

## What is a Good Book?



11074CH25

John Ruskin

☛ Look for these expressions and guess their meaning from the context

canaille

peerage

fain

national noblesse of words

The good book of the hour, then—I do not speak of the bad ones—is simply the useful or pleasant talk of some person whom you cannot otherwise converse with, printed for you. Very useful often, telling you what you need to know; very pleasant often, as a sensible friend's present talk would be. These bright accounts of travels; good-humoured and witty discussions of question; lively or pathetic story-telling in the form of novel; firm fact-telling by the real agents concerned in the events of passing history—all these books of the hour, multiplying among us as education becomes more general, are a peculiar characteristic and possession of the present age: we ought to be entirely thankful for them, and entirely ashamed of ourselves if we make no good use of them. But we make the worst possible use if we allow them to usurp the place of true books: for, strictly speaking, they are not books at all but merely letters or newspapers in good print. Our friend's letter may be delightful, or necessary, today: whether worth keeping or not, is to be considered. The newspaper may be entirely proper at breakfast time but, assuredly, it is not reading for all day. So, though bound up in a volume, the long letter which gives you so pleasant an account of the inns, and roads, and weather last year at such a place, or which tells you that amusing story or gives you the real circumstances of such and such events, however valuable for occasional reference, may not be, in the real sense of

the word, a 'book' at all, nor, in the real sense, to be 'read'. A book is essentially not a talked thing but a written thing; and written, not with the view of more communication, but of permanence. The book of talk is printed only because its author cannot speak to thousands of people at once; if he could, he would—the volume is mere 'multiplication' of his voice. You cannot talk to your friend in India; if you could, you would; you would write instead: that is mere 'conveyance' of voice. But a book is written, not to multiply the voice merely, not to carry it merely, but to preserve it. The author has something to say which he perceives to be true and useful, or helpfully beautiful. So far as he knows no one has yet said it; so far as he knows, no one else can say it. He is bound to say it, clearly and melodiously if he may; clearly, at all events. In the sum of his life he finds this to be the thing or group of things, manifest to him—this is the piece of true knowledge, or sight, which his share of sunshine and earth has permitted him to seize. He would fain set it down forever, engrave it on a rock, if he could, saying, 'This is the best of me; for the rest, I ate, and drank, and slept, loved, and hated, like another; my life was as the vapour, and is not; but this I saw and knew; this, if anything, of mine, is worth your memory.' That his 'writing', it is, in his small human way, and with whatever degree of true inspiration is in him, his inscription, or scripture. That is a 'Book'.

Perhaps you think no books were ever so written?

But, again, I ask you; do you at all believe in honesty or, at all, in kindness? Or do you think there is never any honesty or benevolence in wise people? None of us, I hope, are so unhappy as to think that. Well, whatever bit of a wise man's work is honestly and benevolently done, that bit is his book, or his piece of art. It is mixed always with evil fragments—ill-done, redundant, affected work. But if you read rightly, you will easily discover the true bits, and those **are** the book.

Now books of this kind have been written in all ages by their greatest men—by great leaders, great statesmen and great thinkers. These are all at your choice; and life is short. You have heard as much before; yet have you

measured and mapped out this short life and its possibilities? Do you know, if you read this, that you cannot read that—that what you lose today you cannot gain tomorrow? Will you go and gossip with your housemaid, or your stable-boy, when you may talk with queens and kings; or flatter yourselves that it is with any worthy consciousness of your own claims to respect that you jostle with the common crowd for *entrée* here, an audience there, when all the while this eternal court is open to you, with its society wide as the world, multitudinous as its days, the chosen and the mighty, of every place and time? Into that you may enter always; in that you may take fellowship and rank according to your wish; from that, once entered into it, you can never be outcast but by your own fault; by your aristocracy of companionship there, your own inherent aristocracy will be assuredly tested and the motives with which you strive to take high place in the society of the living, measured, as to all the truth and sincerity that are in them, by the place you desire to take in this company of the Dead.

‘The place you desire’, and the place you ‘fit yourself for’, I must also say; because, observe, this court of the past differs from all living aristocracy in this—it is open to labour and to merit but to nothing else. No wealth will bribe, no name will overawe, no artifice will deceive the guardian of those Elysian gates. In the deep sense, no vile or vulgar person ever enters there. At the portieres of that silent Faubourg St. Germain, there is but brief question, ‘Do you deserve to enter? Pass. Do you ask to be the companion of nobles? Do you long for the conversation of the wise? Learn to understand it, and you shall hear it. But on other terms? No. If you will not rise to us, we cannot stoop to you. The living lord may assume courtesy, the living philosopher explain his thought to you with considerable pain; but here we neither feign nor interpret; you must rise to the level of our thoughts if you would be gladdened by them, and share our feelings, if you would recognise our presence.’

This, then, is what you have to do and I admit that it is much. You must, in a word, love these people if you are

to be among them. No ambition is of any use. They scorn your ambition. You must love them and show your love by a true desire to be taught by them, and to enter their thoughts. To enter into theirs, observe; not to find your own expressed by them. If the person who wrote the book is not wiser than you, you need not read it; if he be, he will think differently from you in many respects.

Very ready we are to say of a book, 'How good this is—that's exactly what I think!' But the right feeling is, 'How strange that is! I never thought of that before and yet I see it is true; or if I do not now, I hope I shall, some day.' But whether thus submissively or not, at least be sure that you go to the author to get at his meaning, not to find yours. Judge it afterwards, if you think yourself qualified to do so; but ascertain it first. And be sure also, if the author is worth anything, that you will get at his meaning all at once; nay, that at his whole meaning you will not for a long time arrive in any wise. Not that he does not say what he means, and in strong words too; but he cannot say it all; and what is more strange, will not, but in a hidden way and in parables, in order that he may be sure you want it. I cannot quite see the reason of this, nor analyse that cruel reticence in the breasts of wise men which makes them always hide their deeper thoughts. They do not give it to you by way of help, but of reward, and will make themselves sure that you deserve it before they allow you to reach it. But it is the same with the physical type of wisdom, gold. There seems, to you and me, no reason why the electric forces of the earth should not carry whatever there is of gold within it at once to the mountain tops, so that kings and people might know that all the gold they could get was there; and without any trouble of digging, or anxiety, or chance, or waste of time, cut it away, and coin as much as they needed. But nature does not manage it so. She puts it in little fissures in the earth, nobody knows where: you may dig long and find none; you must dig painfully to find any.

And it is just the same with men's best wisdom. When you come to a good book, you must ask yourself, 'Am I inclined to work as an Australian miner would? Are my

pickaxes and shovels in good order and am I in good trim myself, my sleeves well up to the elbow, and my breath good, and my temper?' And, keeping the figure a little longer, even at the cost of tiresomeness, for it is a thoroughly useful one, the metal you are in search of being the author's mind or meaning, his words are as the rock which you have to crush and smelt in order to get at it. And your pickaxes are your own care, wit and learning; your smelting furnace is your own thoughtful soul. Do not hope to get at any good author's meaning without these tools and that fire; often you will need sharpest, finest chiselling, and patientest fusing, before you can gather one grain of metal.

And, therefore, first of all, I tell you, earnestly and authoritatively (I **know** I am right in this), you must get into the habit of looking intensely at words and assuring yourself of their meaning, syllable by syllable—nay, letter by letter. For, though it is only by reason of the opposition of letters in the function of signs, to sounds in the function of signs, that the study of books is called 'literature', and that a man versed in it is called, by the consent of nations, a man of letters instead of a man of books, or of words, you may yet connect with that accidental nomenclature this real principle: that you might read all the books in the British Museum (if you could live long enough), and remain an utterly 'illiterate', uneducated person; but that if you read ten pages of a good book, letter by letter—that is to say, with real accuracy—you are forever more in some measure with an educated person. The entire difference between education and non-education (as regards the merely intellectual part of it), consists in this accuracy. A well-educated gentleman may not know many languages—may not be able to speak any but his own—may have read very few books. But whatever language he knows, he knows precisely; whatever word he pronounces, he pronounces rightly; above all, he is learned in the peerage of words; knows the words of true descent and ancient blood, at a glance, from words of modern canaille; remembers all their ancestry—their inter-marriages, distantest relationships, and the extent to which they were admitted, and offices they held, among the national noblesse of words at any

time, and in any country. But an uneducated person may know by memory any number of languages and talk them all, and yet truly not know a word of any—not a word even of his own. An ordinarily clever and sensible seaman will be able to make his way ashore at most ports; yet he has only to speak a sentence of any language to be known for an illiterate person: so also the accent, or turn of expression of a single sentence will at once mark a scholar. And this so strongly felt, so conclusively admitted, by educated persons, that a false accent or a mistaken syllable is enough, in the parliament of any civilized nation, to assign a man a certain degree of inferior standing forever. And this is right; but it is a pity that the accuracy insisted on is not greater, and required to a serious purpose. It is right that a false Latin quantity should excite a smile in the House of Commons; but it is wrong that a false English meaning should **not** excite a frown there. Let the accent of words be watched, by all means, but let the meaning be watched more closely still, and fewer will do the work. A few words, well chosen and well distinguished, will do work that a thousand cannot, when everyone is acting, equivocally, in the function of another. Yes; and words, if they are not watched, will do deadly work sometimes.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Ruskin (1819–1900) was a powerful and influential critic of the nineteenth century. He wrote on a variety of subjects: nature, art, architecture, politics, history. All his work is characterised by a clarity of vision.

His first volume, *Modern Painters*, appeared in 1843—it defended modernism in the arts among the works of social criticism are *Unto this Last* (1862), and *Sesame and Lilies* (1871) from which this extract has been taken.

His ideas on architecture are presented in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1853).



**UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT**

1. What, according to Ruskin, are the limitations of the good book of the hour?
2. What are the criteria that Ruskin feels that readers should fulfil to make themselves fit for the company of the Dead.
3. Why does Ruskin feel that reading the work of a good author is a painstaking task?
4. What is the emphasis placed by Ruskin on accuracy?

**TALKING ABOUT THE TEXT**

*Discuss in pairs*

1. Ruskin's insistence on looking intensely at words, and assuring oneself of meaning, syllable by syllable—nay, letter by letter.
2. Choice of diction is very crucial to the communication of meaning.

**APPRECIATION**

1. The text is an excerpt from *Sesame and Lilies* which consists of two essays, primarily, written for delivery as public lectures in 1864. Identify the features that fit the speech mode. Notice the sentence patterns.
2. The lecture was delivered in 1864. What are the shifts in style and diction that make the language different from the way it is used today?

**LANGUAGE WORK**

1. Many sentences and paragraphs in the excerpt begin with the word 'And'. To what extent does this contribute to the rhetorical style of the lecture?
2. Study each of the following sentences and notice the balance between its parts. Pick out other sentences in the text that reflect this kind of balance
  - a. It is right that a false Latin quantity should excite a smile in the House of Commons; but it is wrong that a false English meaning should **not** excite a frown there.
  - b. Let the accent of words be watched, by all means, but let the meaning be watched more closely still, and fewer will do the work.

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**SUGGESTED READING**

1. *Sesame and Lilies* by John Ruskin
2. *Seven Lamps of Architecture* by John Ruskin



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## The Story



11074CH26

E.M. Forster

☛ Look for these expressions and guess their meaning from the context

atavistic

shock-heads

ingenious

We shall all agree that the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect, but we shall voice our assent in different tones, and it is on the precise tone of voice we employ now that our subsequent conclusions will depend.

Let us listen to three voices. If you ask one type of man, 'What does a novel do?' he will reply placidly, 'Well—I don't know—it seems a funny sort of question to ask—a novel's a novel—well, I don't know—I suppose it kind of tells a story, so to speak'. He is quite good tempered and vague, and probably driving a motor-bus at the same time and paying no more attention to literature than it merits. Another man, whom I visualise as on a golf-course, will be aggressive and brisk. He will reply, 'What does a novel do? Why, tell a story of course and I've no use for it if it didn't. I like a story. Very bad taste, on my part, no doubt, but I like a story. You can take your art, you can take your literature, you can take your music, but give me a good story. And I like a story to be a story, mind, and my wife's the same.' And a third man, he says in a sort of drooping regretful voice, 'Yes—oh dear yes—the novel tells a story.' I respect and admire the first speaker. I detest and fear the second. And the third is myself. Yes—oh dear yes—the novel tells a story. That is the fundamental aspect without which it could not exist. That is the highest factor common to all novels, and I wish that it was not so, that it could be something different—melody, or perception of truth, not this low atavistic form.

For, the more we look at the story (the story that is a story, mind) the more we disentangle it from the finer growths that it supports, the less shall we find to admire. It runs like a backbone—or may I say a tape-worm—for its beginning and end are arbitrary. It is immensely old—goes back to Neolithic times, perhaps to Palaeolithic. Neanderthal man listened to stories, if one may judge by the shape of his skull. The primitive audience was an audience of shock-heads, gaping round the campfire, fatigued with contending against the mammoth or the woolly rhinoceros, and only kept awake by suspense. What would happen next? The novelist droned on and, as soon as the audience guessed what happened next, they either fell asleep or killed him. We can estimate the dangers incurred when we think of the career of Scheherazade in somewhat later times. Scheherazade avoided her fate because she knew how to wield the weapon of suspense—the only literary tool that has any effect on tyrants and savages. Great novelist though she was—exquisite in her descriptions, tolerant in her judgements, ingenious in her incidents, advanced in her morality, vivid in her delineations of character, expert in her knowledge of three Oriental capitals—it was yet on none of these gifts that she relied when trying to save her life from her intolerable husband. They were but incidental. She only survived because she managed to keep the king wondering what would happen next. Each time she saw the sun rising she stopped in the middle of a sentence, and left him gaping. ‘At this moment Scheherazade saw the morning appearing and, discreet, was silent.’ This uninteresting little phrase is the backbone of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, the tape-worm by which they are tied together and by which the life of a most accomplished princess was preserved.

We are like Scheherazade’s husband in that we want to know what happens next. That is universal and that is why the backbone of a novel has to be a story. Some of us want to know nothing else—there is nothing in us but primeval curiosity and, consequently, our other literary judgements are ludicrous. And now the story can be defined. It is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence—

dinner coming after breakfast, Tuesday coming after Monday, decay after death, and so on. *Qua* story, it can only have one merit; that of making the audience want to know what happens next. And, conversely, it can have only one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next. These are the only two criticisms that can be made on the story. It is the lowest and simplest of literary organisms. Yet it is the highest factor common to all the very complicated organisms known as novels.

When we isolate the story like this from the nobler aspects through which it moves, and hold it out on forceps—wriggling and interminable, the naked worm of time—it presents an appearance that is both unlovely and dull. But we have much to learn from it. Let us begin by considering it in connection with daily life.

Daily life is also full of the time sense. We think one event occurs after or before another, the thought is often in our minds, and much of our talk and action proceeds from that assumption. Much of our talk and action, but not all; there seems something else in life besides time, something which may conveniently be called 'value', something which is measured not by minutes or hours, but by intensity, so that when we look at our past it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few pinnacles and when we look at the future it seems sometimes a wall, sometimes a cloud, sometimes a sun, but never a chronological chart. Neither memory nor anticipation is much interested in Father Time, and all dreamers, artists and lovers are partially delivered from his tyranny; he can kill them but he cannot secure their attention and, at the very moment of doom when the clock collected in the tower its strength and struck, they may be looking the other way. So daily life, whatever it may be really, is practically composed of two lives—the life in time and the life by values—and our conduct reveals a double allegiance. 'I only saw her for five minutes, but it was worth it.' There you have both allegiances in a single sentence. And what the story does is to narrate the life in time. And what the entire novel does—if it is a good novel—is to include the life by values as well; using devices hereafter to be examined. It,

also, pays a double allegiance. But in it, the novel, the allegiance to time is imperative: no novel could be written without it. Whereas, in daily life, the allegiance may not be necessary; we do not know, and the experience of certain mystics suggests, indeed, that it is not necessary, and that we are quite mistaken in supposing that Monday is followed by Tuesday, or death by decay. It is always possible for you or me in daily life to deny that time exists and act accordingly even if we become unintelligible and are sent by our fellow citizens to what they choose to call a lunatic asylum. But it is never possible for a novelist to deny time inside the fabric of his novel: he must cling, however lightly, to the thread of his story, he must touch the interminable tape-worm otherwise he becomes unintelligible, which, in his case, is a blunder.

I am trying not to be philosophic about time for it is (experts assure us) a most dangerous hobby for an outsider, far more fatal than place; and quite eminent metaphysicians have been dethroned through referring to it improperly. I am only trying to explain that as I lecture now I hear the clock ticking, I retain or lose the time sense; whereas, in a novel, there is always a clock. The author may dislike the clock. Emily Bronte in *Wuthering Heights* tried to hide hers. Sterne, in *Tristram Shandy*, turned it upside down. Marcel Proust, still more ingenious, kept altering the hands so that his hero was at the same time entertaining a mistress to supper and playing ball with his nurse in the park. All these devices are legitimate but none of them contravene our thesis: the basis of a novel is a story and a story is a narrative of events in time sequence.

#### **From Aspects of the Novel : A Note**

These are some lectures (the Clark Lectures) which were delivered under the auspices of Trinity College, Cambridge, in the spring of 1927. They were informal, indeed talkative, in their tone and it seemed safer when presenting them in book form not to mitigate the talk, in case nothing should be left at all. Words such as 'I', 'you' 'one', 'we', 'curiously enough', 'so to speak', 'only imagine' and 'of course' will consequently occur on every page and will rightly distress

the sensitive reader; but he is asked to remember that if these words were removed, others, perhaps more distinguished, might escape through the orifices they left and that since the novel is itself often colloquial it may possibly withhold some of its secrets from the graver and grander streams of criticism and may reveal them to backwaters and shallows.

### The 1001 Arabian Nights

*The 1001 Arabian Nights* is a collection of stories loosely linked together, narrated by a young girl Scheherazade. She was the daughter of the vizier, or minister, who had to serve a peculiar king. The king married on a daily basis: his wife was always beheaded after the wedding night.

Scheherazade tells her father that she wished to marry the king. He reluctantly agrees. She tells the king an interesting story on their wedding night, and makes sure to stop at an interesting point at the crack of dawn. The king is unwilling to execute her because he wants to hear the end of the story. This scheme was extremely risky, but Scheherazade is successful in continually linking stories over many nights until, finally, the king accepts her as his queen and stops the horrible practice of executing his wife.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E.M. Forster (1879–1970), a noted English author and critic, wrote a number of short stories, novels and essays. His first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, was published in 1905. This was followed by *Howard's End* and *A Passage to India* and other well-known works. *The Hill of Devi*, a portrait of India with a commentary, appeared in 1953. The essay presented here is an excerpt from chapter two of *Aspects of the Novel*.



### UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. What do you understand of the three voices in response to the question 'What does a novel do'?

2. What would you say are 'the finer growths' that the story supports in a novel?
3. How does Forster trace the human interest in the story to primitive times?
4. Discuss the importance of time in the narration of a story.

### TALKING ABOUT THE TEXT

*Discuss in pairs or in small groups*

1. What does a novel do?
2. 'Our daily life reflects a double allegiance to 'the life in time' and 'the life by values'.
3. The description of novels as organisms.

### APPRECIATION

1. How does Forster use the analogy of Scheherazade to establish his point?
2. Taking off from Forster's references to Emily Bronte, Sterne and Proust, discuss the treatment of time in some of the novels you have read.

### LANGUAGE WORK

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1. 'Qua story': what does the word mean? Find other expressions using the word *qua*.
2. Study the Note to *Aspects of the Novel* given at the end. Discuss the features that mark the piece as a talk as distinguished from a critical essay.
3. Try rewriting the lecture as a formal essay and examine Forster's statement: '...since the novel is itself often colloquial, it may possibly withhold some of its secrets from the graver and grander streams of criticism'.

### SUGGESTED READING

1. *The Craft of Fiction* by Percy Lubbock
2. *The Sense of an Ending* by Frank Kermode.



## Bridges



11074CH27

Kumudini Lakhia

- ☛ Look for these words and expressions in the text and guess their meaning from the context

infraction

demeanour

dubious assertion

synergy

If my younger self could see me now she would be incredulous. That I would work in the field of dance or decipher and translate dance for my own comprehension, call it choreography if you wish, would have been unbelievable. In this respect, I am particularly envious of dancers who claim that they were 'born to dance', implying that it was clearly laid out for them from the beginning. I must say, I find this assertion dubious; it is rarely that easy. To dance means to struggle—I believe it is the same in any discipline because discipline itself is a struggle. I believe I was not simply born to dance; I was born to live. And now, as the patchwork of my life comes into clearer focus, I can see clear bridges between my life experiences and my work in dance.

In all truth, as a child, I never did want to dance; it was forced upon me by a doting mother and a silent father. My father probably kept his peace to avoid argument. From the beginning my lessons took place under trying conditions, though I believe that the conditions were more trying for my mother than for me. She travelled in local, over-crowded trains to dance class with an unwilling child, tired from a whole day at school. She waited a whole hour in the not-so-clean ante-room of my guru's house and then endured the same journey back. This was in Bombay, and my first dance lessons were with Guru Sunder Prasad who



lived in Chowpatty while we lived in Khar. We took the train, then a bus and then walked, and the whole trip took roughly 45 minutes each way.

Interestingly, it was the film industry that spurred my mother to enrol me in dance classes. When I was seven, we went to see a movie starring Mumtaz Ali, father of the comedian, Mehmood. Ali did a dance number in the film with which I became fascinated. When we arrived home, I began prancing around the house imitating the film actor and my mother, who was quietly watching, was the one who said, 'Kumudini, you are born to dance.' Ironically, I have no recollection of this story; it was my mother who saw this innate ability in me. Her belief was so strong that she went through the gruelling exercise of taking me to dance class four days a week without complaint.

However, my childhood education was composed of much more than just dance and academics. I did not live in a vacuum. I was surrounded by life and learnt many of my lessons there, lessons that I still carry with me. I grew up during a volatile era, a time of war, India's independence movement compounded by World War II in which India played a role in military operations. My father, being an engineer, was called upon to build the cantonment areas first in Delhi, then in Naini and Allahabad. In Delhi we were allotted a sprawling house on Hardinge Avenue (now Tilak Marg) with Liaquat Ali (later, Prime Minister of Pakistan), as our neighbour. Once his gardener caught me and my brother, Suresh, picking guavas from his tree. He grabbed us by the ear and presented us before the master for punishment. Liaquat Ali not only let us keep the guavas but extended an open invitation to pick the fruits whenever we wished! However, this generous offer was accompanied by the *mali's* face which was so horrifying and revengeful that we never went near that garden again. It was one of my first lessons in the games that politicians play.

Father would now have to move to wherever army construction was required. Therefore, when I was nine years old, the decision was made to send me to boarding school. After a lot of arguments, advice, consideration and research on the part of my parents, I was packed off to Queen Mary's



College (school) in Lahore (at that time in India). I had not known a day away from home, but the idea of living with a lot of girls of my age and studying in a fancy school was both exciting and worrisome, as curiosity was mixed with sadness. No more shuffling to and from class, no more over-bearing Guruji.

No such luck. Mother sent a dance teacher, Radhelal Misra, Sunder Prasad's nephew, along with me! She hired a small apartment for him in Lahore and arranged a schedule for my lessons. Despite her belief that I was 'born' to dance, I didn't enjoy dance classes. Quite frankly, they were no fun. I felt as if nothing progressed, that I was just doing what my guru ordered. I was always a curious child and I wanted to know and understand what I was doing. Why was I gyrating in this way? But my teacher could not, or would not, explain it to me. I was envious of other girls who were playing tennis and basketball while I was doing this thing called Kathak. My mother convinced the principal, a Britisher, that to dance was a form of prayer and that she could not curb religious freedom! Having spent several years in a school where most of our teachers were British, I have come to like their form of discipline. Discipline in one's daily routine does bring discipline in thinking. You begin to place your thoughts in neat little piles the way you do your uniforms and shoes.

It was three weeks before the final school examinations—matriculation at that time—when my life changed dramatically. I was called to the Principal's office. What had I done? The only reason one was called to Miss Cox's office was because of some infraction. While she was a kind and diplomatic person, she was also strict and firm and later, when I myself became a teacher, I was influenced by her demeanour. As I approached the office, I wondered—did I forget to put away the tennis racquets after morning play? Did I forget to lock the door of the dormitory?

'May I come in, madam?' I asked quietly.

'Yes do come in child,' she answered with a voice full of such kindness that it made me suspicious, 'You have to go home.'

'But why? I have to study for my exams!'

'Your father called to say that your mother is sick and he would like you to visit her.'

During the walk back from Miss Cox's office to my classroom I was overwhelmed with feelings of confusion, a state of mind I have never completely got over. Even today, when I want to create a new piece, the first theme that comes to my mind vibrates with confusion.

Mother was already dead when I arrived, 36 hours and three train-rides later. When I saw her, motionless and colourless, I finally understood why I had been summoned home. I was 14 years old. The air was still and nobody looked at me. I did not know where to turn or what to do with my hands, which hung loose from my body. Then suddenly they clutched my stomach. Hunger pangs? I hadn't eaten for three days and there was an emptiness I wanted to fill. I was afraid of appearing greedy, so I underplayed my emotions, though all kinds of yearning gnawed my insides.

Even today I mistake the different kinds of hunger inside me, and this is something that shows up in my work. The dangling arms find expression in my choreography. In *Dwidha* or *Conflict*, I examined the plight of a middle-class woman who is chained to the traditions of Indian life. She is restricted to domestic circles, is forbidden from wearing sleeveless blouses, must wear her hair in a bun and must cater to her husband. Yet, from a small window she sees the newspaperman waving images of a woman with a bold streak of white in her short hair, who wears sleeveless blouses, is surrounded by men who listen to her intently, is widowed but wears colourful saris. Moreover, she commands a country with millions of people. Yet, while the woman looking out of the window is intrigued by this image, she experiences conflicting emotions. The character in *Dwidha* is torn between two lives—she feels an emptiness within her but is not sure what she is hungry for, what kind of life she wants. This is something I have felt often, yet now that I have so much behind me, I am more certain of where to place my hands.

My exams yielded surprisingly good results. So, now what? Where do I go from here? This question has cropped

up throughout my life, and many years later took shape in my composition, *Atah Kim*. It's funny how we store our experiences in our brains as if we are pre-recorded cassettes. The right cassette seems to fall into place when you least expect it to. Upon finishing school, I was at a crossroads and the path ahead was not clear to me. I had lots of ideas about what I wanted to do with my life, and dance was not always a priority. I was always driven, and that partly stems from the fact that I had a relatively subdued childhood. I was enveloped by a great mist of protection and I wanted to emerge from that mist and discover myself. In particular, I wanted to feel powerful; to control a large group of people. In *Atah Kim* I address this desire for power and, yet, once you possess it, what do you do with it? Once you reach your goal, where do you go from there? It's a question without an answer but I believe the question must be asked.

At the age of 15, I had many options. It would have been easy enough to join college for a bachelor's or master's degree in psychology or English literature. But everyone does that. 'You have to do something that is off-beat, different from the done thing,' my father said to me. So it was that I decided to attend an agriculture college in Naini, Allahabad. There were twenty-nine boys and I, in a class of thirty. Having spent my school years in a girls' school, I knew little about the behaviour of boys. My brother was seven years younger so his friends were no help. However, at the agriculture college, I got a taste of relations between boys and girls. We had to travel for miles in the fields on bicycles. The boys deflated the tires of my bicycle so that they could walk back with me, resulting in miles and miles of worthless conversation about the latest film songs and actors, none of which interested me.

Also, I was fascinated by the professors, mostly American, who wore shorts because we worked in fields with clay, crops, manure and insecticides. One day, I also turned up in shorts and had 58 eyes peering at my legs! My grandmother had always said that girls must never push their chests out or uncover their legs. I now realised what she meant but couldn't accept it as valid. 'What about

the short blouses you wear, with your midriff showing?' I asked her.

'Don't argue,' was her reply.

When will we understand the dignity of the female body? A dancer has to move with dignity, a quality much desired amongst dancers but sadly missing in most, especially women, as they are taught to underplay their bodies most of their lives. My grandmother, of course, was not completely to blame for this attitude. It is a problem that goes deep into the texture of our society. We must embrace our senses and use them to the fullest, rather than try to inhibit them.

Another argument I often had with my grandmother was about religion and visiting temples. 'Go to the temple before your exams, God will give you strength to do well,' she would say. I took issue with the idea that an outside force must be bargained with in order to obtain desirable results. Doesn't this strength come from within? I had a hard time believing that it was God alone who endowed me with this ability. Visiting temples activates your senses, though we often take this for granted. You see the grandeur of the architecture and can feel the curve of the stones. The scent of incense, flowers and sandalwood mingle together. You hear the ringing of the bells and taste the *panchamrut*. With your palms and the soles of your feet you touch the different surfaces. What an experience! Why do I have to bargain with God as if he is some kind of agent for a trading company? Yet these arguments with my grandmother were useful in that they made me differentiate between sensitivity and sentimentality. Later, I created a piece called *Panch Paras*, the five senses, to explore this realm.

After graduating with a degree in agriculture at the age of 18, I was left with few job prospects and was again at a crossroads. Luckily, good fortune came to me without much beckoning. It happened in Bombay. I had gone to the train station to see off Suresh who was studying at Sherwood College in Nainital. While I was waving to the train that had now disappeared, there was a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and the woman who stood there

changed the course of my life. All those tedious hours of dance lessons fused into a new synergy. She was Komlata Dutt, a friend of my father's and, more importantly, the person who introduced Uday Shankar to the dance legend, Anna Pavlova, in Paris. And here she was, telling me to join the Ram Gopal Dance Company based in London!

It took some learning to adjust to working with a group of professional dancers and musicians, on the move all the time, and the opportunity exposed me to a very different aspect of dance education—there was a lot of dance to be learnt as well—*kummi* of Kerala, *ghumar* of Rajasthan, *dandia* of Gujarat—all were part of the troupe's repertoire. What I enjoyed most was learning the classical Bharatanatyam from Ram Gopal himself who was a strict disciplinarian and had a fetish for perfection of line. However, in the end he would say, 'You've perfected the technique, now throw it overboard and dance'. This is a lesson I have tried to teach my own students—before you begin experimenting, you need to perfect the technique with which you experiment.

Touring with Ram Gopal not only taught me more about dance, I discovered new things about my own personality. Encountering people from different countries gives you a chance to look at yourself in a new light. More often than not, I found that my weaknesses were brought glaringly into focus. I came to realise the importance of context—how things change when you change their placement. One of the most striking moments of that tour was my time in post-war Germany. It was an unbelievably sad place. Hungry children begging for food is a common sight in India, yet, in Germany the same sight created a different sensation. It amazed me how the same situation in a different environment evokes quite different reactions, and the same is true in dance. One changes the placement of a choreographic piece on stage and it looks quite different. I myself was a changed person when placed in different surroundings.

Still, a long tour of many countries in Europe and America is exhausting. I was constantly travelling between India and various parts of the globe. In all, I was abroad for

three years and by the end, I needed to go home. But where was home? And how does one make a home for oneself? Buy a house, get married, have children, make friends? I had only the last item on the agenda. While in school in Lahore, I had made a lot of friends, but they now lived in a different country—Pakistan. I had to obtain a visa to visit my closest friend over a weekend. I would like to say I am apolitical but I've discovered that politics makes its presence felt even when uninvited.

On my return, the last of many returns, what ultimately awaited me were marriage, children and a flat in Bombay. Finally I had a home, but it came with strings attached—I now had to manage this new home. In a society like ours, where a woman wanting to work outside the home must do so in addition to her domestic responsibilities, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Still, I didn't do too badly thanks to my supportive husband, Rajanikant. In spite of his own background in a family where men are treated as a special breed, he was a good man, with the extraordinary quality of believing everything. The word 'suspicion' was absent from his vocabulary. This made him popular but unsuccessful, both as a professional and a parent, but a very accommodating husband. My biggest benefit from my association with him was the love of music he instilled in me. If he had chosen music as a profession he would have done better in life, but his bar-at-law from Lincoln's Inn in London pushed him into the wrong line of work.

I must say, I am blessed with a wonderful family, two normal and healthy children, my son Shiraj and daughter Maitreyi, now married with their own children. Looking back, I keep wondering what my contribution was as a mother, but it must have been satisfactory to attain these results. And yet, both are completely different in their attitudes and philosophies—one has an extended sense of ambition and the other allows things to transpire as they are destined to. The only point on which they agree is that they disagree with my profession! It is interesting to have this kind of variety in a family. Living with a group of different personalities beneath one roof is like performing with other artistes on stage. The equation, the space factor,

vibrations and relationships must be taken into serious consideration. You are no longer performing solo. You belong to a larger image and must develop a new set of performing skills.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Kumudini Lakhia** (born 1930) is a renowned Kathak dancer and choreographer who was taught and influenced by the famous Ram Gopal. She has performed in over 40 countries, but chose to give up her career as a solo performer to start the Kadamb Dance Centre in Ahmedabad, where she trains students in the art of classical Kathak dance. Her other achievements include choreographing for two very successful Hindi films, *Umrao Jaan* and *Sur Sangam*. Her awards include the All India Sangeet Natya Kala Award (1977); Sangeet Natak Akademi National Award (1982); Kala Ratna Award; Sangeet Kala Sangam (1982); and the Padma Shri in 1987. On the occasion of 50 years of Independence, the city of Ahmedabad awarded her with the Nagar Bhushan.



### UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. How did the author feel about her mother's passion to make her a dancer?
2. What were the lessons of life learnt in her younger days that Kumudini carried into her adult life?
3. How did Kumudini react to her mother's death?
4. What were the concepts that Kumidini Lakhia represent through *Duvidha*, *Atah Kim* and *Panch Paras*?
5. How does Kumudini Lakhia describe her guru Ramgopal's influence on her?

### TALKING ABOUT THE TEXT

*Discuss the following in pairs or in small groups*

1. Exceptionally talented people are born so; talent cannot be cultivated.



2. Discipline and a questioning spirit can coexist in an individual.
3. "Before you begin experimenting, you need to perfect the technique with which you experiment."
4. Kumudini Lakhia's life is an inspiring illustration of the emancipation of women.

### APPRECIATION

1. The significance of reading an autobiograophy lies in drawing lessons from another life. What is the significance of Kumudini's account for us as readers?
2. Pick out instances from the passage that reflect the sensitivity of the author.
3. 'I can see clear bridges between my life experiences and my work in dance.' How does Kumudini Lakhia weave episodes from the two realms in her account?

### LANGUAGE WORK

1. Distinguish between the following pairs of words  
incredulous - incredible  
suspicious - susceptible  
sensitivity - sentimentality  
successive - successful
2. Interpret these phrases in the context of the essay

mist of protection                      at a crossroads  
it came with strings attached

3. 'Kummi', 'ghumar' and 'dandia' are some dance forms mentioned in the text. Make an inventory of folk dance forms in the different regions of the country.

### SUGGESTED READING

1. *Women who Dared* ed Ritu Menon, National Book Trust, 2000.





## GLOSSARY

### SELECTED LITERARY FORMS

**Ballad** : A form of verse, adapted for singing or recitation which presents a dramatic or exciting episode in simple, narrative form.

**Dramatic Monologue** : A poetic soliloquy in which the speaker reveals his own character. Usually a listener is present who does not speak but plays a part in the development of the poem.

**Fable**: A brief tale in either prose or verse, with a moral. Usually, but not always, the characters are animals and birds.

**Satire**: Verse or prose blending a critical attitude with humour and wit; the purpose being to ridicule frailties and follies in human customs and institutions and by causing laughter, to inspire their reform.

**Lyric**: A fairly short poem consisting of the utterance by a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought and feeling.

**Ode**: A long lyric poem that is serious in subject and treatment, elevated in style and elaborate in its stanzaic structure.

**Sonnet**: A lyric poem consisting of fourteen lines, linked by an intricate rhyme scheme.

**Allegory**: A story, play, poem, picture etc. in which meaning or message is represented symbolically.

### SELECTED LITERARY TERMS

**Refrain**: A group of words forming a phrase or sentence and repeated at regular intervals in a poem, usually at the end of a stanza. The refrain probably developed from the old ballad.

**Pathos** : In literature and drama, the portrayal of an incident in such a way so as to arouse feelings of pity, tenderness or sadness in the reader or spectator.

**Irony** : A form of speech in which the actual intent is expressed in words that carry the opposite meaning.

**Sarcasm** : A sneering or cutting remark; an ironical taunt.

