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Unit One

Sense of Self



Source: Internet

Learning outcomes

After we have studied this unit, we will be able to

- understand our position as humans
- recognise our responsibilities towards society and culture
- define our relationship with humans and the natural world at large

Lesson 1: “Mr. Moti” by Rahad Abir

Economy and education are two major factors that segregate people in a society. ‘Mr. Moti’ is a story by a Bangladeshi writer Rahad Abir. Read the two sections of the story and try to understand the identity of people belonging to different social classes. Also, think about how the human world and animals/birds are inter-related.

Ameen is seventeen when the war breaks out. One Monday, after supper, he announces he will go to war. Sonabhan shrieks in surprise. You want to leave me alone?

It won't take long, Ma, he assures her. I'll be back soon after the training.

That night Sonabhan cannot sleep.

After sun-up, she opens the duck coop. The flock streams out, stretches and quacks around her for their morning meal. She takes longer than usual. She mixes water with rice husks in an earthen bowl and puts it down. They gobble it up in five minutes and head for the pond.

Ameen has let out the chickens by then. He lifts his 12-week-old cockerel, Moti, and sits on the veranda. During his breakfast he doesn't strike up any conversation. Having noticed Sonabhan's puffy eyes, he knows not to mention last night's subject. He casts his glance to the side, down at the cockerel eating rice in silence.

Today is haat bar, market day. Sonabhan has arranged the things Ameen will take to the bazaar to sell. Two dozen eggs, a sheaf of areca nuts, a bottle gourd. The bazaar is about a mile away.

Ameen wears his short-sleeved floral shirt over his lungi. He whistles as he looks into the cloudy mirror to comb his hair. Placing the rattan basket on his head before setting off, he hollers: I'm off, Ma.

Sonabhan watches him go along the bank of the little river. For the first time it occurs to her that Ameen has grown up. He has reached the height of his dead father, has his long neck and straight shoulders.

In that moment, Sonabhan realizes it's not the war, it's the fighting that Ameen is fascinated with. Like his dead father, he is crazy about bullfighting, cockfighting and boat racing. The same stubbornness flows in his blood. Once he decides on something, nothing can stop him.

Her little son! Now a man. Even up to his fifteenth birthday barely a day passed without neighbours appearing with a slew of complaints. Sometimes one or two turned up from other villages. They peeked into the house and asked, Does Ameen live here?

Sonabhan would sigh. What did he do?

Your son stole my date juice! Emptied the juice pots hanging on the date trees! Sonabhan would sigh again. Then ask the visitor to pardon him. She hated saying that she'd raised her son alone. If she could spare them, she would bring half a dozen eggs and hand them to the visitor: Please take these for your children.

At night, Sonabhan climbs out of her bed, clutches the hurricane lamp and tiptoes into Ameen's room. She stands by his bed, looks at her sleeping son. He snores like his father. He has her light skin and button nose. She touches his cheek. His broad forehead. She suppresses a desire to lie beside him. Like the old days, when she slept cuddling her baby.

A warning comes from old Chowkidar's young wife. Watch your rooster, she threatens. I don't want him in my house again.

If someone touches my boy, Sonabhan responds, they'll see the consequences. She grounds Moti for an entire day. It makes him sad. His forlorn captivity crucifies her. She sets him loose the following morning.

Some boys come and ask Sonabhan to lend them Moti for cockfighting at a fair. They are happy to pay.

Never, she tells them. He is my son.

Monday dawns without Moti's crowing. His cold body is resting on its right side. Lying against the basket. Eyes closed. His kingly head down.

With Moti's basket in her lap, Sonabhan is motionless.

She puts Moti to rest beside her husband's grave. She sighs, plods across the empty yard, steps onto an empty veranda, crawls into an empty home and sits on the edge of an empty bed.

Another morning breaks.... Noon and afternoon come and go.... The birds in the coops quack and crow.... No one lets them out. For the first time, Sonabhan's doors do not open.

Note: The excerpts of "Mr. Moti" are selected from the complete story included in *When the Mango Tree Blossomed: Fifty Short Stories from Bangladesh* edited by Niaz Zaman.

A Answer the following questions:

1. Why is the rooster called Mr. Moti?
2. Is the writer trying to compare the son with the rooster? What are the reasons for doing so?
3. Why is the story a Bangladeshi story? Which war is referred to in the story?
4. Do you know what cockfighting is?
5. What do you think about the mother-son relationship?

B Make a list of words from the story that have cultural connotations. Make use of them in a conversation between two friends in your class.

C In our culture, sons are believed to follow their father's ways and daughters are found similar with their mothers. Do you see that kind of belief in the story? Discuss it with your friends and bring examples from your own life if you are compared with your father or mother.

D. Arrange a debate on the motion:

"Man is known by his work, not by his looks."

Lesson 2: “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid

Let’s read the following story and answer the following questions.

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don’t walk bare-head in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn’t have gum in it, because that way it won’t hold up well after a wash; soak salt fish overnight before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna in Sunday school?; always eat your food in such a way that it won’t turn someone else’s stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don’t sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn’t speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don’t eat fruits on the street—flies will follow you; but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school; this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father’s khaki shirt so that it doesn’t have a crease; this is how you iron your father’s khaki pants so that they don’t have a crease; this is how you grow okra—far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don’t like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don’t like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don’t squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know; don’t pick people’s flowers—you might catch something; don’t throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw

back a fish you don't like, and that way something bad won't fall on you; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; *but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?

A Answer the following questions:

1. Is it a story about a mother and daughter? Do you find the mother and daughter familiar to you?
2. What is the cultural identity of the speaker and listener?
3. What is benna?
4. What is the importance of gender in the story? If the girl in "Girl" were a boy, would the mother be telling him the same things?
5. If the father were talking instead of the mother, would he say the same?

B Group work: Make a list of foreign or unfamiliar objects mentioned in the story and make short notes on them in small groups. Present the notes in the class.

C One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman. This is a comment by a famous gender theorist. Does the story give you a sense of that kind? Write ten sentences on your thoughts.

D Biological attributes make a person act as a man or a woman in society. This creates gender identity and gender discrimination. In the following table, complete the list of activities that you find marked in our society as man's job and woman's job:

Man's job	Woman's job
Driving a car Athletics Scuba diving	Cooking Nursing

Lesson 3: O Me! O Life!**A O Me! O Life!**

Walt Whitman

Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who
more faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever
renew'd,
Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,
Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

B Listen to the poem using the following YouTube link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGZo87If2T8>

C Answer the following questions:

- What is the main theme of the poem?
- What recurring questions does the poet mention?
- What does the poet mean by 'useless years'?
- Is age an identity marker? What are the attributes of old age?
- What do 'sordid' and 'plodding' mean?
- What 'faith' does the poet mention here?
- Is there a symbolic meaning of 'contribute a verse' in the last line?
- Do you find the answer section of the poem convincing?

D Pair work: There are some words in the poem like 'fill'd' and 'renew'd'. These are called 'contractions'. Make a list of such words in pairs with the help of your subject teacher.**E Write a summary of the poem and present it in the class.**