UNIT 3  NIRMAL VERMA : BIRDS
TRANSLATION : JAI RATAN

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit is to acquaint you with the works of a major literary figure of our times, Nirmal Verma, through a close study of his story Birds. As the story contains the vision and life attitudes that animate his writing in general, we shall abstract, examine and contextualise these traits with reference to Birds. We hope, thereby, to rouse a deep and more active interest in his writings.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Nirmal Verma is considered one of the leading Hindi writers of the times, both in India and abroad. He has written both novels and short stories. We start this Unit with a brief sketch of his life, followed by a broad account of the Hindi short story. We shall follow it up with contexts and settings in Nirmal Verma’s fiction and his beliefs and convictions. This will be followed by an analysis of the story Birds. Nirmal Verma has been widely translated into English. A list of his books is included at the end of the Unit. Those translated into English have been listed separately.

3.2 BIO-SKETCH

Nirmal Verma was born in 1929. A love for literature and the arts ran in the family. His elder brother, Ram Kumar, the well-known painter, woke in him a
love for painting. This has led to the strong pictorial quality noticeable in his writing. His paternal grandfather actively encouraged him to read. He gave him four annas (twenty five paisa) for each page he read of the monthly periodical of those days, "Kalyani". Often, enthralled by the first page, he would go on to the second and third pages, reading more than the required four annas' worth. His elder sister was the other family member who spurred him further into the literary life by talking to him about books and writers. She was a top student in her studies. The books she won in school as prizes and awards, were always read by Nirmal before anyone else. She also subscribed to magazines of repute such as Veena, Saraswati, and Madhuri, thereby grounding him more into the literary life.

Nirmal Verma (1929-2005)

Nirmal Verma came to fiction via poetry — a route common for many fiction writers. His earliest writings were poetry — in English. He'd filled two whole notebooks with verse, he would recall with amusement. He was sure, however from the beginning that his poetry was for his own satisfaction, no more.

His first stories were written for the Hindi magazine that was being brought out by his college, St. Stephen's College, Delhi. Misfortune dogged these efforts. First the editor of the magazine died. And then a few years later, the magazine closed down. His first successful professional debut was in Kahaane, of Allahabad, edited by Bhairav Prasad Gupta. A second story appeared in Kalpana in 1954-55.

In 1959, by which time he was an established writer, he went to Prague on an invitation from the Oriental Institute to learn Czech and translate the writings in that language into Hindi. He finished the course in 1961-62, and participated in the lectures on Czech literature at Charles University.

He travelled extensively in the two Europes of the times, and also went to England. He returned to India in 1972. He became a fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in Shimla, and worked on the theme of mythic consciousness in literature.

His story "Maya Darpan" (Magic Mirror) was made into a film in 1970. It was judged the best film of the year. In 1959 he won the Sahitya Akadami Award for his collection of stories 'Kavvey Aur Kalapaani' (Crows of Deliverance). In 2000 he won the Jnanpith Award for his life time contribution to Indian literature.

A list of Verma's writings has been given at the end of the study material.
3.3 DEVELOPMENT OF THE HINDI SHORT STORY: A BRIEF ACCOUNT

The advent of the short story form on the Hindi literary scene marks an interesting and definitive departure from the traditional forms of literary representation towards new, non-traditional forms. Perhaps this is so in all the languages of India. The main feature of the traditional forms was oral transmission. The story-teller told his story to his listeners by means of the spoken word, gesture, and frequently, song. His stories were retellings of stories told down the ages — stories of gods, beasts, birds and men, inanimate nature and miraculous happenings. This vast mass of oral expression lies embedded in the Panchatantra, in innumerable tales contained in the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Jatakas, even in the Upanishads and Vedas, despite their predominant temper of abstract philosophical inquiry. It has arisen from the innate human urge to tell stories, fabricate a reality over and above the reality lived in. Everyday reality is magnified. It is infused with the awe and wonder of religion, and made sacred. The ordinary is made extraordinary. In other words, the extraordinary is a given premise in the katha, or the tradition of oral presentation.

In the short story, on the other hand, the extraordinary is not a given premise. The given premise is the ordinary, everyday events and feelings and emotions that the man in the street experiences or tackles in the course of daily living.

The question now arises, why and how this change of premise occurred. The immediate reason was the impact of the West. The end product — the short story — that took shape from this impact, was of course, totally Indian. The characters, the events, the situations and the animating urges of the stories were Indian. The specifics, so to say, were Indian. But the triggering force came from the West, bore the stamp of western thinking. The West was perceived as an enemy on political grounds. But on intellectual and cultural grounds, it represented a challenge that had to be met and somehow contained in the Indian field of awareness. Two major concepts, originating from the West, impacted strongly on traditional Indian beliefs, and led to far-reaching, permanent changes in our art of story telling. One was the concept of individualism. The source of all action — this concept holds, broadly — the spring from which rises the impetus for all effort and endeavour, is the individual: a being like you and I, indistinguishable from other individuals.

Second, the individual’s area of action was the environment in which he lived. That is to say, the philosophy of all human effort and enterprise was defined in purely earthly terms. This of course clashed with the traditional Indian ideal of linking human effort to a divine will beyond human reach.

But the Indian intelligentsia could not afford to be sceptical of these concepts and take refuge in smug denials. Sweeping technological changes accompanied the new intellectual ideals, giving them force. Objects like the railway and telegraph revolutionized not just the physical modes of travel and transport, but also the perspectives on the act of communication. Space shrank, quite simply. Places and destinations miles off and several days’ hard trek away suddenly moved up close. A new and exciting proximity with relatives, kin and fellow men came about. It was a kind of re-discovery of man
by man, a confirmation of common latitudes between man and man. The mystique of space, the mystery associated with it, disappeared: the dimension of divinity and godhead seen in it fell away. Space lost longitude, became predominantly latitudinal in its spread.

This reshaping and re-tailoring of space had its effect on the spirit of story telling too. Over and above all this, was the effect of print technology. It brought about decisive changes in the setting for the conveying and communicating of the story, and the distribution of literary drives and urges. The setting was no more made up of the story-teller and his listeners face to face with each other, seated in their distinct sections. The story was available in print. Like a bird flying away from its cage it had flown clear of the chambers of the story-teller’s mind and imagination. It had taken abode now on the flat, white surface of paper. No longer was it at the mercy of the story-teller to be given voice. The story-teller was supplanted by the story-writer. Of course the story-writer is also a story-teller, even if he is not doing so orally. But he is a figure away from the public gaze, functioning in the privacy of his room. Likewise, listeners were replaced by readers, who too, carried out their function of reading in privacy, away from the press of fellow listeners.

The whole art of telling a story, thus, underwent a dispersal. From a community art form it became an individualized, solitary activity.

Technology, thus, re-enforced the intellectual in-roads into Indian literary traditions made by Western modes of thought, chief among which were individualism and realism.

The Indian literary vision now turned earthward. It linked itself to man and his interactions with fellow men, women, children, and the strivings of these in the world they inhabited. Gods, demons, miracles and all extraordinary phenomena were kept out of this vision. Ordinary men and women and everyday happenings became the bases of the story. To sum up then: the Indian literary vision made a passage from the extraordinary to the ordinary, from the community to the individual, from non-realism to realism.

Initial Effects

This momentous, far-reaching change of vision came about in the beginning of the nineteenth century. But some seven decades of the century elapsed before the vision and its implication concretized into actuality. In the first flush of this intellectual re-ordering and technological facilities, the literary output consisted mainly of either printed versions of orally prevalent stories, or translations of existing oral texts in Sanskrit, Persian and English. An example of the first category was ‘Rani Ketaki Ki Kahaanee’, by Inshaullah Khan in 1803. Its format closely follows that of the Sufi romances of the times. The big difference is that it was written in prose, unlike the Sufi romance which was told in verse. But in all other respects it was a close copy. Like its parent, it begins with a prayer to god. It gives the reasons for its composition, and precedes each section with a long title — all in the presentation techniques of Sufi love stories.

In the second category of the writings of this interim period, as mentioned before, were translations from old Sanskrit, Persian and English. Of the
English works translated, interestingly, was Daniel Defoe’s adventure story, 
Robinson Crusoe.

None of these was as yet a story as defined in the new, post-katha sense. 
Supernatural events and characters made up their contents. They were 
significant because they were set in prose, not in verse, as in the oral, 
recitative tradition. This led to the rise of a new class of readership, able to 
relate to literature without the lulling aids of rhyme and lit.

The first story that was not only in prose but free of supernatural elements was 
‘Devraane Jeththaanee Kee Kahaanee’ by Pandit Gauridatt in 1870. It was a 
story of two middle class women, wives of two brothers. Its setting was 
realistic, as required by the post-katha sensibility. But it was written in the 
format of a katha. The story-teller is a conspicuous, recurring and binding 
presence throughout the story, as in the katha tradition. Therefore it does not 
fully qualify as a modern story. It merits attention, however, as an immediate 
precursor to the modern story.

The nineteenth century, thus, was important mainly because of the widespread 
use of prose it ushered in. This, as pointed out before, helped build up a new 
readership that could respond creatively to the stories that were to pour out 
from the beginning of the twentieth century. An available, even if small, 
readership is necessary for any emergent writing.

First Fruits

The twentieth century began with three firsts in the history of the Hindi short 
story. In its first decade and first year — 1901 — came the first story in Hindi 
letters, a story of an unmistakably modern temper and spirit. This was ‘Ek 
Tokreehbar Mitte’ (A Basketful of Earth) by Madhav Rao Sare. It is 
constructed entirely on the force and strength of symbols. It is the story of an 
old widow, living in a mud hut with her little, orphaned granddaughter. The 
zamindar wants the land on which her jhonpdi stands. So he drives her out. 
Her granddaughter goes off food. ‘I will eat only at home’, she says, meaning 
the jhonpdi. The widow goes to her old jhonpdi with a basket. She will carry 
back a basketful of the earth with which her jhonpdi is built, and make a 
cooking hearth with it. She will make roties on this hearth, and coax her 
granddaughter to eat. She now fills her basket and asks the zamindar to help 
she raise it to her head. The zamindar, for whom the old woman is just a 
quirky, beaten old woman, consents, however unwillingly, and tries to hoist 
the basket on to her head. He cannot. The basket doesn’t rise off the ground. 
The widow says, hands folded: ‘Maharaj, thousands of baskets of earth have 
gone into the making of that jhonpdi. You can’t cope with even one basket. 
Can you bear for life the load of a thousand baskets?’

The zamindar wakes to his excesses, and returns the jhonpdi to the widow.

The basket of earth is the central symbol of this story. It symbolizes the 
motherland, and its usurpation by outsiders, namely, the British. British rule 
had not long been established in the country, and sentiments opposed to it 
were astir, even though they were not yet harnessed into a nationalist upsurge. 
The zamindar symbolizes the usurping British. The widow stands for Mother 
India — Bharat Mata — doughty and cornered, pleading for her people, her 
children.
She is pitting her wits and imagination against the far superior strength of her oppressor. Some scholars call this a symbolic representation of non-violence. But this seems somewhat far-fetched. For one thing, the non-violent struggle and Gandhi’s advent were still some thirty years away. At the same time, the political overtones of the story cannot be overlooked, nor the fact that non-violence as a strategy and thought was not unknown before Gandhi. Possibly then, the old woman’s clever and resourceful non-militancy can be traced to the prevalent lore and practice of such tactics.

What explanation can be given to the immense strength that comes to the basket of earth? Isn’t this unnatural, even if not supernatural? And as such, is it right to see the story as the first example of the modern short story in Hindi?

Initially it is, indeed, difficult to accept this episode in the story. But several factors enter and play in the reader’s reactions to the story and neutralize the disbelief. The image and idea of patriotism that the story sets off in the reader’s mind, stays on as a dynamic force that persuades the reader to believe the unbelievable. It is, in the words of Wordsworth, ‘a willing suspension of disbelief’. Since it is a willing suspension, it is different from the simple credulousness assumed for the supernatural by the katha tradition.

The other stories listed as modern in this first stage of the evolution of the Hindi short story are ‘Indumati’ and ‘Gulbahar’ by Kishoreelal Goswami in 1900 and 1902, ‘Plague Kee Chudail’ by Master Bhagwandas in 1902, ‘Gyarah Varsh Kaa Samay’ by Ramchandra Shukla in 1903, and ‘Dulaee waalee’ by Banga Mahila in 1907.

But none of these is as simple, as evocative and direct as ‘A Basketful of Earth’. ‘Indumati’ indeed, is just a re-telling of ‘The Tempest’. ‘A Basketful of Earth’ undoubtedly laid the foundation of the modern Hindi short story.

The Maturing of Realism

In the second decade of the twentieth century, this modern, reality-based form of the story flowered fully, putting down firm roots. Some of the famous, enduring names of Hindi letters made their appearance in this decade. Among these was Premchand, whose first story in Hindi, ‘Saut’ came out in 1915, in the journal Saraswati. (Premchand wrote in Urdu before taking to Hindi.) Jayashankar Prasad, also a doyen of Hindi letters, preceded Premchand with his first story ‘Graam’ in 1911, in the journal Indu. Acharya Chaturvesh Shastri’s ‘Grihalakshmi’ came in 1914, Radhika Raman Prasad Singh’s ‘Kaannon Mein Kangar’ came in 1913, and Bal Krishna Sharma Naveen’s ‘Santo’ in 1918.

But according to critics it is Chandrachud Sharma Guleri’s ‘Usney Kahaa Thaa’ published in 1915 in Saraswati, that was the truly path breaking story of the decade, scoring over even Premchand’s story ‘Saut’, published in the same year in the same journal. ‘Usney Kahaa Thaa’ is an anti-war story, cast in the mould of a love story. It is about a man parting with his life for the sake of his beloved’s husband. To this unusual story and theme, was added unusualness of craft. The flashback technique, in which the writer breaks the sequence of time in his story and goes back to an earlier phase in the events being narrated, was used for the first time in Hindi letters.
The other notable writer of this decade, Jaishankar Prasad, broke new ground by portraying the complexities in the make-up of relationships. After his first story, ‘Graam’, his collection of stories, ‘Chhayaa’ appeared. According to critics Prasad’s stories are an uneven blend of poetry and drama. His theme is mostly love, examined with subtlety. But a marked streak of melodrama enters the events and characterisations. ‘Aakaashdeep’, a well-known story of his, reflects this trait in a strong way. Despite the overstatements, however, there is a hard core of sincerity in his stories that touch the heart, and go home. ‘Puraskaar’, ‘Gundaa’ and ‘Madhuua’ are some of his well known stories.

Premchand

Despite the brilliance of ‘Usney Kahaa Thaa’ and the strong presence of writers like Jaishankar Prasad, this decade of the century definitely belonged to Premchand. In temper and outlook he was an unusual combination of tradition and modernity, realism and idealism, simplicity and subtlety. Equipped with this recapitulative as well as forward-looking cast of mind, he broke the frontiers of descriptiveness, narration and time-sequence in story writing. These creative energies of his found supreme expression in stories like ‘Poos Kee Raat’, ‘Kafan’, ‘Sadgati’.

From the point of view of development, the years from 1916 to 1929 are considered his most creative period. His exploring mind led him to diverse sections of society, such as women, the untouchables, and rural India. As his vision expanded, his courage of conviction took deeper root. Up to the end of the twenties, he felt the need for an idealistic underpinning to his realistic stories. It looked as though the reality he wrote about, seemed too stark to him, too open, and that he had doubts about its being accepted by the reader. This now changed. He could now show the harsh and unlovely edges of realism without softening them in any way. One of the finest portrayals of this raw, unapologetic realism is in the story ‘Sadgati’. The zamindar in this story drives the starving peasant to exert all his feeble strength into digging a well, to the point when the peasant falls dead with the effort. The story ends there. No elaboration is given, no comments made on either the zamindar’s callousness or the peasant’s helplessness. But everything is said — without being stated.

The realistic form, indeed, reached its farthest limit in Premchand’s hands. He defined realism and reality as social phenomena in clear, unambiguous terms. He located them in society. Even in stories like ‘Sadgati’, in which the characters are brought to the foreground and the social realities are made to reverberate without being described, the ground on which the story is founded is objective and can be seen as a dimension apart from the characters.

New Turns to Realism: Jainendra Kumar Jain, S.S. Vatsayyan

This clear, objective dimension to the realistic mode was ignored by the next important figure that appeared in Hindi short story writing — Jainendra Kumar — roughly in the late twenties. His first story ‘Hatya’a appeared in 1927. For Jainendra the seeds of a story lay in the characters’ minds, at their conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious levels. The story rose from the conflicts set off in these psychological depths of the individual’s mind.

This intense involvement with the inner workings of the mind led him, eventually and inevitably, to probe the mind of woman. For it is on woman on
whom falls the brunt of the conflict-prone pressures of subordinating personal inclinations to social regulations. Her personality has to adapt to drastic and often severe tailoring, to conform to models set by society and tradition. Woman, thus, represented for Jainendra a perennial and primordial sphere of conflict.

He was among the earliest writers to portray woman as an individual in her own right, not dependent on her derived standings as mother, sister or wife. He was the first woman-friendly Hindi writer, definable as such by present-day feminist standards.

Some questions can be asked here. Wasn’t Premchand, too, woman-conscious, woman-friendly, deeply alive to the rigours imposed on her? Also, didn’t the first modern story in Hindi, ‘Ek Tokri Bhar Mittee’ have a woman as its central character, and was it not sensitive to the powers latent in the female personality?

Premchand’s approach to and understanding of women sprang from an ideological commitment to reform. He was a champion of women’s rights, was explicit about them. Jainendra does not write about reforms, or about waking the conscience of society to the condition of women. He wants to wake women to the truths of their lives, empower and energize them through this inner awakening, and thus, gear them for fashioning identities for themselves. Coming to ‘Ek Tokri Bhar Mittee’, it is built around the ideas of maternal power always prevalent in Indian society. Here again, Jainendra differs markedly. He does not speak or proxy for his women characters. He enters their minds so totally and wholly that his voice becomes theirs, almost erasing distance and difference. In thought and approach both, thus, Jainendra not only departed from the path set by Premchand, he also raised the art of the story in Hindi to new heights. ‘Khel’, ‘Paazeb’, ‘Ek Din’ are among his memorable stories.

‘Agaya’ — Satchidanand Hiranand Vatsyayan — was the third figure comprising the trinity of Hindi writers — Premchand, Jainendra and himself — who dominated the literary scene in the twenties and thirties of the century. His first collection of stories Tripatthaga, came out in 1931. Agaya served in the army, afterwards became a militant freedom fighter, and was given to a wandering mode of life. These experiences found expression in his stories, of course. ‘Haariti’, ‘Akalan’ ‘Drohee’ and ‘Vipathaga’ are some outstanding examples of this expression. But a more important and more significant relationship can be established between these experiences, the characters he created, and the feel and texture of his stories. The ‘enemy’, or the entity to be confronted and thwarted, in his stories, is more clearly defined, is more of an articulated and analysed factor in the characters’ stances of rebellion.

In a way, this can be said of Premchand’s stories too. The social setup, society as a whole, is a clearly discernable antagonist in his stories. The difference is that Agaya’s characters have re-defined the setup and made it a live presence in their minds. They interact and dialogue with it in an ongoing process that gives an intellectual edge to their behaviour. Agaya was the first writer in Hindi to have intellectual central characters. They are self-conscious, aloof, and selective in their choice of friends or partners. His men characters are sensitive to the feminine principle of life, and are attracted to women who are
as thoughtful, inquiring and intense as themselves. In Premchand’s stories, in
contrast, this critical-analytical edge is not present. The social setup with its
ills and recommended cures are brought in, in accordance with the general
reformist and remedial outlook of the times.

In one respect, perhaps, Agyeya’s characters bear a similarity to those of
Jainendra: they too labour under a sense of anguish. But the similarity goes no
farther. The anguish is of two different kinds, producing different sensations
in the readers. Jainendra’s characters suffer from what can be called ‘extreme
anguish’. It has a knife-like cutting edge. They seem prepared to give up their
lives, if need be. They seem driven by a kind of death wish. Their conflicts
with tradition rise to a sharp pitch as a cry of despair, a state in which they
seem to be saying that pain is the only reality of life, and that all argument is
therefore, futile. Agyeya’s characters almost never reach this point of the
suspension of speech. To speak, to articulate, are proofs of being for them.
They may lose, but they remain speaking beings, translating avidly their states
of mind into words, assimilating them into the veins and arteries of their
being.

Two other writers of stature in these years before Independence were
Ilachandra Joshi and Yashpal. Like Jainendra’s, Ilachandra Joshi’s stories
were also psychological in spirit and content. ‘Khandhar Kee Aatmaayen’
(Souls of Ruins) ‘Diary Ke Neeras Prusht’ (A Diary’s Dull Pages), and
‘Diwali’ are his major story collections. Yashpal was, like Premchand, reform
oriented. But as a Marxist, believing in change by violence, he was more hard-
hitting in his stories. For him, the story was a weapon to attack society and its
mal-practices, and thereby reform it. His stories range in theme and setting,
from the moral inertia of society, to the entrenched, psychological-cum-sexual
bottlenecks it can give rise to. Among his representative stories are ‘Chitra
Kaa Sheershak’ (The Title of the Picture), ‘Aatithhya’ (Hospitality),
‘Gavaahee’ (Testimony), ‘Pratishtha Kaa Bojh’ (The Burden of Fame),
‘Aadmee Kaa Bachchaa’ (The Child of Man).

Summing up, we can say that in these years preceding Independence, the
realistic, realism-based flavour and fibre to story writing given by technology
and the Western philosophy of individualism, expanded and branched out in
diverse ways. It was enriched by the diverse writing sensibilities of the times,
and the diverse definitions they gave to realism.

In the forties of the century, sweeping and historical events once again
impacted with our minds, and a newer, intenser form of realism was ushered
in into story-writing. Among these events were the second world war, the
intensification of the freedom struggle under Gandhi, the eventual freedom
from British rule, and the partition of the country. The world war and the final
phase of the freedom campaign when independence was no longer a distant
dream but a near certainty, were powerful influences on the minds of Indians.
They were mutually contradictory, though. The war against Germany was
being waged by the British who were our enemies in our freedom struggle.
The Quit India movement of 1942, signifying a dramatic high point of anti-
British feelings, distanced us, specially our writers, from the international war
effort. In addition, events on the freedom front were unfolding fast in this
period. The year 1942 and the Quit India campaign of that year were just three
years before the end of the war. It was just five years before independence,
and the shattering event of partition, just six years before the assassination of
Gandhi.
This pressure of history-in-the-making kept the writer on a high pitch of creativity. Premchand wrote some of his finest stories in this charged atmosphere. The reformist that he was at heart drew him to the reformist ideals envisaged by the architects of the freedom struggle as fitting for a nation wanting to be born again. ‘Jail’, ‘Jaloos’ and ‘Maikoo’, are stories on the themes of liquor, the picketing of liquor shops, and people’s rallies as forms of political protest; all of which were pronounced features of the independence campaign.

Alienation as Spur to Writing

However, it was Partition, which accompanied freedom and brought the sense of a near breakdown in the country, that made the already high pitch of creativity higher still, and sent it to dizzy heights. The environment, the urban environment specially, underwent bewildering changes, compelling the writer to relate to it anew and evolve new responses to it. The changes were basic, grass-root changes that upset the assumptions that had been held so far about people and their spheres of action. Women became visible members of the milieu outside the home. From indoor beings they became outdoor frequenters. Large-scale migrations from the village to the city took place, further disturbing the urban scene and setup, compelling the writer to re-define his or her relationship with the milieu.

It was this violent transformation and the sense of facelessness it gave the individual that caused the next phase of growth in the Hindi short story. This phase that set in, roughly, from the sixties of the century, is seen as the most exciting, still evolving phase of short story writing. Its most striking feature is alienation, a state in which the individual is driven inward into himself or herself.

In a way, this inward drive or inward orientation was a feature of Jainendra’s writing too, done in the preceding period, as we saw. Jainendra, as we noticed, preferred to probe the minds of his characters, and thereby get the steam for the structure and unfolding of his story. But Jainendra was neither alienated from his environment nor had he lost faith in human relationships. The tone of his stories is positive in spite of the vehement negative note ringing in them.

The Nai Kahani Movement

The nai kahani movement that dates back to the nineteen fifties or 1956 to be exact gave voice to the emerging middle class. That year saw the publication of a special issue of Kahani published from Allahabad and edited by Bhairav Prasad Gupt. The issue contains stories by Mohan Rakesh, Kamleshwar, Rajinder Yadav, Usha Priyamwada and others. Among the pioneers of the movement were Rajendra Yadav, Kamleshwar and Mohan Rakesh. Some critics also see Nirmal Verma as a part of the movement. As far as form and shape go, there is no blanket definition of the nai kahani possible. No two stories even of the same decade are similar. Mohan Rakesh and Nirmal Verma both leading writers of the sixties have different forms and flavours in their short stories. And Kamleshwar, an iconic figure of the movement, is different from both. Even so, it can be said that the nai kahani or the new short story turns inwards and the individual is shown to be a loner and a negative tone overrides the positive. Hope seems to have sunk very low for the
writer, his characters, their milieu, and for life itself. Hopelessness lies thick in
the air, heavy on the senses. The characters drift, flounder or grope,
directionless. They are severely alone.

This state of severe loneliness seems an outstanding feature of the nai kahani,
even though the themes and situations vary from writer to writer.

Basically, of course, the alienated individual is engaged in a quest for identity.
The alienated hero’s — or heroine’s, as Latika’s in Nirmal Verma’s Birds —
is a search for his/her lost self in which identity lies contained. But it is a
search for the familiar, for something known at one time. There is nostalgia in
this search. Its end is either a confirmation, a denial, or, a re-definition of what
was once known.

What distinguishes the nai kahani, broadly, is the mood of disenchantment
with all established modes of behaviour, thought and action. This
disenchantment set in, as we saw, in the wake of independence and the deep
sense of breakdown it roused from the fallout of partition. Its expression was
muted at first. In Birds, for instance, among the early stories of the movement,
the difference between what is now and what was before does not seem
absolute and irreversible. Faith is not lost and given up as a bad habit of the
mind. The story ends on a note of affirmation of faith, when Latika slips in
under Julie’s pillow, the letter written to her by her boy friend, which she had
early confiscated in accordance with the hostel rules. Of course, it is
ultimately, only a gesture. The sadness that envelopes Latika like a shroud is
not going to lessen by any means. When she slips in the letter a flutter of joy
does go up in her. But it is a flutter, no more. The sadness will continue as a
far greater weight, smothering her. Nonetheless, the possibility of its going
underground one day and leaving the field clear for joy to reign as more than a
flutter, echoes strong in the tones of the story.

This possibility become remoter and more or less disappears as more nai-
kahaniis get written and writers multiply by the dozen. In Nirmal Verma’s own
stories, often set in foreign locales, this glimmer of hope fades and
abnormalities are accepted as inevitable, as normal to life. Breakdowns of
family, relationships, institutions and networks of faith and sustenance, are
acknowledged and registered without protest, with small sardonic smiles. In
other stories by other writers voices of protest and resistance are heard, but
loaded with helplessness and a bitter fatalism. This makes the protest and
resistance failings of the trapped and the angry. The voice and expression of
disenchantment becomes in fact bitter and thereby more strident. The gentler
tones leave it. It becomes uni-tonal, a sustained snarl and growl at the two-
facedness of life, at the impermanence of things.

The state of disenchantment, we can conclude, remains the bedrock of the nai
kahani writing.

Women’s Writing and Dalit Writing

Two important streams in short story writing are those on the traditionally
marginalized sections of society, mainly women and dalits. Each of these
kinds is a large subject and deserves a much fuller treatment than we can give
them here. We shall have to make do with extremely brief references to them.
Premchand, Agyeya and Jainendra all wrote stories on women. Premchand also wrote some stories on dalits and was among the first to vocalize their torment. How were the new stories on women and dalits different from these older stories? The difference is that in these earlier stories the writers were not of the same caste or gender as their characters. Now women wrote on women and dalits on dalits. This gives the new stories an entirely new documentary force and a first hand feel of the reality that had not found expression earlier. There was a qualitative, indeed a radical change in both kinds of writing. Mannu Bhandari, Usha Priyamvada, Rajee Seth and Manjul Bhagat are among those who have written on women. The dalit writers include Omprakash Valmiki (whose autobiography Joothan has become a classic). Mohandas Nemishera, Markandeya and Hridayesh and there are others.

Other Streams

Apart from women’s and dalit writings, other streams of short story writing have sprung up. They include, among others, anti-stories (a-kahani), rational stories (sachetan kahani), contemporary stories (samkaleen kahani) and people’s stories (janvadi kahani). Ganga Prasad Vimal, Maheep Singh and Markandeya are among the piloting figures of these streams.

3.4 CONTEXTS AND SETTINGS IN NIRMAL VERMA’S FICTION

Introductory Remarks

Context for a writer is formed by the impact of outer circumstances on his mind and sensibility. It is a compound of the two. And from this compound grow the settings and locales that he designs for his stories, and for his fiction generally.

Keeping this in view, let us consider the objective factors in Nirmal Verma’s life and the significance they came to have in his writing.

He was born, as we saw, in 1929. This meant that his years of schooling took place at a time when the British presence was as yet a felt reality. Even middle class schools often had British men and women as principals or in influential positions. In Birds, for instance, Father Elmond, the priest, Hubert the organ player in the chapel, and Miss Wood the principal of the school, are prominent in the school’s hierarchy, and thereby, in the consciousness of the girls. The church itself is depicted as a bit of a joke in the story. But it is accepted without resistance. The apparently non-Christian majority of the school takes it with an easy-going secular spirit.

It would be relevant to recall here that peaceful co-existence was among the reigning slogans of the decade that came immediately after independence, that is, the fifties, when Verma’s generation graduated and took their M.A. degrees. The phrase was basically political in concept. Verma’s application of this concept was instinctive and aesthetic. That is why, it can be said, his fiction has outlived and survived the now defunct political parallels it happened to have.
Let us now note the circumstances of his life that were shaped by the dominant social/political mores of the day, and helped create the context/contexts of his fiction. His father was a government official. This meant, as it did in those days, living the winter months in Delhi, the winter capital of the ruling classes and the summer months in the summer capital, Shimla. This seasonal migration affected the cultural moorings and kinship ties of the family, he says in an extended interview with Ashok Vajpayee.

A sense of a void was, apparently, felt by Nirmal and his siblings. And this void was filled in curious ways, he says. "To the Shimla of those days sadhus and sanyasains congregated. Charismatic characters, especially when they danced as they sang and performed their rites. These scenes to this day are living in my eyes . . ." (24).

In addition to sadhus, in his story "Kavvey aur Kalapani" — 'Crows of Deliverance' — for which he won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1959, the main character is a sadhu like recluse, another factor that inspired his sense of wonder was the devotion of his elder sister to the Goddess Kali (24). Between this sister and him there was a deep attachment. This closeness, coupled with her bhakti for Kali, went towards making women and womanhood for him absorbing elements, possessed of a kind of spiritual elevation. This is a marked feature in Birds. In his fiction generally too, his women characters overshadow the men.

He was once asked specifically about this feature. He said:

"I think and also believe that just as there is in philosophy what we call the essence of knowledge, there is in art the essence of experience, which I see in a high degree through the medium of woman. There is no sociological reasoning here. In Antonioni's films too, a deep and complex analyses of middle class Italy is carried out through the medium of woman. When asked, Antonionini explained: The loneliness and the contradictions of our society can best be summed up in the character of women". I felt on reading this, that he was saying something very close to me. What I find somewhat compromised in men. I find free of its bounds, stark and complete in the character of woman (54).

Despite this natural bent towards the feminine personality and the greater vividness of his women characters, they cannot be called the backbone of his fiction. The backbone is provided by what we can call a blind reaching out by him for the felt and unknown forces that tug at the consciousness. He calls these forces "forms (that are) sensation and knowledge, forms half made, half unmade . . .".

This search for states of being that are non-physical and yet stir feeling in a very physical way was present in him from an early age. His interaction with the sadhus woke it. Side by side with this was, as we noticed, the sense of mystery produced by the figure of Kali. He and his siblings went to the Kali temple every evening, climbing the steep hill on top of which the temple stood. They played hide and seek in its verandahs. And then, there were the pilgrimages with the parents to Rishikesh and Banaras. All this, he says, "woke many things in him. I learnt how through saadhana (disciplined pursuit of knowledge) a person can totally forget himself. We can call this a sense of
total oblivion. This power to forget oneself, this intense concentration and merging with an unseen force was a little frightening too, but always remained an experience rousing my deepest curiosity” (26).

This attraction for the felt and unknown concretised in his life as a kind of wanderlust. And in his fiction it has emerged as locales that are unreal even when defined and specified. There is a curious absence of technology in these locales. In Birds, for instance, the school doesn’t even seem to have electricity. Latika climbs or descends the stairs holding a lamp. When the locales are cities, as in other stories of his, no car ever figures in them. None of his characters has a car, or is shown getting into or alighting from a car. They commute by bus. Buses are technology, yes. But so friendly and innocent of the shove and push travel of are these buses in his fiction, that they seem like physical extensions of human limb power. And it is definitely no pre-technological era that is the time-setting of his fiction!

Before going deeper into his fiction, let us recall the real life circumstances relevant here. In 1959, as we mentioned in the Bio-Sketch, he went to Czechoslovakia on the invitation of the Oriental Institute, to learn Czech and translate from it. He stayed there till the early sixties. His European travels provided him close and first hand experience of Western culture. He related to it, on the one hand, as an individual free of the biases of history, and on the other, as an Indian rooted in his culture. It has resulted in a body of writing consisting of travelogues and reportages set in foreign lands, in addition to stories set there, that form a distinct segment of his writing. There is a candour in these writings and an attitude of involved non-involvement.

Within India he has gone on constant explorative-cum self-explorativ journeys into places away from the metropolises. The most notable of these has been his journey to the Kumbh Mela, which has resulted in his much discussed travelogue, ‘Sulagti Tahnee’ (The Burning Bough).

Let us consider now, in some more depth the fiction arising from his fascination of the felt-Unknown. As pointed out, it has, first led to the creation of locales of supernatural or surrealist ambiguities. A forceful expression of this method of grappling with the fascination is found in the last sections of his last novel ‘Antim Aranya’ (The Last Wilderness).

The setting is a river bank. The hero has come there to immerse the ashes of his dead employer. The employer was a father figure to him. With the hero is no one else but the priest, present there to perform the immersion ceremony. But the hero’s dead father seems present in the near distance somewhere. The essences of all the dead cremated on the river bank down the years seem standing veiled in the thin mist. The priest calls to the crows to come down and eat the food offerings made to the departed. (Crows in Hindu funeral rites are seen as the embodiments of the dead.) In a minute the horizon is black with the birds slowly winging down.

The deserted river bank is populous with life in manifold forms, manifold suggestions: bird life, human life, inanimate life, life that is neither of these but is there, breathing, sensed and felt. This intense abstraction, moreover, is achieved through matter-of-fact details of the geography and setting of the area. The river is the Sarpa. The town through which it flows is Parulkot.
somewhere presumably among the Shimla Hills that is so often the setting of his fiction (*Atrit Areada* 2004: 276-79).

Apart from supra-real locales, another culminatioin in his fiction deriving from his wanderlust needs to be noticed. Almost all his characters have an air of fatigue about them, of a history of bitter, unhappy experiences that have left them mentally uprooted. They are loners. Almost always, they are without family ties or obligations, content and wryly philosophical about their lot in life. A typical story of his — *Birds* is a typical story — is founded on these states of mind. These states of mind determine its characterization, dialogue and onward course. The experience and its aftermath of sad wisdom are tantamount to inner journeys, and fruitions-cum-transitions to mellow, deeper states of being.

To sum up: The physical and the non-physical play upon and with each other in Nirmal Verma’s fiction. Each upholds the other in the spirit of inter-existence and dualism, which, as we noticed in the opening paras of this section, is the major component of Nirmal Verma’s sensibility and fiction.

### 3.5 NIRMAL VERMA’S BELIEFS, CONVICTIONS AND HIS CRITICS

A serious charge made against him by some critics is that he is too westernised in his thinking and make-up.

On the face of it, it seems a valid enough charge. *Birds* can be said to bear it out. The music figuring in it is exclusively Western. And music, as we shall see in the subsequent section, is an important element in the composition of the story.

Secondly, there is a marked non-Indian human presence in the story. Miss Wood, Hubert, and Father Emond are either British or European. They are important characters in the story. Dr. Mukherjee, too, is only half Indian.

In addition to music, religion is another conspicuous feature of the story. The atmosphere of the church and the representation of Christ in it are highlighted in the narrative. The school itself has a British atmosphere about it. It seems to be a school especially for English-speaking Indians. In current parlance, it would be called an English medium school. There is also the Army Club with its dancing, billiards, bar and easy mixing of the sexes.

But to assess *Birds* and thereby, the inner affiliations of Verma, on these bases would be unsound. It would be missing the spirit in which music and religion have been brought into the story.

Any form of artistic expression is a liberating experience, in Nirmal Verma’s thinking. Further, in his thinking, religious experience equals artistic experience in its liberating potential. He makes a clear distinction between religion and religious experience. The one is mainly external, given form and made concrete by the paraphernalia of worship, by dogma, doctrine and prescribed behaviour. The other is abstract, free of rules and conditions. It is a charged release of spiritual energy. A formal religious setting can activate it.
as happens in *Birds*. But it is still free of the obligations and injunctions imposed by the implicitly authoritarian presence of the religion in the formal setting.

Keeping in view this trait of his sensibility, then, let us consider the music and religion figuring in *Birds*. We see the narrative passing behind the tonal presence of the music to its evocative quality where the music ceases and the words of the text rise amidst the echoes left by its passage. They are simple, descriptive words, describing the sense of motion present in the musical notes. ‘Lead kindly light...The notes of the music seemed to have climbed a high mountain, and scattering wisps of breath into the vast emptiness of the sky, were climbing down. The soft, rain-drenched light was glistening on the oblong glass panel of the chapel window... The smoke from the candles traced a blue line in the light, now floating in the air...’

In this picture of motion and the flurry of motion what we get is a word picture of music shorn of label or place of birth. An icon of Christ in the chapel where the music is being played is described in words — a dozen or so (And one single ray of light falls aslant on Jesus Christ’s image (*Birds*) — that bypass theology and sectarianism and evoke a Christ anonymous and universal.

This impersonalisation and globalisation of some salient features of Western culture considerably blunt the edge of the charge of Euro-Centrism made against him by some critics. But these critics could still dismiss the globalisation as an easy way of dodging the issue. The issue for them is unambiguous condemnation of Western culture. As it happens, he can satisfy them on this score too. Fortright and principled condemnations by him are not lacking.

Before coming to these, let us briefly consider the sheer irreverence portrayed in *Birds* for the very church rituals that are, just a few paras earlier, shown rousing spiritual fervour. In the chapel, during the service, the girls are frankly bored. They push their chairs back noisily. They titter. Dr. Mukherjee jokes under his breath, that Miss Wood was dozing in her chair, pretending to pray. And Latika wonders, looking at Father Elmond in his robes, if padres wore anything under their robes.

To come now to the weightier, principled condemnation of Western culture he has made. For this we shall once again go the interview with fellow writers mentioned in the earlier sections.

One of the interviewers (25) asked whether it could be said that his stories move on two levels: an outer visible level, and an inner level. This inner level is strong and consistently suggested, he says. ‘But it never intrudes into the outer movement of the story that is constituted by speech, change of setting and sequence of events. The overall substance of the story is formed by defined positions of the two levels that interact upon each other without trespassing, yet with a spirit of vigorous inquiry’.

Nirmal Verma agrees that there are two levels in his stories and that they are in a state of tension with each other. He then goes on to trace the origins of this tension. The origins are metaphysical and historical, he says.
Metaphysically it appeared from the moment man began seeing himself as separate and distinct from nature. As all estrangements do, it has given him a sense of incompleteness. No other species of life — animal, plant bird or reptile — he says, has to contend with this condition. "To be human is in itself a state of tension", he says.

The historical reason for the tension, his reasoning goes on, lies in the creed of individualism. When the human being became an individual from man, when he saw himself as a unit apart from the human species, he entered the second stage of his fall from grace. He attributes this directly to the influence of Western ways of thought and the consequent erosion of traditional family surroundings and environments. In our country, he says further, the extreme and destructive individualism of Western societies is still not known. Nonetheless, he says, the concept of individualism has certainly become a prominent feature of our thinking, in so far as the urban sections are concerned (26).

Summing this up, we can say that in his view the creed of individualism into which metaphysical and historical factors have climaxed, has somehow to be moderated.

How would he do this?

To find out, let us again go to the interview.

One of the questions asked of him was about the importance of memory in his stories. The question was, whether it could be maintained that the story he or any writer writes eventually is only a memory of the real-life event that sank into his consciousness at the time it occurred (24). Memory and actuality, it is implied, are so close to each other that the story cannot exist without the presence of both, or in the absence of one.

Verma totally agrees with this. And he illustrates the proposition by a story about Ramakrishna Paramahamsa: 'Once, when someone asked him if he had seen God, he said, no he had not seen God but he had had a dream. In the dream he saw a lake. The lake was covered with weeds. Then he saw a gust of wind blow the weeds away to one side, and the blue waters below came into view. He then thought the blue water was reality. When the wind blew again the weeds spread over the lake again, and then he thought that the weeds were illusion, but after narrating this, he said, "neither could the illusion exist without the reality, nor the reality without the illusion".

Then, more explicitly, he says, 'The West has always tried to sweep aside the surface and isolate the truth underlying it. This is most destructive because without the surface the depths dry up. It is the same with their science and philosophy, where research takes the stance that the surface is just the outer skin, and so, by peeling away this skin, the inner truth will be revealed. When you break the link of the surface from the depth, the depth too hides its truth. I think that for a story-teller who functions in the area between illusion and reality, this is an invaluable perception. I believe that like a sanyasi, the writer too weaves together, thinks into and writes about the "leela" between illusion and reality, the interplay of the two' (25).

We now have two important clues to his basic attitude and thinking: One, that individualism is destructive, for it inflates the ego. It smothers further the
innate sense of belonging to a larger reality that has been already impaired by man’s dualistic thought that he is different from the rest of nature. Secondly, contrary to western approaches to truth, the outer, visible flux of life, its to and fro, are no less important than what lies below. De-linking the depth from the surface, only causes the truth to hide deeper into the depths, creating thereby a new surface and a new depth. We can now come to some conclusion about his sensibility. One, there is in it a keen awareness of appearance and reality. Two, appearance and reality are intertwined, not separate or separable. His stories and fiction generally, of which Birds is but one example, emphasize this intertwining. We cannot end any consideration of his beliefs and inner drives without taking into account a much discussed book of his, ‘Sulagit Tahnee’ (Burning Branch), published a few years before his death. It is a deeper probe into the issue of reconciling appearance and reality, memory and history, that forms the core of his fiction. Its underlying assumption is that history (standing for appearance and actuality) and memory (standing for reality and recollection beyond history) are the two points between which the reflective Indian of today flounders. Reconciling the two is obviously easier to accomplish in fiction than in real life. Craft and imagination, not as freely available in real life, help in the fictional exercise. He himself does not see any quick solution to this condition. The only answer, he feels is to live with it fully and unflinchingly without falling into the traps of revivalism or populist cults of god men.

It is, in terms of theory, a life of inquiry and patient plodding, along trails that promise clues of wholeness. And in practical terms it is a life of travel and motion. He himself has always lived this life, the itinerant life of a sanyaasi, who, in his view, as we saw, is like a writer in many ways.

‘Sulagit Tahnee’ (Burning Branch) records his re-discovery of cultural temper and practices long forgotten by him.

He saw them in operation in the Kumbh Mela. With an involvement that is loving yet detached, he describes in detail the physical setting of Kumbh Mela. He sees the sand and the rivers, sunlight and starlight, discourses and prayers and the roused, impassioned rush of the sadhus and other men towards the flowing waters of the Ganga. And he sees, feels, the steady pulse of faith below the frenzy and the panorama. Is it a home coming for him, he asks himself. It could be, why not, he reflects. To know is not the important thing! The important thing is to have faith.

To wake to the river of faith, flowing in the depths of the consciousness, is to arrive at a point where a synthesis of history with memory beyond history seems possible. It is not a state of mind that can be labeled one way or the other, this or that. It is totally introspective. Its conflicts will be resolved solely by introspection. We can call it a vigil for an inclusive state where labels lose all meaning and significance.

### 3.6 DISCUSSION OF BIRDS

#### 3.6.1 The Title

The title, Birds, is symbolic of the flux of life. And as we said in the foregoing section, the awareness of this flux is central to Nirmal Verma’s thinking. It has been woven into the fabric of the story from beginning to end.
Birds creates the idea of motion. However, as you read on, the two words blend. They evoke the much subtler, more fine-tuned idea of motion as an intrinsic feature of all life, as a force necessary for sustaining life. This idea gets stated formally in the story, as we shall see.

A strong to and fro, back and forth motion is the dominant image formed from the very outset of the story. Latika is shown going to the girls’ room. Her shadow falls in a quivery mass on the steps leading to the rooms. This quiver of her shadow is, of course, a realistic detail. But it is also more than that. It is meant to be a synonym for the state of turmoil and inner turbulence in which she is depicted all through the story. This deep, psychic disturbance of hers is sustained right up to the point just before the end of the story, where we see her walking along the corridor, shaken by questions for which she has not quite got the answers she has sought from Dr Mukherjee.

She gets them in the next few minutes. The sequence of events here is this: a ray of light flows from the half open door of Julie’s room that she passes on her way. The action of light and the after-sounds of the quiet, sane words of advice from Dr Mukherjee explode in her mind in a pictogram of profound meaning. It gives her the sense of stability she is ever in search of. And once again, the image of the birds’ orderly motion across the sky is evoked by this pause coming to her. For the rhythm of their flying is sustained only by the moments of pause present in their motion. The full choreography of the birds’ motion is, thus, reflected in the swings and transitions of Latika’s moods. It is a confirmation of the close link between the title and the story. Let us now follow the course of this development a little more closely.

We visualise Latika as she walks along. Her eyes seem abstracted, far away. At the same time they seem focussed on some vignette of reality within her, visible only to herself. Like her shadow on the steps, it is a picture of both motion and stillness that she makes. Like the shadow it is a picture real and unreal both. And in a sweep, we connect this being who is still and not still, solid and not solid, with the quality of the birds’ skim along the sky. Isn’t the motion of the birds a lot like the elusive, hard-to-pin air of mystery that surrounds Latika? How, one might ask. What is elusive about the birds’ flying? On first sight, nothing. It’s just a flock of birds flying. What you see is just what there is. But this is where the subtlety of the story and of all literature, perhaps, comes in. Latika has identified herself very closely and intently with the birds. Her moods have got transferred to the birds. This gives their flight a psychic quality and tension similar to her own. The main feature of this tension of hers is extreme insecurity. The ground under her feet seems shifting, never still. And it is this quality of permanent instability, permanent movement, that is very marked in the scene where she is shown walking along the corridor knocked about by questions without answers. So marked that there flashes into our mind instantly the image of the birds untethered from the earth, suspended in the void, and impelled forward by no visible force.

Indeed, almost none of the characters has a firm footing in the present. Doctor Mukherjee, stable and un-neurotic otherwise, has remained a refugee at heart, not fully broken off from the country he has fled from. As for Hubert he is an unhappy lover. No unhappy lover is ever strongly in the present. Added to this is his vocation as musician. His mind wings with the notes of his music, rises and falls with them.
Latika, the central figure of the story, and of the group of three it foregrounds, is the most disoriented of them. Her mind is locked with the past in a way that estranges her from her present and raises a communication gap with almost everyone round her.

Her swings of mood are linked more closely than those of the others, with the swings of the mountain landscape of the story, with its ever fluttering and shimmery, un-still atmosphere. This setting and the habitat are very important mood-creating factors. There is a perpetual play of light going on in the surroundings. At times the light merges with the objects it falls on, as in the chapel where it glistens on a glass panel, tapers away on to an image of Christ and produces a solid-seeming artifact of molten glass and light. At times, as at the rooftop performance of Hubert, the light of the candles on a table there, parries with the dense darkness around, holds it off and triumphantly proclaims its separate existence.

In addition to light, sound is another running strand in the setting and thereby, the story. Sound is depicted as a relentless, ever active, ever present force that punctures the body of silence, and thus thwarts it from taking root. The “silence of the jungle is never voiceless”, the text says. “Sounds and voices like dreams in deep sleep flutter the light gossamer curtain of stillness…”

The birds in flight across the sky are an extension and expression of this unceasing flux on the earth below. And as one who is in a deep psychic link with the tossing and turning of the phenomena about her, the ceaseless, wavy motion of the birds on the sky above is also a manifestation of the rise and fall of feelings within her.

A second point of importance is that the rhythm and regularity of the birds’ motion also imply a point of convergence, a motion inward and a point of rest from where the energy is impelled outward. Latika too, despite her compulsive roosting in the past wants this point of rest, a point where body and mind, time and space unite, touch each other in a natural junctioning, and a sense of the present is felt.

All through the story Latika is shown making an effort to touch this still centre present in all motion, all change. She loves, for instance, to climb up the hill in the winter months and trace out somehow, the road below hidden under the snow. The road is constant. The snow is seasonal, fleeting. And she wants to make contact with the constancy lying below the fleeting.

This steady awareness of the abiding latent in the breakdowns outside flares up sharply in Latika’s mind as she turns to go after Hubert’s collapse. He will soon recover, she knows. But what is it that keeps people going, she asks Dr Mukherjee, standing beside her. What impels people forward by its sheer momentum even when they stop?

In his tired, wise way, Mukherjee tells her that life is a flow forward, ever forward, and one flows with the current. This flow is the only truth the human being knows. It is constancy and motion both. You may thus remember the past, you may look back into the past, Mukherjee says. But you cannot, should not, be fixated in it. He himself is not, though he has his share of memories.
Latika now walks back to her room, less burdened by her neurotic need to cling to the past. She has woken to the forward motion of time and to the dimension of the future, the unknown, implicit in the action of time.

The sense of the unknown, the future, a time free of the past, is never totally absent in her swings of mood. The birds’ orderly thrust through and across the sky wakes it time and again, just as it wakes a need to touch ground, be in the present.

But now, stabilised somewhat by the doctor’s reflections, past, present and future come to her in a truer perspective. She can see time not only in sharply divided segments, but also as a continuum.

The flight of the birds across the sky expresses and encompasses this straightening out of the geometry of time gone wrong in her mind. The birds’ flight, in short, describes the story of Latika. Their flight is the essence of the story. The title is a summing up of this essence.

3.6.2 Analysis of Birds

Two things strike the reader immediately on reading Birds. There is, first the close insider’s view of the feminine mind and psychology portrayed by the male author of the story. In fact, the whole story has a strong feminine (not feminist) aspect.

Nirmal Verma does this not simply by having a woman as his central character: he does this by constructing his story on the brickwork of suppressed memories, unexpressed thoughts and unsatisfied desires. These, in our society, are parts of women’s field awareness in a more poignant way than a man’s.

This difference is presented in the story. On the one hand, by the way the two male characters — Dr. Mukherjee and Hubert — deal with their memories or with emotions not finding full expression. And on the other, it is presented in the way Latika, the main character, deals with hers.

3.6.2.1 The Extrovert Approach of the Male Characters

Mukherjee is detached about his life. It is a life not just without family, but also without country. He is a refugee from Burma, and is half Burmese. He lived in that country in a normal family setting of parents and wife, till all of them fled the country after the Japanese invasion.

But Mukherjee can laugh at himself. He can see the humour in the fact that he is time and again thrown in with old Miss Wood, the school principal, who seems even older than him. Alas! Is an old woman, long past her prime, the only fit female company for me, he seems to reflect, sad and amused.

For the most part he does not talk about his life prior to his coming to this little hill station. But sometimes a heavy philosophic mood seizes him. Memories of his past press in upon him, demanding expression and release. He gives in to this pressure, but he does so in an entirely indirect way, making personal experiences impersonal. He becomes lyrical or ironic.

For instance, during the picnic, when the talk turns to jungle fires, he says, they slowly spread like ‘an intoxication in all directions’. Then about burning
cities that he’d seen, he says, “One after the other, houses fell like a pack of cards. Unfortunately it is only on rare occasions that one sees such splendid sights”. The rare occasions when these splendid sights took place actually boil down to just one specific occasion, when his own house in Rangoon burnt down in the war. But he cannot, will not, focus on his personal loss. He will not reduce a nationwide calamity to a personal tragedy. None of Miss Wood’s persistent questions succeed in making him narrowly nostalgic and succumb to the pleasures of reminiscing.

Mukherjee, in effect, has converted the pain of his past into strength. He has assimilated the pangs of memory into his system of perception. This assimilation has in turn, passed into the substances of his speech, of all that he says. In other words, Mukherjee has come to be a permanent observer of life. He is the man who has chosen to be on the margin as his point of vantage to study life and to relate to it.

An important consequence of his composure is that it places him in easy communication with all the other characters. He can put both Latika and Hubert, who is her shy admirer, into communicative moods with himself. He is equidistant from both of them. And he is one of the forces necessary to dilute the heavy, dumb grief enveloping Latika.

**Mukherjee and Latika**

Mukherjee has the personality to make Latika confide in him. He is not a father confessor, even if he is a father figure. Nor is Latika looking for a confessor to confide in or confess to, for baring her soul.

She wants unspoken sympathy, the kind that can be read in the eyes, no more. She wants no direct reference to her problems, neither by herself nor by whoever she is with. Mukherjee satisfies her on all these counts. He knows about her attachment to Girish Negi, for he was the one who brought them together. He inspires confidence in Negi no less than in Latika. On the eve of his departure for the Kashmir front, Negi comes over to him, not to Latika. The pain of parting from her is too much for him to bear. Mukherjee is the insulating agency who can soak up pain and be a kind of conduit to Latika. When Negi dies in action, Mukherjee is in no need of words to feel into Latika’s torment. He sees it in the withdrawn, shadowy look that settles on her like a permanent fog. He pretends not to see it. But in subtle, delicate ways he draws her out of her befogged state. With clever, ingenious arguments he brushes aside her unwillingness to participate in the get-togethers he arranges. From the rooftop musical at which Hubert is to play Chopin on the piano, followed by “coffee with cream”, as he emphatically announces, Latika wants to be excused. She is not feeling too well, she says. “Good, you would have had to come to me in any case”, he laughs and more or less drags her by the arm to the venue.

Latika does not resist too much or too hard. She is not in a state to be definite or decisive about anything. All she knows is that the doctor’s company and presence are soothing. She can be with him without having to make conversation. A current of goodwill and care flows from him always. He is watchful under the goodwill, making sure that she is not on the way to cracking up under the stress she is in. She is not unaware of his watchfulness.
But she can ignore it. Perhaps she needs the feeling of being cared for, as long as it doesn’t get interfering.

She knows it will not. She knows he’s just too much of a philosopher for asserting himself through means he has at his disposal. He is a doctor, weathered and wise. He has qualities of leadership. And despite the wide differences in their ages, he’s still not too old to assume an easy, possessive male mastership over her. None of these incipient threats will ever materialise, she knows.

And so they continue to sit together, walk the paths of Meadows when he banterers with her about the crush he is sure Miss Wood has on him. But all through these interactions, small draughts of wisdom and ways of preserving sanity amidst life’s uncertainties keep getting conveyed to her from him. They take root within her. And it is this steady nurturing of her mind that emerges in forceful and fruitful expression when Hubert has his breakdown.

Mukherjee is in effect, a guide and a guru-figure to Latika.

**Hubert and Latika**

The other important male character in *Birds* is Hubert, a non-Indian who seems more European than British. He is employed as an organ player in the church attached to the school, of which Latika is the warden. At first sight Hubert may not appear an extrovert. He is given to introspection. This does not, of course, make him an escapist, backtracking into the past like Latika, to avoid a thorny present. But it does mean a capacity to be content in the company of one’s own self, not feel any pressing need for company and diversion. Secondly, he often seems overshadowed by Mukherjee. Mukherjee seems to set the pace for his behaviour. It is at his prompting that Hubert’s performance on the terrace takes place. He is the one who updates Hubert about Latika’s mental state. Nobody else, Latika least of all, could have done this for him. And finally, as a doctor, by waking Hubert to his heart condition Mukherjee gains a marked ascendancy over him. A lot of Hubert’s subsequent behaviour, as we see, ensues from these unsettling factors. If a man can be emotionally swayed thus, if he can be made to act like a junior partner without fuss, if he does not seek company, can he be at all classified as an extrovert?

The answer is that even if a man is without an extrovert personality, extrovert behaviour would be allowed to him, would come to him naturally. A man’s behaviour is different from a woman’s in times of crises. A man can get drunk, break out into song, make a public spectacle of himself to work out the assaults of pain and stress. Latika cannot get drunk as Hubert does, cannot come reeling back home boo-hooping in a whiskey-choked voice. A man may be an introvert, not be enough of an extrovert, but extrovert behaviour would not be banned to him. Very easily, therefore, Hubert gives vent to his heartbreak by getting drunk, sitting slumped in a daze in the club bar. Mukherjee herds him back home, and Hubert lurches up the stairs, singing in a boozy, broken voice, “In the back lane of the city there is a girl who loves me”.

**3.6.2.2 The Introvert and Feminine Approach of Latika**

Neither Hubert’s noisome extrovert behaviour, nor the suave and interpretative approach of Mukherjee is the way of Latika in her interactions with her past. For her, the past is made of images trapped in the deep freeze of
the mind. They flash past her eyes during her spells of heightened awareness. Limp and drained of will during these bouts, she watches entranced these re-enactments of scenes from her brief spell of romance and courtship.

She is a totally disoriented woman during these spells. She watches herself as though it is not herself. It is a state in which she is neither detached from herself, nor attached in the normal sense of the word. One could call it a sleepwalking state.

No matter how one defines it, the point is that it is a distinct way of reacting to memory and experience, totally different from Mukherjee’s or Hubert’s. It is a typically feminine way, a woman’s way. Its main feature is silence. Speech lies submerged somewhere in the depths of this silence. A hush stays round Latika always. The dominant image she makes is of a shadowy woman winding her way along the corridors and staircases of the hostel. This shadowy figure takes its duty peep into the girls’ rooms, makes reprimands or commands in low, far away tones.

Her bodily movements and facial expressions, in effect overshadow her speech. This emphasizes the mantle of silence round her. It gives her personality a pronounced mimetic quality — the quality whereby a person conveys a lot without words, with just body language.

Take this paragraph, for instance:

Latika recalled that she had said the same thing last year and perhaps the year before too. She felt that the girls were watching her with suspicious eyes, as if they did not believe her. Her head reeled, as if from some unknown corner a cluster of inky clouds were about to rise and enfold her. She laughed a little and then tossed her head (42).

The para depicts a storm of inner tremors and vibrations that have broken out within her immediately after she has spoken one of the sparse, stuttery sentences she speaks all through the story. (‘Nothing’s decided yet. I love the snow.’) The sentence seems unrelated to the actual context in which she is saying it. It has its own recollections and associations too heavy for her to bear. The sheer intensity of this and other flashbacks that she is subject to makes her a psycho-physical being, speaking an inner language of muscular tensions, and an outer language of tongue and voice.

Non-verbalism and body language are feminine styles of communication more than the male’s. Sometimes they are called the weapons of the weak, of the underprivileged and the cornered. Latika is not underprivileged or weak in the usual sense of the word. She is sophisticated and highly individualized. Her grief is personal grief. Its roots lie more in existential tensions than in social demands.

Even so, the kind of stern and autonomous withdrawal into herself that she makes has strong feminine overtones and associations. They rise from impulses that are more primordial than cultural drives or pressures.

3.6.2.3 Role of Setting and Locale in the Creation of Mood

The physical features of the setting and locale have been fashioned by the author in such a way as to reflect the somber mood of Latika and the two men.
Never does nature break into violent states, threatening life and human habitations. The trees particularly, have been portrayed as discreet, yet emotionally sympathetic and solace giving presences, like benevolent spirits of nature. From the trees rebounds the wind’s voice, never above a soothing, chant-like murmur.

The streams too never burst their banks and roar in anger. This low key, intuitive action of the ecological presences in the story underscores and further contributes to its feminine feel and physique.

Add to this the subtle pervasive play of light that is a feature of the story, and the femininity gets even more pronounced. The indirect, oblique action of the light matches the faraway, elsewhere look that characterizes Latika’s gaze. Like the muted action of the trees, the wind, and the waters of the streams, the rays of light from either the sun, candles or torchlight is always filtered, either through the foliage of the trees, or soft and swaying due to the motion of the wind. It is never strident or glaring or direct.

When it is, as shown in the scene where Hubert comes out of the chapel (‘...his eyes were blinded by the glare as if someone had sprayed a handful of bright, boiling light into his eyes’) (62), it seems like an intrusion into the normal light of the place. It is blinding, something to shut the eyes to, and Hubert does just this, shutting his eyes and shutting out the loud, uncouth light. His thoughts rush back to the chapel, its muted lighting, the subtle, coded messages that rise from the notes of the music he plays there and bathes his mind in a fine mist. In the writing too at this place, there is a hint of impatience, as though the glare is an error of the weather that needs to be dealt with fast, and the normal pitch of light recreated soon.

Music

Music comes in as another supportive element in the projection of mood in the story. It too is always on a soft, soothing, descending and fading note, like the murmur of the trees or the gurgling of the stream. It washes gently over fretting minds. Take these lines, for instance: “That very moment Chopin’s Nocturne, gliding from under Hubert’s fingers, slowly began to dissolve in the darkness on the terrace, like soft whirlpools glinting on the surface of water and rippling far, far away towards some distant shore. Latika felt that from far off peaks of snow, flocks of birds were descending and flying away to unknown lands. These days she often did see them through her window...” (47)

The music, as we see, has had a deep effect on Latika. In the sections in the story that precedes the lines quoted, she is shown as having slipped far back into her past. Scenes of her first meeting with Girish Negi are swarming in her eyes. She is dissolving in the mists of the past, borne along by the soft stream of the music. This drowsy sinking into the past and the soft cascade of the music, connect in Latika’s mind with the birds that she sees these days through her window, winging down from the mountains and headed for distant lands. Like the notes of the music, and the birds winging away to unknown lands, she too is poised on the edge between the present and a blurred uncertain outline of the future.

3.6.2.4 The Realistic Method

In addition to these symbolic means for projecting femininity, Nirmal Verma also employee the straight, realistic mode. An example is the scene where
Latika combs her hair, standing at the mirror. This is a common — far too common — scene in a lot of fiction and could easily have become cheap and melodramatic. But the author is alive to the danger. The narrative simply says, “She looked at herself with unseeing eyes” (53). Most fictional scenes of mirror-gazing consist of dialogues with the self for dramatic heightening. But Latika’s thoughts are about a very practical, every-day question: that she’d forgotten to tell Karimuddin, the caretaker, to store fuel wood for the winter season almost upon them. Unstored, the wood never dries and worse, smokes away when lit, as it did last year.

This makes her smile — a mischievous smile with the hint of a wink in it. For last year, to escape her cold and smoke-filled room, she’d taken to sneaking into Miss Wood’s quarters via her bathroom which the old lady had forgotten to lock when going away for the vacation.

Some more snippets of memory follow about her early, now thankfully over, greenhorn’s fears at being alone in the hotel with the girls and Miss Wood away. She’d keep Karimuddin engaged in small talk till she dozed off. She’d have the doctor — another homeless loner like herself — sleep in the next room.

The upsurge of memories subsides. And, as if in illustration of it she pulls out tangled skeins of hair from the comb and walks to the window to throw them out.

In the short interval, of say, a quarter of an hour, spanning her going up to the mirror, comb in hand, and across to the window to throw out the tangle of hair from the comb, a whole chunk of her life and a whole aspect of her personality have been projected. It is a light, girlish aspect, full of kinetic energy and vivaciousness.

3.6.2.5 Julie and the Girls in the Hotel

Another life-like depiction of femininity made by Nirmal Verma in the story, is that of the girls in the hostel. They are a giggly lot. They are quietly breaking the rules of hostel regulations by holding a singing session after lights-out. Yet they are possessed of an innate respect for the staff, as indeed, for all elders. They invite Latika to join them in their musical evening. They have, in short, all the bubbling high spirits tempered by restraint, common to the girls of their age and time.

When Julie is confronted by the letter to her from her boy friend in the army, she reacts in the typical feminine way of simply sinking into silence. Her flight from speech does not have the proud and existentialist grimness of Latika’s. But it shares some basic traits with the latter. Both are spontaneous and untutored manifestations of the feelings of guilt and the sense of wrongdoing associated with love and romantic tie-ups. Latika’s meetings with Captain Negi, it may be recalled, were clandestine meetings, even though they were public knowledge. The danger and insecurity this spelt for Latika are indeed, intrinsic to romantic liaisons in our country to this day, in real life and in popular lore.
Latika, of course, eventually legitimizes her feelings for Negi by openly sorrowing over his death. But this posthumous openness is in a large part, a fictional happening, produced by the demands of the story. It does not gainsay the earlier, true-to-pattern behaviour of Latika, in keeping her involvement with Negi a secret.

Julie’s lapsing into silence, when confronted by the letter, in short, springs from reflexes instilled into her by cultural taboos and the ideals of female chastity they uphold.

3.6.2.6 Affirmation of Life

The second marked feature of *Birds* is the staunch affirmation of life against the forces of the anti-life it makes. The extreme inner exhaustion of the characters is no last-but-one step to total breakdowns as seems at first. It is, on the contrary, the last-but-one step to restoration and re-birth. This is so even for Hubert who does have a breakdown because of Latika’s rejection of his suit. But he is going to recover and will apply himself to his usual pursuits of music and the aesthetic pleasures provided by music, nature, women and the feminine aspects of life their personalities evoke — the way of life to which he is most inclined by temperament.

The narrative skill here is two-fold. First, it lies in highlighting and foregrounding the anguish of the characters, in extracting the fullest dramatic tension from it. But eventually — here comes the second aspect of the narrative skill — this whole build up of tension is demolished. Vital changes of perception, seemingly small, are shown taking place in the characters’ minds even when they are in the throes of despair. These little internal changes climax into external action and behaviour, that radically alter the nature of the reader’s involvement with the story. They disengage his attention at a stroke from the conflicts of the characters, with which it has been engaged all this while. The characters appear in a new light as refurbished beings. They demand to be looked at afresh.

This is seen most vividly in Latika’s case. She is, as we have seen, weighed down heavily by her tragic love affair. She has become a recluse, allergic to human company, brooding over death though not exactly wishing for it.

Despite this, a persistent strand of self-questioning and self-appraisal and of self-doubt is present in all her aloof and distant interaction with the people round her. ‘Am I a killjoy’, she wonders, as she evades the invitation from the girls of the hostel to join them in their music session. To reassure herself that she isn’t a killjoy, she asks the girls, wouldn’t any of them stay back during the holidays and join her in seeing the snow? She just loved the snow! She knows she’s sounding forced, and that the girls are unconvinced of her love for the snow. She knows that the loneliness she suffers from, year after year when the girls go away and she is alone in the hostel, is plain from her eyes and voice, despite her effort to hide it.

The object which rouses and reflects her self-questionings most vividly is the letter to the girl Julie, from a secret admirer of hers. As the warden of the hostel Latika has to examine and pass all letters coming to or going from the girls. The letter to Julie obviously is not one that can be passed. Latika therefore, is being no more than correct in withholding it and reprimanding the girl.
But a love letter — and, one from an officer of the same regiment to which Girish Negi belonged — is obviously going to stir heart more than the official level. She cannot hide this truth from herself. She is just a jealous old maid in lecturing to Julie about morals; not really the responsible official she is acting as, she knows in her heart of hearts.

The letter is a cruel reminder and mocking evidence of the things that she has lost forever, and which the girl want to have. Right under that pine tree off the window at which Julie stood now, dumb with fear at her wrath, she and Girish had played their silly but precious, meaningful games of people in love. Similar games like these will mature into sustaining realities for this girl, not break midway as they had for her.

A strong wave of self-hatred sweeps over her. If she wanted to, she could overlook the impropriety of the letter. In a sporting, tolerant, spirit she could let Julie have the letter and the pleasure of reading it.

But she is unable to muster that kind of large-heartedness. She has to muster if she is to come out of the prison house of her past. She does attain the large-heartedness one day. The events causing it are not directly related to the letter as we learn from the story. The events, however, set off a desire in her to unlock the doors of her self-made prison. Walking back to her room, dizzy with the new line of thinking that has come up in her, she slips the letter under Julie’s pillow as she lies sleeping.

That act of surrender and restoration makes concrete the freedom as yet only envisaged by her. Her act of restoration is the climax of the story. But the spirit of self-questioning and self-doubt underlying that act is shown at work all along in the story.

Latika cannot help her bouts of self-doubt. For the memory of Girish Negi, the man she’d loved and would have married, is getting faint in her mind. It can be totally gone some day. And the prospect frightens her. Her memories have become too necessary for her survival. If they go, how would she survive? The void would swallow her! On the one hand is this fear that is distant and yet looming. On the other, is the, as yet, living memory of Negi she carries within her, despite its slowing pulse. Caught between the two fears Latika sways from her dominant mood of withdrawal to fits of wild outpourings of speech.

3.6.2.7 The Role of Hubert

The immediate spur for these charged vocal interludes of Latika is mostly Hubert. They do not arise fully from the give and take of conversation. Her vivacity has its roots in the revelling deep in her heart that Hubert finds her desirable. It is a revelling without vanity, without the sense of conquest that a woman can have at receiving the full load of a man’s attentions. There’s a touch of gratefulness in Latika’s revelling. Hubert’s attentions come as to her as an affirmation of her womanhood. She is mortally afraid of losing it. Is she becoming like Miss Wood, ‘toothless, hollow-cheeked … bags of flesh under her eyes?’ Hubert’s attentions, the letter he has written to her — all these assure her that she’s not going Miss Wood’s way, at least not yet. Also, these assurances do not clash with her feelings for Girish Negi. In the first place
she's not romantically inclined towards Hubert at all. Besides, there are other, deeper differences that put the two in distinct, un-interchangeable positions. Girish brought her to life as Latika, gave her birth as a special, unique being, so to say. Hubert affirms her being as a woman. His letter makes her see herself as part and participant in the stream of life.

This deep, inner poise comes to her at a psychologically critical stage as we saw in the preceding paragraph. Re-inforced thus, re-invigorated by this knowledge about herself she is a different person in her interludes with Hubert. A bounce comes into her behaviour. She takes the initiative in the conversations during their walk back to the school after the church service. Each time Hubert clears a way for her through the pine leaves with his walking stick, she looks at him openly, almost without reserve, seeing him with informality as a sweet, dependable companion. All this is very different from the droopy, phantom figure she is for the most part.

Hubert, thus, is the life affirming character that pulls Latika out of her stand-still state, sets her in motion. Of course, Dr Mukherjee too plays a role in unfreezing Latika. But he is more a father figure to her. His words of advice stir her cerebrally, on the level of reason. What she needs, however, are strong emotional pushes that jolt her into animation. Hubert gives these emotional shake-ups. He doesn’t do this consciously, as we saw in our consideration, in the preceding paragraph, of the effects of his letter on her. But he has an emotion-based approach to the kind of existential questions that haunt her. She is asking without being able to put it into words: what is the place of death in life? Hubert has an answer, and he gives it through music. In a piece of music, he says, each note fades out of hearing. But in the process of fading out it "bequeathes the remnants of its cadences to the coming notes. It dies but is not destroyed, therefore alive even in death, fusing with the other notes". There’s something very tactile in that description. You feel you are touching vital nerves in the raw matter of life and death. This raw, flesh and blood quality breaks through in practically all of Hubert’s words and actions. It is not, as we said, deliberate on his part. It is just a certain chemistry of personality he has, a chemistry that affects Latika in the way she has to be affected.

3.6.2.8 The Importance of Hubert and Mukherjee in Birds

*Birds* is the story of Latika. It is the story of the restoration of her broken personality. And to tell it Nirmal Verma utilises the axiom that the human personality — broken or whole — needs the head and the heart both to stay balanced and in working order. The question thus is, who and where are the head and heart of the story.

From our analysis so far, Hubert emerges as the heart and Mukherjee the head. Mukherjee is the crisis manager, the man level headed and in control of his faculties in the foreboding atmosphere that prevails in the small hill town. This atmosphere with an undercurrent of dread is important not only in the build up and growth of the story but also as the setting and habitat for giving full play to the character traits of both the men. These traits, as we are maintaining, are what give the story its final shape. Let us, therefore, consider and recapitulate the atmosphere of *Birds* in some depth.

There is, firstly, the idea of impermanence that has been worked into the fabric of the story. All the three major characters — Latika, Mukherjee and Hubert — are uprooted people. Mukherjee is a refugee from Burma. Latika
seems to have been washed up to the town after some happenings in Delhi she vaguely hints at. And Hubert seems to be a man of no nationality. You could call him non-Indian, even non-Asian, but nothing more specific than that. Latika is also uprooted.

Added to this are, firstly, the ever-present sense of a see-saw motion in the forest, as we noted in the section on the title of the story. Secondly there is the stumble and flurry of vacation time in the school. The idea of impermanence, of transience, of the temporariness of things, and the sense of dread all this can foster in the minds of the characters becomes easy to understand. They have to live with it, cope with it, like learning the art of navigating a particular twist in a current of water.

Mukherjee is the only one who has mastered this art and has developed from it a system of thought, a technique of living. ‘Flow with the current’, he tells Latika in various ways, time and again. ‘Ride the current, go where it takes you. Don’t look back’.

Hubert, on the other hand, thinks that by heeding and acknowledging the natural emotions and intensities of the mind the dread can be foiled. The love of man and woman is one such emotion that can falsify the dread.

Latika, of course, is just not in the state of mind to go along with this. But she is sensitive to the beauty of laughing at danger that Hubert’s thinking and approach signify. She sees this beauty when Hubert lies before her one day, collapsed under the combined weights of the pain of her rejection of him, his own none too good health, and the weight of the whiskey he’s drunk to forget the other two pains.

His young, collapsed body is a moving sight. Is this what the human body is, she speculates. Is it just a bag of sand, so solid to the eye, and so collapsible like a bag of sand?

The sadness of it and the poetic beauty of the sadness overcome her. And from its swirls rings the voice of Mukherjee in her ears. ‘Flow with the current. Go where it goes’. Emotion and reason fuse in her. She comes unstuck from her past. She wakes to the folly of preserving memories, the folly of forgetting the perishability of the body — the perishability of everything, in fact.

Both Hubert and Mukherjee, thus, play a role in this maturing of Latika.

3.6.3 Some Points on the Narrative Technique of Birds

The narrative technique of Birds is strictly the kind in which the writer remains a detached, neutral observer of his characters. It is a third person voice that we hear throughout, a voice that is impersonal, yet can evoke and enter the vocal timbres of the characters.

We hear the dry humour and drawl of Mukherjee’s voice when he says, “I sometimes wonder why human beings live, don’t they have anything better to do?” And we hear the loud, hoisting yawn he gives in the church and cries, “When will this business end?” (55)

We hear the halting, apologetic tone of Hubert’s voice when he asks Latika to return to him the letter he’d written to her without knowing about her
bereavement. ‘Please consider it unwritten’, he says in, what we feel, is a hushed tone. This same hushed muted tone goes berserk, turns torrential when he collapses under the weight of his own emotional pressures, and breaks out into drunken singing. Then we hear the din and commotion of that voice gone out of control.

And Latika’s soft but clearly enunciated voice we hear throughout the story. Her voice too breaks its bounds and rises at climactic points. “Many years ago I went to Delhi. Mr Hubert. I was very young then — I don’t know how many years ago it was. I have lost count of the years ...” she bursts into a cascade of speech, and we hear its breathless rush forward.

Apart from the sounds of human voices, the sounds of trees, the wind, flowing water and innumerable natural phenomena are also worked into the texture of the story. A very aural quality pervades it. Even silence has sound. “The silence of the jungle is never voiceless. Sounds and voices, like dreams in deep sleep, keep fluttering the light gossamer curtain of stillness …”, the text says at one point.

The objective stance that is the hallmark of a third person narrative has been carried in the story to the finest degree possible, till the author’s voice merges with every living object, human and non-human. It is a tapestry of sound and voice that we experience. So unbiased and without preference, so utterly democratic is this entry of the author, one by one and turn by turn, into the vocal system of his characters, that we cannot decide whose perspective and vision he is upholding. Some kind of a division of authorial loyalties is usually discernible in works of fiction. Some characters are upheld, others are not. The nature of this division describes and categorizes the book.

But here, in *Birds* and in Nirimal Verma’s fiction generally, no character is run down or disapproved of, no bad guy ever figures in his work.

In a way Mukherjee is cast as the man of the right, feasible outlook. But Mukherjee is a theoretician for the most part. For his theories to become part of living, as they do, finally, inputs from Latika and Hubert are also needed. Mukherjee does not emerge as the sole spokesman of his theories, at the end of it all.

What stays in the mind after the final scene of Latika moving off, restoring the letter to its owner, is the mountain setting. We see the steady, demanding gaze of a mountain god, whose inner and outer forms both are projected by the mountain setting. If human beings stray into this setting, an underlying statement of *Birds* seems to be, they cannot but develop the kind of level-headed, ad hoc living that Mukherjee has formulated. But how and why do they stray into the setting? A higher force determines the course of human life, *Birds* says in effect. And the third person narrative method adopted by the author culminates in that statement.

3.7 GLOSSARY

**Pictogram:** A drawing of an image or images carrying a meaning. As in dance, where the gestures of the dancer convey an everyday meaning. Pictograms were resorted to before the formation of regular scripts.
Choreography:
The composition of the steps and body movements present in a dance. In this story the dance is a product of the imagination. The author sees the flight of the birds and Latika's swings of mood as two forms of dance, each reflecting the other.

After-sounds:
The echoes of sounds made by speech or objects which stay or go up in the ear even after the sounds have ceased.

3.8 QUESTIONS

1. Would you call Latika (a) strong (b) weak (c) a mixture of both? Elaborate your answer.

2. Memory plays an important role in Birds. Write a short essay of around 400 to 500 words bringing out its importance.

   Or

   Compare and contrast Latika's and Dr. Mukherjee’s respective ways of dealing with their memories.

3. Write short notes of 150 words each on (a) the setting of the story.
   (b) The effect on Latika of the music in the church.

4. Do you think Birds is an apt title for the story? Give reasons for your answer.

5. Hubert is instrumental in weaning Latika from her memories. In around 300 to 400 words explain how.

6. Re-create and highlight in your own words, the scene where Latika tucks in under Julie's pillow the letter she had withheld from the girl the day before. You may start from the point (or whatever point you think right) where she goes towards the girls rooms after saying good night to Dr. Mukherjee.

7. Dr. Mukherjee is a mature, philosophical man. In around 250 words give an account of these aspects of his character and personality.

8. Do you think Birds ends on a happy note?

3.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

Books by Nirmal Verma

Short Story Collection


Short Story Collections in English Translation

Such a Big Yearning and other Stories. New Delhi. Indus. 1995

Novels


Novels in English Translation


Essays and Memoirs

Dhundh Se Uthti Dhun. Diary, Notes, Journals, Yatra Samsaran. Nayi Dilli.
Sulagti Tahnecce. (Translated as ‘The Burning Bough’ in English).

Interview


Criticism