



THE
PEACEWORKS
SCHOOL
CURRICULUM

LITERATURE

The PeaceWorks School Curriculum [Literature module] comprises of six one hour sessions conducted by us, ending with a creative writing workshop. This workbook is a resource for teachers to be able to continue the literature curriculum in their classrooms. Not totally exhaustive, this is just a starting point of ideas and material that can be adapted in the classroom even through the regular curriculum subjects and material.

Broadly the themes we cover are:

session 1 Theme: Identity

1. Introduction: What is PeaceWorks? What are the aims of the programme and why is there need for curricular intervention? Why read texts? What does literature do—how does it identify the ‘other’? What is the role of curiosity in our social life? Why must we know about the ‘other’?
2. Introduction to the group of students. Names, with one fact about oneself that is not known by anyone else in the group.
3. Divide the entire class for group reading of Elias Canetti’s pieces on 50 characters.
4. Once the pieces are read, ask each participant to come up with one adjective for the character that they read about.
5. Discussion. Stress on ‘curiosity’ again. Are we interested in knowing other characters like these? Can we identify with them? Is there a connection? Or are they too different from us?
6. Exercise. Divide the class into pairs. Ask each person to give one adjective to describe his/her partner in the pair. Then the person describes his/herself in one adjective.
7. Discuss the value of looking at each other in the light of ‘curiosity’.

session 2 Theme: Identity

1. Read Jerry Pinto piece on fluid identities.
2. Discuss how our identities are fixed by others—how our names give away our identities: gender, religion, community, etc.
3. Exercise: ‘My name is . . . / I am . . .’ Stress on the significance of the difference between one’s name and one’s inner identity (character/beliefs/ ambitions/dreams). Ask each person to utter their name, then distinguish the name from any other way by which they want to describe themselves.

session 3 Theme: Gender

1. Read the short story ‘Lotus’ by Aishwarya Subramanyan.
2. Discussion on gender issues: Starting from the topic of female infanticide in the story, go on to gender roles at home, on the streets, in the education system, at work and so on. How does being a woman/girl help shape one’s identity in society, as well as internally?

session 4 Theme: Exile

1. Read ‘Leaving Quito’ by Jorge.
2. Discuss issues of exile—what is it like to go away from one’s own homeland, what is missed, what parts of our culture do we take with us—hence, what is valuable and defining for one in one’s own culture, that one makes a part of her or his identity? How does identity get mixed up with migration and exile? How are new identities created in the middle of people and cultures very different from one’s own? How do we, under such circumstances, how do we learn to ‘live with difference’?

session 5 Theme: Partition

1. Read ‘Take Me Home’ by Bhisham Sahni.
2. Discuss ‘feelings’—Issues of old age, incomprehension, victimhood, human nature.
3. Read ‘The Princess Bride’ by Suketu Mehta.
4. Discuss ‘memories’—Are you shackled to the past? Can we forgive? Can we forget? Should we forget? How can we learn from experiences of the past and get on in life? How can we re-build trust? Bridge differences of the past?

session 6: Theme: Writing

1. The importance of an independent voice that can be achieved through writing
2. Exile and Partition: Stories of Partition from one’s family. Or stories of people who live elsewhere: how do you adjust with ‘others’? Encourage research and give writing assignment.
3. Tips on writing creative non-fiction: honing writing skills. Talk of techniques of successful storytelling.

There is so much

There is so much
in the way we all live
that

separates: it must be hard

for some people
to see

daddy reaching over

me
to kiss

mama in the grocery,
or see
mama laugh

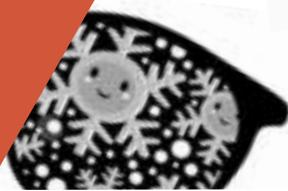
and hug

daddy
in the street.

Ask yourself and others:
You are like...
You are different from...



Exercise:
Discuss:
"There is so much in the way
we all live that separates..."
Form groups of four.
Do a detailed exercise on
"You are like..."
and "You are different..."



 f the race

Some day I will have babies with

high
foreheads and curled

hair,
and darker places,
brownier eyes.

The colors are flowing

from
what was before

me
to what will

be
after

All the colors.

Exercise:

Make an artwork, anything,
a street scene, your home,
your room, a cricket match,
an abstract painting, ... anything,
with just one colour.

Now do the same artwork in
three colours of your choice.

Now again, do the same art-
work with multiple colours.

Teacher: This can be treated
as an art competition which
leads to an exhibition in the
school.

Debate—What would the
world be if we were all just
one colour!

We are talking about

the ones who pick their friends

because of how black they act

or
because of how white they can

be.

Sometimes blackness seems too black for me,

and whiteness is too sickly pale;
and I wish every

one were golden from

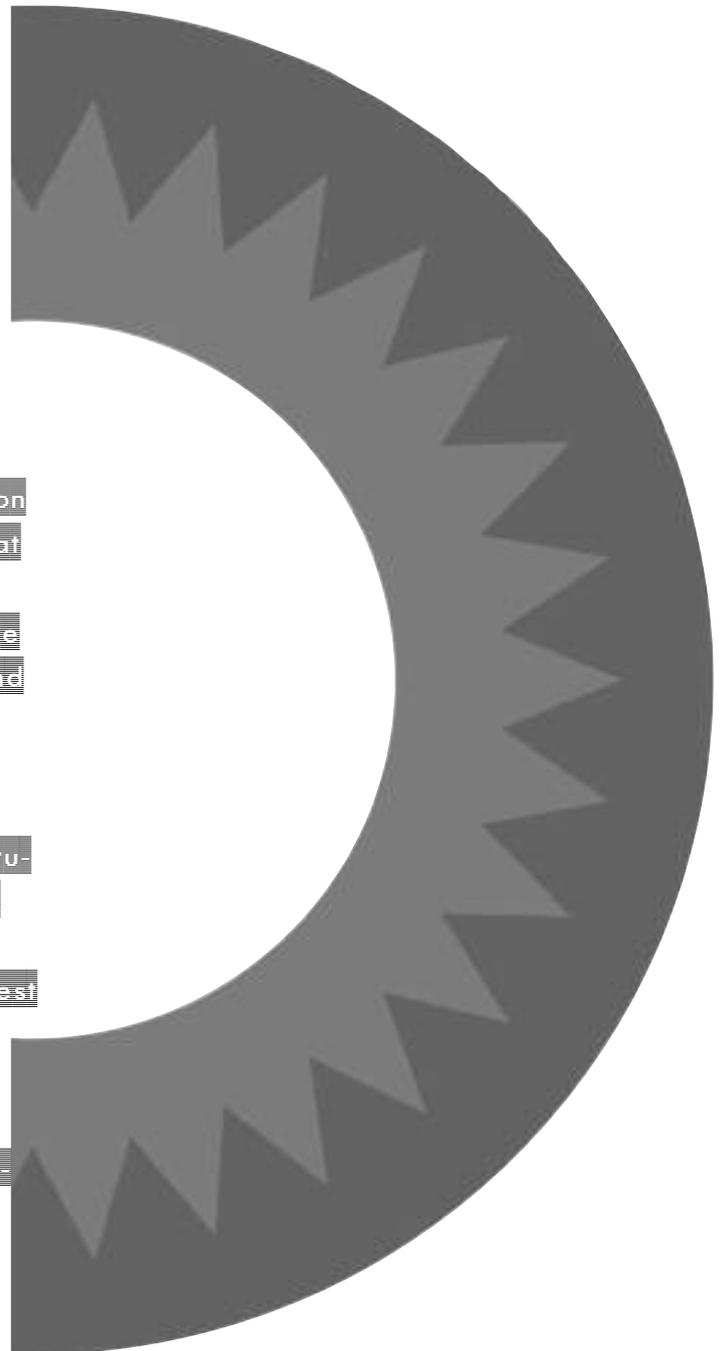
the
sun.
Golden from the

in **S**ide

out. **Exercise:**

Imagine you have landed on
a new planet and find that
creatures there are very
different from you. Describe
how you would engage and
interact with them.

Make groups of five-six stu-
dents. Ask the students to
pick adjectives for the
following: themselves, their best
friend, the class bully, the
boy who is bullied, their
neighbor and the child of
their servant. Initiate discus-
sions post the game.



LEAVING QUITO

JORGE

Everything here is new for me: the people, women, children, country are very different from my country, because my country is very poor. I come from Quito, the capital of Ecuador, in the north of the country. My house is big: has two floors and I live with my father and mother, brother and sister. I am a graphic designer and I work for a company and have my own small business.

In Quito, people sleep on the streets, children beg on the bus, old people are abandoned, there is no work and the police are not good. The president who left in 1996 was corrupt; today, Jamil Mahuad is president. We have high inflation: the price of gas was US\$3.50 but now it is US\$25. I made posters for my political party Movimiento Popular Democratico. Last February, the founder, the leader of my party was killed. In 1996, the president ran a telethon to raise money for the poor at Christmas. But he took all the money and gave it to his brother who wanted to become the mayor of Quito. I was in a taxi with a friend, investigating the telethon, when I noticed three people following me. The taxi driver went fast but they intercepted my car. They told us to get out and come to their car. They had police guns. They blindfolded me and my friend and told us they would kill us. They asked for our MPD documents, but I said I hadn't got my documents with me. So they said they would kill me.

We drove for 20 minutes and stopped on a bridge. We all got out. They tied our legs and threw us over the bridge.

We hung there.

'Give us the documents or we will kill you.'

'The documents are in my house,' cried my friend.

They pulled me up alone. We went to my friend's house and they told me to go and find his documents. 'Or we will kill the people in the house.' I was very frightened.

I looked but I couldn't find the papers. I didn't know what they would do. But they said, 'Go away. We will kill you later.' My friend hung from the bridge the whole day, until some people came to help him. At the end of the week, I left Quito.

Jorge is from Ecuador. He wrote this in 1999.

This work appeared in Karibu magazine, part of WEA London's Looking Writers project for refugees and asylum seekers.

Exercise:

Individual:

Can you listen to the voice in the story? How does it sound?

Do you know anybody in your

family/friends/neighbours/acquaintances who has a history of fleeing from a disturbed area? Record their experience. [Audio/Video/Diary]

Imagine you are the man hanging from the bridge relate your experience?

Group:

Do we listen to each other?

Set the class up on a listening and speaking exercise. In groups of two the students would alternatively speak and listen for five minutes. The one who has heard is supposed to relate what he has heard. The idea is to train them to listen to each other.

Bad guys

We live the same: our way,
and walk

the same;
and talk,

no matter where we live

and go.
And most people

smile at us on sunny Ohio afternoons

in parks and restaurants.
But

while we talk and smile
and eat

our way through

Sundays, we keep a corner
of our eyes for

any

bad guys. — Arnold Adoff



Exercise:

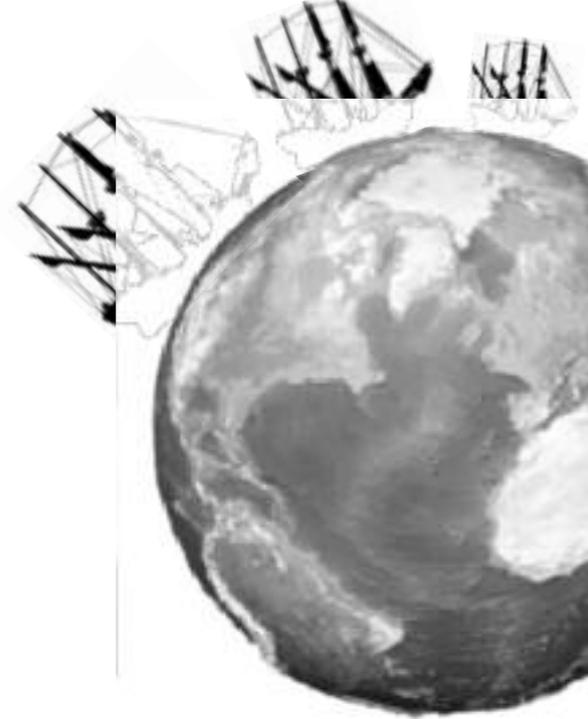
To Think:

Do you keep an eye out for the bad guy? Who is your bad guy? Ask your friends, neighbors or family members the same question?

Imagine that you woke up in the morning and found yourself tagged as the bad guy. Describe your experience.

Are you adventurous, okay if you are and if you like playing by your rules and taking a few chances then this exercise is all for you. Go and speak to the person you think is the bad guy and see what you discover. Record the interview. (Audio/Video)

Take it a step further. You have the facts of the 'bad guy'. Now script a different story of the same 'bad guy'.



Remember:

Remember: long ago
before people moved

and migrated, and mixed and

matched
their arms
side

by

side

in European caves;

or captured slaves
were

sent in ships around this earth;

long ago there was one people:

one color,
one race.

Exercise:

You are an archaeologist who has discovered a cave painting from the yore that confirms that all humanity came from one single source. You have to present a paper in front of League of Nations. Write the paper.

Group activity:

Organize a face painting competition. First divide the students at least in five groups and each group should have one artist, one model, one writer, one speaker etc. However, the division of labor does not have to be specific. Group members can share their work. The groups have to present two short speeches. First, one of the members would say how their friend who looks different is still their friend. Then the model must stand up and say how he feels looking different from others.

Dropping gas: 16th March 1988

It is not quiet in Halabja, though it should be.
I return from the mountains with the rest.
What is it about wanting to know?
Wanting to see so that you believe?
What is it about not being able to just let go?

Half of the houses are still standing
and the rest, you can see what they were made of –
bricks and cement, windows and doors
flesh and blood.
There are screams and cries everywhere
of those discovering the bodies of their loved ones –
children who managed to escape their courtyards
and died outside on the steps,
a man's back and the face of his baby under his arm.
My neighbour says, They are all dead.
He wants to show me his family.
There are some journalists taking photos,
some men robbing the dead bodies
and a clear sky –
it's all dead now, cannot be killed any more.

I stand detached from everything,
observing, believing and not believing.
My neighbour will lose his mind and kill himself next week,
a woman who does not find her daughter
will search for her till the day she dies,
the man who left his family behind
will live in a hell of his own
and the Imam who always called for prayers
will soon take to drink.

I stand here watching, crying and not crying.
I know that I don't know anything,
that I will never know anything
and I know that this ruin
is the only knowledge I will ever have.

Exercise:
Think of one event in re-
cent history that this piece
can be associated with.
Write about it and explain
why you chose the event
you did.

DISCUSS
What is it about wanting to
know?
Wanting to see so that you
believe?

I stand detached from
everything,
observing, believing and not
believing.

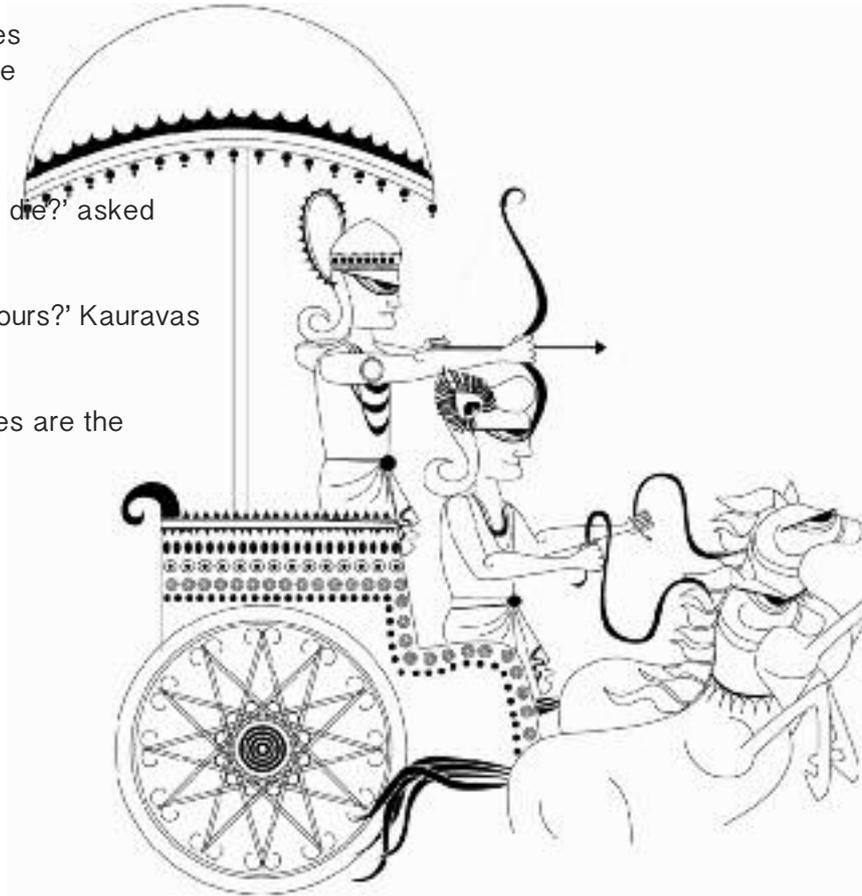
I stand here watching,
crying and not crying.
I know that I don't know
anything,
that I will never know
anything
and I know that this
ruin

is the only
knowledge I will
ever have.

After the War

At the end of the war when the counting of corpses began, the Pandavas and the Kauravas together beat their brows in horror. 'Why did we fight?' asked the Pandavas. 'How did they die?' asked the Kauravas. 'Aren't we kin?' Pandavas wondered. 'Aren't we neighbours?' Kauravas wondered. 'Our rivers are the same,' said the Pandavas. 'Our languages are the same,' said the Kauravas. 'Our house was on the other bank of the river,' remembered the Pandavas. 'Ours too,' echoed the Kauravas. 'The same earth, the same sky, the same water, the same food,' Pandavas sang in a chorus. 'The same tree, the same blood, the same pain, the same dream,' Kauravas took up the refrain. Then they polished their guns and began shooting one another.

'Avasthe' and 'Yuddhan Kazhinju'
translated from the Malayalam
by the author.



Exercise:

Why do you think they began shooting each other?

Think of three instances in history where this poem could be applicable, where people who were neighbours, people who shared the same rivers, the same language, the same sky the same trees... went to war. What were the reasons. How would you rewrite any one of those histories and avert the war.

Nezam Ghalebi

My name is Nezam Ghalebi and I am 17 years old. I am living in London. I am from Afghanistan. I lived in Afghanistan for about ten years and then I went to Russia.

In the past, my family was rich and my father was a member of the government. When I was born, there were schools in Afghanistan, but I didn't go to school because of the war. Before the war Afghanistan was a beautiful country. Before the war my four brothers and three sisters and my father and mother were living together with all of my family. The war broke out in 1991; there was terrible fighting with guns and aeroplanes and other weapons. That war lasted one year.

The second broke out in 1992, the year I was nine. My father was killed when I was six months old and I have never seen him. We were in the middle of the fighting in Kabul in 1992. I saw dead and injured people with my own eyes. I never forget that moment. Our house was destroyed by a rocket. It was disastrous, devastating. We were all screaming and running down the stairs in shock and panic. I was very afraid of dying. That was a traumatic time for me.

I was looking at our house, and suddenly a rocket fell close to me and injured my leg. I fainted and woke up in hospital with the doctors, and my mother

and my brother looking at me. My mother was crying. One month later I was feeling better. My brother died in battle. He was a soldier. When I was ten years old we decided to leave Afghanistan. After two weeks we left and travelled to Pakistan. We lived there about one year. In Pakistan we lived in a small house. We paid rent and felt very poor and homesick; we knew we had lost everything we had. It was too hot and the people were not friendly: 'Why are you here? Go to your country,' they said over and over again. We had no choice but to stay: the war in Afghanistan was so bad we couldn't go back there. The situation for my family was unbearable.

Then my brother decided to leave Pakistan and travelled to England. After one year we too decided to leave Pakistan and go to Russia. My brother was in Russia, studying. We lived in Russia about five years with my brother. After five years we decided to leave Russia and come to England. We had no choice but to leave because in Russia the government didn't pay us any money and they didn't give us a home to live in.

My brother really loved England so we came to England. Now we are living here in London. I am happy here but I miss my country and I miss my father, too. I ask myself, why did he die? I go to school every day and I live with my mother and my brother. But I am happy because I am living in peace in a country where I can't see war any more.

Nezam Ghalebi came to the UK in 1997 and is at Whitefield School in northwest London.

Exercise:

Had a friend related this story to you as his own how would you have reacted? If a stranger told the same story to you how would you have reacted?

Imagine you live in Pakistan and a refugee Afghan family has come to live with you for a few months. Narrate your experiences.

Group activity:

Extempore:

Collect small object in a box like — a letter, an old photograph, a small box, an old toy, broken spectacles, a small mound of earth so on and so forth. Now ask the students to imagine that this is a box that was left behind by a refugee family in one of the camps. Each student must now come to the box pick up an object and speak about it for few minutes. They can tell a story, describe a conversation, or recite a poem that comes to their mind or even share a personal story.



Princess Bride

Suketu Mehta

One day in August 1947, Nony Singh overheard her father talking about shooting her. She was around ten then, a Sikh girl growing up in a big house in Lahore, just before partition. She was walking along a passageway when she over-heard a conversation out on the veranda: her grandfather, her father and her uncles were planning how they would defend; themselves against Muslim mobs that were; returning with increasing frequency to the house. The men—most of whom were army or police officers—had stockpiled a huge cache of arms in the house. The teenage girls in the family—her oldest sister and her three aunts—had already been sent to safety across the border to Simla, a hill resort that would eventually fall to India; only Nony and her two younger sisters were left in Lahore. She heard her father tell the others that, if Muslims broke into the house, he would fight to the end. But before the end came, he said, “I will take the three girls into a room and line them up and shoot them.”

We were standing on this same veranda now, my friend Nony Singh and I, 50 years later. It was the first time she had returned to Lahore since 1947. She was making a unique crossing, not merely from the country in which she lives to the one left behind, not just from her present home to an earlier one, but from approaching old age back to the territory of childhood, a realm preserved only in dreams and old photographs.

What made her return unusual was that she is the great-great-grand daughter of Maharajah Ranjit Singh, the “Lion of the Punjab,” the Sikh king who at the beginning of the 19th century ruled over all of Punjab from Lahore. So when she came back, it was with a special sense of belonging, above and beyond that of the many other partition refugees visiting ancestral homes. Signing the Pakistani visa forms in Delhi, she had remarked: “I felt I own the place. How dare they ask for a visa?”

Nony had left Lahore on a sour note: a fight with her best friend Fauziya, who lived next door. Nony had made a doll, with a long plait, the face painted with watercolours, and a wardrobe fashioned of brightly coloured scraps from her aunts’ old clothes. Fauziya wanted Nony to marry her attractive doll to Fauziya’s male doll. At first Nony agreed, but then Fauziya told her that since her doll was female, it would have to come with a dowry—all the doll-clothes and doll bedding that Nony had hand-stitched. Also, Fauziya insisted, after the wedding the female doll would have to stay in the male doll’s house—as was the custom among humans. Nony turned down the match, and Fauziya stopped speaking to her. A few days later, Nony and her family left Pakistan forever, taking the doll with her. She has always regretted, she told me, that she left Pakistan on a fight over the distribution of property. What she wanted to do now was to go back to the two houses in which she had grown up: her maternal grandmother’s amid the winding lanes of Anarkali Bazaar, and her paternal grandfather’s in Model Town. Her grandmother had died soon after crossing the border, Nony said: “We were thrown out. We felt very hurt. My grandmother died of sorrow.”

The Anarkali Bazaar house is now a printing shop. Sometime after partition it was taken over by the former tenants, and stacks of old books crowd the rooms where her grandmother once conducted business from behind a latticed screen with the accountants, making sure that rent-collection from her numerous shops in the bazaar was in order. Though he was quite ill, the old man who now owns the house invited Nony for dinner because, he said, he had something to explain. He was ashamed.



At partition, he said, Nony's grandmother had given his father the key to the house for safekeeping. The father had kept all her grandmother's possessions locked in the upper rooms of the house, allowing no one to enter them. Then, he said, after a family dispute his cousins had broken into the rooms and stolen everything. He said he had lived with the guilt for 50 years. Now at last he could explain and apologize. Nony said later, "I was embarrassed also, and I was hurt. This was my house, and some other people took it over. But I admired him for telling me. His family was so affectionate. The human feeling was what mattered."

When she left the man's house, she was given bangles and an embroidered veil—the traditional gifts a daughter of the house is given when she returns to her in-laws. The symbolism was clear: this was Nony's true home, here in Lahore. Delhi and India were merely in-laws, the family into which she had found herself married.

Nony was overwhelmed at the reception she received, not just from the people who lived in her family's houses, but from taxi-drivers, bell-boys, merchants in the bazaars. Her coming from India was good for substantial discounts in the ancient shops of Anarkali Bazaar. As a daughter of the neighborhood, she was able to buy a Rupees 750 suit for 600 rupees. The elderly proprietor of a photo shop, upon learning Nony was from India, said he was, too, and asked her to have lunch or dinner with his family.

One evening we went to the Pak Tea House, a writers' cafe that Pakistan's greatest poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, used to frequent. A group of poets and writer clustered around us. Surprisingly, this was the place in Pakistan where Nony found the closest thing resembling hostility toward her as an Indian. A professor of Urdu literature declared that the enmity between India and Pakistan would be solved if India "liberated" Kashmir, Punjab and Assam. "I was scared of their fanaticism," Nony said. "They were so vehement. These are the people that create the frenzy. If they were my age, they would never have talked that way." After one in the group maligned Maulana Azad, a prominent Muslim in the freedom struggle who chose to live in India and is therefore reviled in Pakistani history texts, Nony added: "He was talking like a fanatic about Pakistan. I wish he had seen that united India [before partition]. We sacrificed together; we shed blood together to win freedom. Then what happened?" For all her warm feelings toward ordinary Pakistanis, Nony remained clear about the political gulf between the two countries: "The difference between India and Pakistan is army rule. Their youngsters hate India. Army rule has dinned it into their heads to make war. Our democracy, whatever it is, has worked."

Not always. Like most Hindu and Sikh refugees who fled to India, Nony's family did well in their new homeland. She married a fellow refugee, a farmer who in 1965 set a record for wheat production. Then in 1984 India's Sikhs suffered through what for many of them was a second partition: the pogroms against Nony's community that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards. Nony and her three daughters were saved by a Hindu neighbour across the street, who hid them from the fury of the mobs for 11 days. Once the riots were over and she could return to her house, Nony worried about what she should put on the name plate outside her gate. After all, she had just witnessed the evil attention a Sikh name could attract. In the end, she used only the number 15, the address of the house. She still regrets not being able to display a name. "I felt one day people will be reduced just to numbers," she says. "We are not proud of being anything—Sikh, Hindu, Muslim."

Her grandfather's home in Model Town was a household of women before partition. Nony's father was frequently away on army duty, and her grandfather usually closeted himself with his second wife on the ground floor. As teenage girls are wont to do, Nony's aunts and her sisters liked to play the radio full blast, mostly film music—Saigal, Kanan Bala, Nurjehan. Her aunts often stole away to the movies, a forbidden activity. Once they took the family tonga, or horse-cart, and caromed down the road until they lost control of the horse, crashed, and fell off laughing-shocking all the neighbours. Before partition the family was united, rich and happy.

When she travelled to Lahore, she was looking for something that would be defined for her by Badar, the man who now lives in her grandfather's house. At the end of the lavish dinner his family had laid

out for Nony and me, Badar became thoughtful. Like his wife, he said, he was the child of partition refugees who had made the crossing the other way, from Delhi and Bhopal to Pakistan. "It is a miracle you're here," he said, turning to Nony. "It's like a movie, a dream. After 50 years, coming back to this house." Then he reflected: "Man is always in search of old things. We go to ruins, to museums. You have come to look for old things. Something is lost. That is common to all men." A little later, he asked, "What is lost?" and then answered his own question. "I think it is love."

Now, age 61 and living in Delhi, Nony is not at peace. After her husband died in 1982, she became ensnared in property disputes—the curse of the descendants of India's princely class. Her days are taken up dealing with her six lawyers and her multiple ongoing lawsuits, many of which she has inherited from her ancestors like a useless watch. All this has made her a bit lonely in her adopted city. Says she: "Delhi to me seems faceless."

I returned to Delhi ahead of Nony. She wrote me from Lahore: "Here I am in conversation with my grandparents, my mother, my father, my aunts, my sisters, my little brother. For the first time I am not grieving for my grandmother having gone, for my Daddy having gone... For the first time I feel that part of my grieving shall go—as if I have called them all back to meet me at a place where they gave me birth, as if I have had a long conversation with them and clarified all my doubts, of not having done my best for them, for not having given them enough love... Here, meeting them after their deaths was easier because we all belonged together, we belonged to each other, we belonged to this soil, this town. On the other side of the border we had all separated, our personalities scattered. Here we are all one, we are together in grief and in happiness... Here—in Pakistan—an enemy of my country India!"

Suketu Mehta is a New York-based novelist and journalist who is working on a book about Bombay.

Exercise:

At the age of 50 Nony Singh realizes something, what do you think it is?

Imagine that you are the old man who was left in charge of Nony's old house. Imagine a conversation between you and Nony.

'Sense of belonging'—what does this term mean to you.—Discuss

Interview your parents, your grandparents, your neighbours—what does the term 'Sense of Belonging' mean to them. Is it the same for all, is it different? Analyse.

Do a project on 1947. With the region splitting up, what happened in the art and the music world.



 pyjamas, 1983

That year pyjamas were potential life-savers.
When the rioting students were attacked
they dispersed into the tiny roads they knew too well
and entered the first open door on their path
which was shut behind them immediately.
They wore pyjamas, drank a glass of water,
picked up a book and pretended to be the sons of the family.
Then, there was solidarity amongst our people:
it was 'Us' versus 'Them', things were black and white
unlike now when we're being oppressed by us
even though there is no 'Them'.

Exercise:

What is Us?

What is them?

Debate— **Is it essential to have distinctions of 'Us' and 'them' in society?**

Why? What are the pros? What are the cons?

Imagine you are the speaker wearing the same pyjamas sitting in the balcony many years from the point described in the poem. You see your own people fighting, write a letter to your old friend who was with you then and describe how you feel now that you see your own people fighting amongst themselves. Teacher: Have the students read their letters out loud in class. The best letters can be mailed and we put it up on our blog.

Tell us about a film you have seen or a literary piece that you may have read, that depicts the negative aspect of 'Us and Them'

Tell us about a film you have seen or a literary piece that you may have read, that depicts a positive aspect of 'Us and Them'



Commencement Address

For Bard College, New York

Salman Rushdie

Members of the Class of 1996, I see in the paper that Southampton University on Long Island got Kermit the Frog to give the commencement address this year. You, unfortunately, have to make do with me. The only Muppet connection I can boast is that Bob Gottlieb, my former editor at Alfred Knopf, also edited that important self-help text *Miss Piggy's Guide to Life*. I once asked him how it had been to work with such a major star and he replied, reverentially, "Salman: the pig was divine."

In England where I went to college, we don't do things quite this way on graduation day. So I've been doing a little research into commencement and its traditions. The first American friend I asked told me that in her graduation year—not at this college, I hasten to add—she and her fellow-students were so incensed at the choice of commencement speaker, whom I suppose I should not name—oh, all right then it was Jeane Kirkpatrick¹—that they boycotted the ceremony and staged a sit-in in one of the college buildings instead. It is a considerable relief therefore, to note that you are all here.

As for myself I graduated from Cambridge University in 1968—the great year of student protest—and I have to tell you that I almost didn't make it. This story has nothing to do with politics or demonstrations; it is, rather, the improbable and cautionary tale of a thick brown gravy-and-onion sauce. It begins a few nights before my graduation day, when some anonymous wit chose to redecorate my room, in my absence, by hurling a bucketful of the aforesaid gravy-and-onions all over the walls and furniture, to say nothing of my record player and my clothes. With that ancient tradition of fairness and justice upon which the colleges of Cambridge pride themselves, my college instantly held me solely responsible for the mess, ignored all my representations to the contrary, and informed me that unless I paid for the damage before the ceremony, I would not be permitted to graduate. It was the first but, alas, not the last occasion on which I would find myself falsely accused of muck spreading.

I paid up, I have to report, and was therefore declared eligible to receive my degree. In a defiant spirit, possibly influenced by my recent gravy experience, I went to the ceremony wearing brown shoes, and was promptly plucked out of the parade of my gowned and properly black-shod contemporaries, and ordered back to my quarters to change. I am not sure why people in brown shoes were deemed to be dressed improperly, but I was again facing a judgment against which there could be no appeal.

Again I gave in, sprinted off to change my shoes, got back to the parade in the nick of time; and at length, after these vicissitudes, when my turn came, I was required to hold a university officer by his little finger, and to follow him slowly up to where the vice-chancellor sat upon a mighty throne. As instructed, I knelt at his feet, held up my hands, calms together, in a gesture of supplication, and begged in Latin for the degree, for which, I could not help thinking, I had worked extremely hard for three years, supported by my family at considerable expense. I recall being advised to hold my hands way up above my head, in case the elderly vice-chancellor, leaning forward to clutch at them, should topple off his great chair and land on top of me.

I did as I was advised; the elderly gentleman did not topple; and, also in Latin, he finally admitted me to the degree of Bachelor of Arts.

Looking back at that day, I am a little appalled by my passivity, hard though it is to see what else I could have done. I could have not paid up, not changed my shoes, not knelt to supplicate for my B.A. I preferred to surrender and get the degree. I have grown more stubborn since. I have come to the conclusion, which I now offer you, that I was wrong to compromise; wrong to make an accommodation with injustice, no matter how persuasive the reasons.

Injustice, today, still conjures up, in my mind, the memory of gravy.

Injustice, for me, is a brown, lumpy, congealing fluid, and it smell pungently, tearfully, of onions. Un-fairness is the feeling of running back to your room, flat out, at the last minute, to change your outlawed brown shoes. It is the business of being forced to beg, on your knees, in a dead language, for what is rightfully yours.

This, then, is what I learned on my own graduation day; this is the message I have derived from the parables of the Unknown Gravy Bomber, the Vetoed Footwear, and the Unsteady Vice-Chancellor upon his Throne, and which I pass on to you today: first, if, as you go through life, people should someday accuse you of what one might call Aggravated Gravy Abuse—and they will, they will—and if in fact you are innocent of abusing gravy, do not take the rap. Second: those who would reject you because you are wearing the wrong shoes are not worth being accepted by. And third: kneel before no man. Stand up for your rights.

I like to think that Cambridge University, where I was so happy for three marvelous years and from which I gained so much—I hope your years at Bard have been as happy, and that you feel you have gained as much—that Cambridge University, with its finely developed British sense of irony intended me to learn precisely these valuable lessons from the events of that strange graduation day.

Members of the Class of 1996, we are here to celebrate with you one of the great days of your lives. We participate today in the rite of passage by which you are released from this life of preparation into that life for which you are now as prepared as anyone ever is. As you stand at the gate of the future I should like to share with you a piece of information about the extraordinary institution you are leaving, which will explain the reason why it is such a particular pleasure for me to be with you today. In 1989, within weeks of the threat made against me by the mullahs of Iran, I was approached by the president of Bard, through my literary agent, and asked if I would consider accepting a place on the faculty of this college. More than a place; I was assured that I could find, here in Annandale, among the Bard community, many friends and a safe haven in which I could live and work. Alas, I was not able, in those difficult days, to take up this courageous offer, but I have never forgotten that at a moment when red-alert signals were flashing all over the world, and all sorts of people and institutions were running scared Bard College did the opposite—that it moved toward me, in intellectual solidarity and human concern, and made not lofty speeches but concrete offer of help.

I hope you will all feel proud that Bard, quietly, without fanfares, made such a principled gesture at such a time. I am certainly extremely proud to be a recipient of Bard's honorary degree, and to have the privilege of addressing you today.

Hubris, according to the Greeks, was the sin of defying the gods, and could, if you were really unlucky, unleash against you the terrifying, avenging figure of the goddess Nemesis², who carried in one hand an apple-bough and, in the other, the Wheel of Fortune, which would one day circle around to the inevitable moment of vengeance. As I have been, in my time, accused not only of gravy abuse and wearing brown but of hubris, too, and since I have come to believe that such defiance is an inevitable and essential aspect of what we call freedom, thought I might commend it to you. For in the years to come you will find yourselves up against gods of all sorts, big and little gods, corporate and incorporeal gods, all of them demanding to be worshiped and obeyed—the myriad deities of money and power, of convention and custom, that will seek to limit and control your thoughts and lives. Defy them; that's my advice to you. Thumb your noses. For, as the myths tell us, it is by defying the gods that human beings have best expressed their humanity.

The Greeks tell many stories of quarrels between us and the gods. Arachne³, the great artist of the loom, sets her skills of weaving and embroidery against those of the goddess of wisdom herself, Minerva⁴ or Pallas Athena⁵; and impudently chooses to weave versions of only those scenes that reveal the mistakes and weaknesses of the gods—the rape of Europa⁶, Leda and the Swan⁷. For this—for the irreverence, not for her skill—for what we would now call art, and chutzpah—the goddess changes her mortal rival into a spider.

Queen Niobe of Thebes⁸ tells her people not to worship Latona, the mother of Diana⁹ and Apollo¹⁰, saying, “What folly is this!—To prefer whom you never saw to those who stand before your eyes!” For this sentiment, which today we would call humanism, the gods murder her children and husband, and she metamorphoses into a rock, petrified with grief, from which there trickles an unending river of tears.

Prometheus¹¹ the Titan steals fire from the gods and gives it to mankind. For this—for what we would now call the desire for progress, for improved scientific and technological capabilities—he is bound to a pillar while a great bird gnaws eternally at his liver, which regenerates as it is consumed.

The interesting point is that the gods do not come out of these stories at all well. If Arachne is overly proud when she seeks to compete with a goddess, it is only an artist’s pride, joined to youthful gustiness; whereas Minerva, who could afford to be gracious, is merely vindictive. The story increases Arachne’s shadow, as they say, and diminishes Minerva’s; it is Arachne who gains, from the tale, a measure of immortality.

And the cruelty of the gods to the family of Niobe proves her point. Who could prefer the rule of such cruel gods to self-rule, the rule of men and women by men and women, however flawed that may be? Once again the gods are weakened by their show of strength, while the human beings grow stronger, even though—even as—they are destroyed.

And tormented Prometheus, of course, Prometheus with his gift of fire is the greatest hero of all.

It is men and women who have made the world, and they have made it in spite of their gods. The message of the myths is not the one the gods would have us learn—“behave yourself and know your place”—but its exact opposite. It is that we must be guided by our natures. Our worst natures can, it’s true, be arrogant, venal, corrupt, or selfish; but in our best selves we—that is, you—can and will be joyous, adventurous, cheeky, creative, inquisitive, demanding, competitive, loving, and defiant.

Do not bow your heads. Do not know your place. Defy the gods. You will be astonished how many of them turn out to have feet of clay. Be guided, if possible by your better natures. Great good luck and many congratulations to you all.

Notes:

1. Jeane Kirkpatrick (1926 – 2006) was an American ambassador and an ardent anticommunist. After serving as Ronald Reagan's foreign policy adviser in his 1980 campaign and later in his Cabinet, the longtime Democrat-turned-Republican was nominated as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and became the first woman to hold this position.
2. Nemesis was the ancient Greek goddess of retribution.
3. In Greco-Roman mythology, Arachne was a great mortal weaver who boasted that her skill was greater than that of Minerva, the Latin parallel of Pallas Athena, goddess of crafts. The offended goddess set a contest between the two weavers but Arachne’s subjects, the loves of the gods, was so offensive that Minerva destroyed Arachne’s tapestry and loom. Ultimately, the goddess turned Arachne into a spider.
4. Minerva was the Roman goddess of warriors, poetry, medicine, wisdom, commerce, weaving, crafts, and the inventor of music. She is often depicted with an owl, her sacred creature and, through this connection, a symbol of wisdom.
5. Pallas Athena is the Greek equivalent of Minerva.
6. Europa is a beautiful Phoenician princess in Greek mythology.
7. In Greek mythology, Leda was the queen of Sparta, and the mother of ‘Helen of Troy’. Leda was admired by Zeus, who seduced her in the guise of a swan.
8. In Greek mythology, Niobe was the daughter of the legendary ruler Tantalus, called the “Phrygian” and sometimes even as “King of Phrygia” It was on occasion of the annual celebration in honour of Latona and her offspring, Apollo and Diana, when the people of Thebes were assembled, their brows crowned with laurel, bearing frankincense to the altars and paying their vows, that Niobe appeared among the crowd. Her attire was splendid with gold and gems, and her face as beautiful as the face of an angry woman can be. She stood and surveyed the people with haughty looks. “What folly,” said she, “is this! To prefer beings whom you never saw to those who stand before your eyes! Why should Latona be honored with worship rather than I? My father was Tantalus, who was received as a guest at the table of the gods; my mother was a goddess. My husband built and rules this city, Thebes; and Phrygia is my paternal inheritance. Wherever I turn my eyes I survey the elements of my power; nor is my form and presence unworthy of a goddess. To all this let me add, I have seven sons and seven daughters, and look for sons-in-law and daughters-in-law of pretensions worthy of my alliance. Have I not cause for pride? Will you prefer to me this Latona, the Titan's daughter, with her two children? I have seven times as many. Fortunate indeed am I, and fortunate I shall remain! Will any one deny this?” By using poisoned arrows, Diana killed Niobe’s daughters and Apollo killed Niobe’s sons, while they practiced athletics, with the last begging for their lives.

9. In Roman mythology, Diana was the goddess of the hunt, being associated with wild animals and woodland, and also of the moon.

10. In Greek and Roman mythology, Apollo is one of the most important and many-sided of the gods. The ideal of the “kouros” (a beardless youth), Apollo has been variously recognized as a god of light and the sun; truth and prophecy; archery; medicine and healing; music, poetry, and the arts; and more.

11. In Greek mythology, Prometheus (which means “forethought” in Ancient Greek) is a Titan. He was a champion of humankind known for his wily intelligence, who stole fire from Zeus and gave it to mortals. Zeus then punished him for his crime by having him bound to a rock while a great eagle ate his liver every day only to have it grow back to be eaten again the next day. His myth has been treated by a number of ancient sources, in which Prometheus is credited with—or blamed for—playing a pivotal role in the early history of humankind, including Prometheus Unbound by P. B. Shelley.

Exercise:

Initiate a discussion on:

Personal Injustice

Ask the students to narrate/write down a personal incident of injustice they may have faced.

Next ask them to narrate a personal incident where they may have meted out injustice.

Social Injustice

Examples from across the globe that disturbs them the most.

Political Injustice.

Ask the students to draw from real life examples. Current affairs from around the world can be a good resource.