environment tended to reduce poetry to sentiment and lyric, often overshadowing the poets' deeper literary work — as Subbu's career illustrates.

Q3 Humour and criticism.

SOLUTION

Asokamitran's essay is an excellent example of how humour can carry serious social and cultural criticism without becoming bitter or didactic. Rather than directly censuring the pretensions of the film world, the author lets absurdity speak for itself: the national integration of the make-up team whose achievement is producing 'hideous crimson-hued monsters'; the legal adviser who is called 'the opposite' of what he officially is; the poet-in-his-forties who is formally just the office boy.

The criticism embedded in these comic sketches is real. The office boy's frustration points to the broken promise of the studio system — that talent alone would find its reward. Subbu's enemies, despite his generosity, hint at the jealousy and sycophancy that flourished in the institutional hierarchy. The Boss's vague, pompous speech for Stephen Spender quietly indicts the shallow cultural aspirations of the studio leadership — they invited an eminent English poet but understood neither his poetry nor his politics.

The discovery of Spender's identity through The God That Failed adds the sharpest critical edge: the Gemini Studios had enthusiastically hosted the Moral Re-Armament Army without understanding it was an anti-Communist movement, and had welcomed its most prominent literary fellow-traveller without knowing who he was. The humour makes these points palatable rather than preachy. The reader smiles first, and only then recognises the critique of cultural pretension, institutional naivety, and the gap between artistic aspiration and commercial reality.

Answer: The essay uses gentle, self-deprecating humour — comic portraits of the office boy, the legal adviser, and the baffled Spender reception — to carry sharp criticism of studio hierarchy, cultural pretension, and institutional naivety, making the critique engaging rather than didactic.

Exercise 6.3 — Noticing Transitions

Q1 This piece is an example of a chatty, rambling style. One thought leads to another which is then dwelt upon at length. Read the text again and mark the transitions from one idea to another. The first one is indicated: Make-up department → Office-boy → Subbu.

SOLUTION

The essay moves through its ideas by association — each subject triggers a connected subject, rather than following a linear argument. Following the opening transition indicated (Make-up department → Office-boy → Subbu), the chain continues:

Subbu → Story Department: Subbu is listed under the Story Department, which leads the narrator to describe the department's members.

Story Department → Legal adviser: Among the Story Department members is the lawyer, whose portrait occupies the next section.

Legal adviser → Actress's outburst: The lawyer's most memorable act was accidentally ending the career of a temperamental actress by playing back her tirade, which becomes its own vignette.

Legal adviser / Story Department → Poets at Gemini Studios: The closure of the Story Department prompts reflection on the wider culture of poets at the studio.

Poets at Gemini → Political leanings (anti-Communism): The poets' khadi-clad Gandhian lifestyle leads to their attitude toward Communism.

Anti-Communism → MRA visit: The anti-Communist climate explains why the Gemini Studios so warmly hosted Frank Buchman's Moral Re-Armament Army.

MRA visit → English poet's visit: The MRA visit prompts the narrator to recall another foreign visitor — the unknown English poet.

English poet → Stephen Spender identified: The narrator's visit to the British Council Library to check The Encounter reveals the poet was Stephen Spender.

Stephen Spender → The God That Failed: Years later, a fifty-paise copy of The God That Failed confirms Spender's identity and finally explains the mystery of his visit.

This chain of associative transitions is what gives the essay its chatty, anecdotal quality — each episode is complete in itself yet flows naturally into the next.

Answer: The transitions follow an associative chain: Make-up department → Office-boy → Subbu → Story Department → Legal adviser → Actress's outburst → Poets at Gemini → Anti-Communist attitude → MRA visit → English poet's visit → Spender identified → The God That Failed.