3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we shall discuss a Bangla Short Story by Afsar Ahmed: *Headmaster, Prawn, Chanachur* in English translation by Chandana Dutta. This story aims to unfold the meaning behind the meaningless expressions and behaviour of the protagonist. The constant element of surprise arises from the fact that everyone around him is able to find meaning and beauty even as he despairs. It is hoped that after reading first the story and this unit, you will be able to appreciate the poeticness and beauty of words and expressions in the context in which the author uses them. You will also see the protagonist behind the mask or persona of madness and how his expression and behaviour is a strategy for survival in the upheavals in society. You will also appreciate the element of drama in indirect discourse in a short story besides the cohesiveness that verse imparts binding the disparate events and characters together.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the second Bangla Short story we are taking up for discussion, the earlier one being salt, Block-4, Unit 1 by Mahasweta Devi. I suggest that once again you read the survey on Bangla Short-story before coming to this unit to acquaint you of the creative florescence of this genre in Bangla language.

From the 1950s to the 70's the short-story acquired greater formal sophistication in terms of both craft & content of fiction.
It was during this period that disenchanted with the administration creating a mood of alienation, frustration and pessimism struck the youth leading to introverted protagonists. Afsar Ahmed belongs to such writers along with Debes Ray, Mati Nandi, Shyamal Gangopadhyay, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Kabita Sinha, Syed Mustafa Siraj and others. Mahasweta Devi in her preface to Bashai Tuda accuses the writers for “an atrophy of conscience”. In a country bedevilled with so many problems — social injustice, communal discord and evil customs, a conscientious writer has to take a firm stand in defiance of the exploited. Afsar Ahmed apparently is voicing his concerns by a conscious coating of the irrational, counter-provoking behaviour in the wake of provoking incidents. In the course of our discussion we shall touch upon various aspect of the protagonist’s stance, look at the dramatic and poetic elements in the story and finally how his madness is thwarted and he is forced to defeat his own purpose.

3.2 AFSAR AHMED: AN INTRODUCTION


3.3 INTRODUCING THE STORY

The title of the story in Bengali Arrthaheen Katha Balar Nirbharta literally means to be dependent on the meaningless words. The translator obviously felt that the title chosen by her recur in the story and capture the essential meaningless, poetry and the lyrical quality in the story.
The story H.P. Chanachur is perhaps unlike any other story that you have read. Arupda, and his perception of life there is no cohesive plots, though there are incidents in it and the story concerns.

The story is about Arupda's response to the incidents that happen around him and his perception of life in general. There is no cohesive plot, though there are incidents in it. You will come across quite a few references to death violence such as suicides, drownings, rapes, dacoity, murders and police atrocities. All these incidents about which you shall read in details in the following sections, colour Arupda's perception and imagination.

3.4 ANALYSIS

The story..... Headmaster, Prawn, Chanachur was first published in Bangla as Arthaheer Katha Balar Nirbharata” in Baromas in September 1998, Calcutta and translated by Chandana Dutta for Katha. The English translation was published in KATHA PRIZE STORIES VOLUME 9 IN 2000.

Chandana Dutta has a doctoral degree in English Literature from JNU. She has taught in colleges in DU and Bhutan. She headed the editorial department at Katha Vilasam. This is her first attempt at translation. According to her “to convey exactly what the writer wishes to, and yet keep the translated version readable, was like walking a tightrope.

3.4.1 The Narrative

You are I am sure accustomed to narration in the third person and in the past tense. But here we have a first person narration — (Do you not think that first person narration) — Arupda the protagonist, is not only the first person narrator of the story but also the focaliser — that is to say that we see things through his eyes.

Since he is both sane and pretending to be mad we hear two voices in the story. We are normally used to a verbal mode of communication but here we have non-verbal communication, through gestures, silences, pauses, evasive behaviour. So as you read this story, be alert to these different modes of communication.

Do you think that the use of the first person narration makes the story more effective? In what ways the same voice come through to us? Does it add to the sense of immediacy and urgency to the story?

3.4.2 Framework of Madness

On the face of it you can call this story to stay of a man called Arupda pretending to be mad. This appearance of the madness which he wears / effects is his shield — a kind of defiance against the social decadence and violence that he sees around him. In other words he is shying away from the erosion of the social fabric or ground realities of the day.
Founding a story on pretensions of madness is not a new theme/practice in the history of literature. We do have precedents in Shakespeare’s ‘Hamlet’ and ‘King Lear’. “Hamlet’s madness has a method in’t” says Polonius. Hamlet’s plan to act mad is a pretense so he can get away with saying and doing things that would not ordinarily be tolerated. When Polonius is sent by Claudius, the King who has slain Hamlet’s father and married his mother Gertrude to find out about Hamlet’s disposition, he uses madness as a cover to ridicule Polonius.

Polonius: Do you know me, my Lord?
Hamlet: Excellent well, you are a fishmonger.
Polonius: Not I, my Lord.
Hamlet: Then I would you were so honest a man.
Polonius: Honest my Lord?
Hamlet: Ay, Sir, to be honest as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.
Polonius: That’s very true my Lord.
Hamlet: For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, Being a good kissing carrion. Have you a daughter?
Polonius: I have, my Lord.
Hamlet: Let her not walk in th’ sun. Conception is a blessing, but not as your daughter can conceive. Friend look to it.

Hamlet acts mad to serve a motive, i.e. to get closer to Claudius so he could take his revenge for his father’s murder.

The Fool in King Lear, another of Shakespeare’s great tragedies acts as the only person with wisdom and insight. He is Lear’s jester but “not altogether a fool”. Lear’s foolishness in dividing his kingdom among his daughters based on their statements of love for him furnished Lear’s fool with many points of philosophical recriminations.

Fathers that wear rags
Do make their children blind,
But fathers that bear bags.
Shall see their children kind.
Fortune, that arrant whore,
Ne’er turns the key to th’ poor....

There is some similarity between the fool providing humour in the play by parodying its serious theme and Arupda in the story indulging in a spurt of poetic utterances realizing fully the collapse of values that typify the present times.

Another way of looking at the story is that it is a story of defeat because the of madness that he puts up all the time has a complete opposite effect. It is either found amusing to the policeman or is transformed in an effortless manner by his wife as another variety of everyday reality. So this weapon of madness goes blunt and in the end we see he and his wife having an exchange where he admits his defeat.

She says “Why are you going”?
He says “Because I am not able to do anything” (this sentence sums up all his sense of frustration and defeat)
She says “when will you return”? He says “I will be back”.

“I will be back soon because I will not be able to do anything. And then I will go along”.

In these four or five lines of dialogues his total defeat is expressed. And it comes clinching in the last paragraph.

“I go down the stairs. But at the bottom right in front of me, I find another flight of steps. Climbing up the new staircase. I find myself at the door of my bedroom. A funny way to return to base, I think, feeling my senses come alive”.

It is a complete rounding off of the entire exercise of his: of escaping reality and being defeated by reality at the end. Reality get the better of him. Reality wins. So, we can say that the story depicts the ruthlessness with which reality wins every time in life.

Do you think that all the incidents have been framed by the writer within this broad framework? Let us take a look at them one by one:

### 3.4.3 Major Incidents

Arupda, the protagonist makes a pointed statement at the very beginning of the story that sets our expectancy ignited: “I am forced to weave together meaningless activity and thought, and have reached a point where there is no other way out. My body, its numerous parts, strike different meaningless poses, constantly. I lose myself in never-ending meaninglessness, seeking refuge in it”. This way, Arupda, accounts for his behaviour both verbal and non-verbal. We are also made to understand that his so called staged, absurd behaviour is not questioned by his wife, daughter, colleagues and neighbours. What does this show? Do you think that people around him understand his occasional odd behaviour and therefore indulge him? Or is it something different?

To substantiate his statement he cites an incident that is taking place in the present in the story. His wife Pramita and daughter Tinni arrive home from Tinni’s school and ring the door bell. But, instead of opening or asking them to push open the door and enter in, he lets them think that he is busy with some work and therefore taking time to open the latch of the door. He has in the first place never bolted. The door after they left. He had also seen Tinni and Pramita returning to the house from his balcony.

After they have entered the house, he greets his wife with a hello which again is a pretense but which Pramita takes as real. She retorts “don’t be stupid” She has other things on her mind. She throws her concerns at him “Uff, once again today they could not rescue the child from the manhole”. Arupda, not acknowledging her talk returns to the door and pretends to latch an already latched door. Pramita is astonished to know that the door was never latched by him and that he was pretending. When she questions him, Arupda is roused and his mind gets filled with a flood of images. He blurts out thus:
One night
rain
a lot of rain
the juice-filled fruits are dry
birds fly, their feet pointing downward, their spines ramrod
water crocodiles collect the colour blue at the root of the
banyan
tree as they yawn
the water-borne moss against the mountain face flaps its wings
and chaffs its knees
oh! My poor birds, don’t go into the water, float away like the
clouds
Snake-like evening
ink-filled night
naked breeze
all these in our rooms
pit caves, tar flies, children’s lessons
meetings with a mermaid have not yet happened.

Pramita, it must be noted, unruffled by Arupda’s deliberate inchoate
utterances believes in establishing linkages between Arupda’s responses and
her own thoughts. She says to Arupda “Hah! I think I remember your saying
one rain filled night some one had fallen into the manhole. What a country.
What a city, the height of being unsafe”.

Look at the following conservation between the couple which establishes their
friendliness and mutual trust inspite of all odds.

Pramita: “I am afraid of letting Tinni come back from school by
herself”.
Arupda: “It is something to be afraid of “.
Pramita: “Are you never afraid?”
Arupda: “Of course, I am” Headmaster, Prawn, Chanachur.
Pramita: “Murders have gone up in the city, so have rapes”.
Arupda: ……headmaster, prawn, Chanachur.
Pramita: “The budget session is approaching. Who knows what madness
the ministers will indulge in this time”.
Arupda: ……headmaster, prawn, chanachur.

The story itches forward by Pramits’s terrified utterances, quizzing him on
various issues and Arupda’s helplessness at quenching her fears. Shall we list
those perplexed questions? What are they?

“You know, Rajat said the other day, there is a price for everything. Nothing
happens anymore without a bribe”.

“Where ever there is someone responsible for some work, they are waiting
with their hoods raised to take a bribe”.

“You are absolutely correct. Otherwise, how can they buy hilsas worth more
than two or three hundred rupees”.

Besides the child falling into a manhole incident, Pramita recalls two dacoitie
in the colony and the police flushing out a headless body of a youth from a
canal. The gruesome macabre incidents keeps coming at us. “Sometime
earlier, a young girl form the basti was abducted and gang-raped in the park nearby”. And even before that, about a month and a half ago, the police came to the S–7 flat of “theirs” to look for a young boy whose limp body hung from a ceiling fan. The boy’s name was Sanju. He was about twenty-one years old and his parents are told are practicing doctors.

In E–3, Arupda tells us nine days before Sanju’s suicide a young boy who came home for two days from hostel swallowed thirty sleeping pills and died. Arupda’s response to these unfortunate incidents is not in the form of explanations, wonders, quizzing questions but meaningless thoughtfulness — “No meetings with a mermaid happened”. This line occurs several times in the story. Why do you think Arupda’s response come in this way?

Now, read Sanju’s suicide incident carefully to see for yourself the apathy of the police. One that the police had heard S–7 instead of N–7, just two blocks away. To probe the suicide case in S–7 flat which is Arupda’s house the police stumps in to see the corpse. Pramita resorts to self defences by trying to explain the mistake of the officer in noting down wrong house number, Arupda on the contrary uses his meaninglessness to provide police “with all the evidence of a suicide in my bedroom”. He even daydreams imagining his lifeless body hanging from the ceiling fan of his bedroom.

The dialogue between Arupda and the police characterizes the usual apathy on the part of police to probe crimes and Arupda’s usual manner of evading replies by talking out of context till the police leave. (Can you recall any encounter you have had with the police or one that you have heard of on similar lines?)

Another funny incident in the story is Arupda’s purchasing a phone and getting it installed in the house N–7 where the boy had committed suicide. The parents of the boy are made to understand that the phone was ordered by the boy before his death. The phone we are told “coos like a bird at N–7 and showers consolations from relations and well-wishers, pours requiems for the dearly departed. Arupda revels in the fact that the phone is making consolatory noises to Sanju’s parents”.

Standing in the dark balcony of my flat I hear the cooing of this bird. Whenever I wish to sleep restfully in my bed, it echoes strangely in my ears. During the day sometimes, I stand on the tarmac below N–block so that I can hear my bird trill every time a call comes through. The phone instrument which could have been mine, had I so much as reached out for it, is now in the room of a recently dead youth. His parents have embraced this falsity as being so deeply true that I don’t stand any chance of introducing myself as the rightful owner now. I have no existence there.

Arupda’s stage managed death is not without significance. He wants his madness to explode in an arresting manner. He even stages an imaginary event of his death. The message of his own fake death is somehow conveyed. We are not told how the news of his own death is conveyed to his friend but the news reaches him and Ananya goes to the wrong address given by Arupda to his friend Ananya. Ananya is made to understand that Arupda has hanged himself from the ceiling in N–7. Ananya visits the doctors, the boys parents,
mistaking for Arupda’s parents, grieving, consoling, shouldering the walls of the boy’s parents. Ananya later coming out from N–7 passing by Arupda’s balcony sees him with a newspaper in his hand. Obviously, Ananya is shocked, a dialogue ensues and to each of his perplexed questions, Arupda replies in three words. Headmaster, prawn, chanachur. But when he talks to his wife later he gives an all together different version of it. He says that he gave a resounding Rick at his back for going to a wrong address. How do you think one can be so frivolous to convey the new of his fake death to a friend of his what does it tell you about the state of this or consciousness?

It is interesting to note that Arupda does not want to die. Rather he wants to live. He says that Ananya could never comprehend his desperation to live alive. Having heard of incidents of death, he wanted to experience his own annihilation, eclipse by himself to the brink of things at the edge of the abyss. He wants to die without losing consciousness. It is there in all the mythologies when you dream your death or experience near-death experiences. Thus death, its aftermath dovetail all the incidents in the story.

3.4.4 Madness Missing its Mark

The story goes on like this with Arupda acting mad and Pramita’s interludes of laughter making sense of his meaningless words, activity and thoughts. There also ensues a normal dialogue between them.

“But suppose that policeman returns and rings the bell on such a night?

Then he will go back laughing deliriously as if somebody has tickled him, when I utter a few of these words”.

He, as if, withdraws back into his meaninglessness when he tells her that it was a mistake to stop talking in his usual way. At one point of time he tells Pramita:

“I am trying to say something without saying anything”.

The all seeing, all understanding being emerges as the dominant consciousness in his aggressive pursuit of madness. We have related the facts that drive him to madness. He is, therefore, a very sane man but in a state of hopelessness.

The opening sentences we mentioned earlier are not the speech of a madman look at the tone of these sentences. “I must live with them without solutions” is a very sane voice, not madness, “I loose myself in never ending madness”. The question before us is — up to what extent does the tactics of madness adopted by Arupda help serve his purpose? (which is that of escaping bleak realities around him).

The answer to this is: one that nobody finds his affected insanity irrational, frightening or threatening. An instance in case is the rain dance. Unknown to Pramita he enacts a mad dance.

“I pull faces and dance mockingly, brazenly, behind her back. I think about the result of my dancing and my gestures. If only there would be rain. No, there is no rain anywhere, there is no ocean anywhere, there are no trees anywhere, there is no earth anywhere, only this taunting dance as I kick my feet high in the air theee is no rain anywhere, there are no torrents anywhere at all. (If you have read Ibsen’s Play A Doll’s House, you will recall that Nora’s
tarentalla (spider dance) in fear of her lie being detected by her husband is an act of her absolute helplessness in controlling the situation). At that point he is interrupted by his wife:

You know, Rajat said the other day............and so forth.

Think of other ways in which his mad act simply misses the point or goes wide off the mark?

Read the scene between the policeman and him. The policeman asks his vocation........

*Arupda* “I blow things out of proportion”

Very soon you realize that the encounter between *Arupda* and the police does not remain at the level of comedy alone. The policeman keeps coming. Gradually it becomes threatening and terrifying. *Arupda* cannot take it anymore. He lapses from insanity to sanity, there is a change of tone. The policeman says that he wants to see his bedroom where he sleeps. This is clearly an invasion of his privacy. He begins to admire the colour of his walls, his beautiful wife and daughter. *Arupda* becomes even with the policeman like any sane, enraged, outraged man would. Then the policeman becomes a little normal.

*Arupda:* “There is vulture shit on your head”.

*Policeman:* “Every now and then I have to go to the morgue. I have put vultures close to the morgue. It must be their shit”. He bursts into laughter. “Fact is not all corpses in the morgue can be disposed off properly, we also do not always hand over the corpses to the next of kin”.

*Arupda:* How do you live with dried bird shit on your head?

*Policeman:* Oh, my dear sir, we too are types of vulture”.

*Arupda:* Are we?

*Policeman:* Are you scared?

*Arupda:* “Why don’t you take a cigarette? It makes you look a little human”.

This is a cheeky play with the police.

*Arupda:* “What is stopping you from flashing the child out of the manhole?

(We see that *Arupda* has not forgotten the incident of child falling in the manhole).

We must understand that he is a consciously split personality and there is a piquancy, a tantalizing aspect of his verbal madness. One does not want to give it up — rather one wants to read the lines again and again. His tragedy ties in this that he no longer is able to play a madman.

### 3.4.5 Love of Nature

*Arupda*’s interaction with nature does not strictly fall in the framework of madness. It is a sad and reflective man relating to natural phenomena to
escape from reality. He feasts his eyes on the red glow around the Krishnachurna tree, rather watching the tree from the balcony is his favourite pastime. This is as if there is an ideal world possibly symbolized by the tree and its red glow. The sheet of light that comes from the tree is like a screen from the ugly realities of life. His bedroom walls are covered by the same glow. In his verse there is a lot of nature, its sensuous description reminding one of Keat's poetry: juice — filled fruits, colour blue, water-borne moss, float away like the clouds, ink-filled night, mermaids, rain, ocean, torrents, trees, earth — all life supporting elements interlinked with birds, hilsas, crocodiles, mermaids and so forth. Arupda emerges as a very poetic character. (Read the poetic utterances again and again to find out the deep hidden meaning/messages). A line like "meeting with a mermaid have not yet happened", which is repeated time and again, suggests a child like craving and longing for a dream universe. While daydreaming nature he feels he has escaped "to an enchanted hill or to a lonely lake on whose cool waters bob many a road". The lotus leaves are all water-like below the waters.

3.4.6 Style

You must also appreciate the three dimensional aspect of words — literal, metaphorical and contextual all the three together combining to give the seemingly abstract, contradictory, illogical sequencing of words and statements significance and loaded meanings. (You can look up dictionary how paradoxes and oxymoron convey meaning more significantly through apparent contradictions). So, the abstract statement Arupda makes in the beginning of the story, becomes concrete, palpable, fathomable, reachable, understandable — found on optical realities.

Arupda talks of his living death "Just try to see me both alive as well as dead. May be you will get something from it". He compares his ability to survive inspite of the ordeal of survival experienced by an intelligent and a sensitive man with that of ants. He says "ants are more imaginative than the fire" What perhaps he means is that fire is characterized by extinction, it has an extinguishing quality where as ants multiply in huge numbers — even if they are destroyed.

In other words fire here perhaps suggests the overwhelming presence of destructive forces in society and ants suggest the human will to survive and go on inspite of the negative forces in life — the returning of the police again and again to Arupda’s house, Pramita’s terror of the police, Arupda’s staged act of death, Annanya episode, child and manhole incident, all other reported incidents and finally Arupda’s defeat. Also, remember that the major incidents in the story are those of crime and lawlessness. So the police and its coming and going and Arupda’s climbing up and down the stairs at the end of the story as it were is like the phoenix coming out of the ashes.

The story also has a high element of drama in it. It can be enacted. Most of the story is unfolded in the form of Arupda’s dialogues / conversation with the other characters in the story — Arupda and his wife Pramita, Arupda and the policeman and Arupda and Annanya. You are I am sure mostly accustomed to reading a story that is narrated in the past tense. The first person narration and the dramatic element in the present story provides an immediacy and an
The story is rich in literary devices too such as imagery, paradox hyperbole, personification etc. At the same time it has ingenious trills flaps etc. *imagery* — splash of red, sweat drenched, red-radish face, spines ramrod, juice filled fruits, water-borne moss, ink-filled night, glistening drops waiting to roll off, putrefying corpses (covering sense of sight, hearing, touch), *Simile* — Pramita stomps into the bedroom like a reckless, uncaring bull, float way like the clouds, snake-like evening, phone coos like a bird. The story abounds in the images related to death and destruction.

The copresence of morbid images and sensuous images gives the story a unique flavour involving us holistically. As the story frightness as also bewilders the reader it has a multi-dimensional effect.

Metaphor-red-radish face Paradox — Because they consider the untruth of my existence a living truth, these two creatures somehow continue to exist. (You must discover others from the story on your own).

Also note the element black humour i.e. humour connected with death and destruction. Can you figure out examples of black humour in the story? We can conclude by saying that the writer has adopted a powerful idiom — a mixing of genre — poetry, drama, fiction to comment on serious issues that need to be addressed.

### 3.5 THE TRANSLATOR’S NOTE

It is not easy to talk of translations that one has done. I believe that the process of translation works at multi-levels, not simply as a two-level conversion of a given piece from a source language to a target language. Each translation involves a range of details which may not ultimately be seen on paper but which nevertheless contribute to the process. The practice becomes even more complex when it involves the translation of a piece of fiction. Any such work, a short story or a longer work, actually plays with ideas unlike a non-fictional work that depends more on facts. The emotional and mental range that a story operates within is wide because it leaves much to the imagination, both of the writer and the reader, and more so when a translator is involved. A short story is a singular piece of creation, one with its quirks, its complexities, its philosophies, intact. Such a piece of work is successful when it is able to convey to its reader a large part of what its writer has tried to put into it. I deliberately use the words “large part” because I believe that every creation is open-ended, not only because every reader interprets it from his or her individual perspective but also because the writer struggles as well with his own mind and art to convey in a story all that he would like to. Therefore, to my mind, we read a story the way we are able to, perhaps not entirely as the writer intended. This gap between the processes of writing and reading is an important one. As translators it is essential that we understand this and remain alert to it on all counts.

To extend this point further, I would like to say that each effort at creating something, whether writing a story, or translating it, is also, paradoxically, a
It was a particularly difficult task working with Afsar Ahmed’s *Headmaster, Prawn, Chanachur*. I took up the story because it was gripping. And to me it expressed the predicament that most of us are in, though we either do not understand or will not acknowledge the truth of our situation. I certainly have felt myself transit through long phases of “meaninglessness”. We could, of course, interpret this word according to our own situations. This feeling grips us not only in profound ways but also in everyday, mundane moments. We may be sitting around a table, a group of friends, talking animatedly over dinner when suddenly we slump back. It hits us that we are talking a lot but do not know why. What is it that starts us on such energized conversations, to perhaps dissect the ills of the world, when we have absolutely no capacity to change the course that the universe is taking? Or when we perceive ourselves as the speck we are in this vast universe. Is our existence meaningless? Is everything around us ultimately negative and hopeless?

Perhaps, our experiences are meant to teach us that meaninglessness is part of our lives, and yet we must journey on. It is essential for us to find meaning, to be positive. To end our lives is not the answer. It is, as in the story. The stairs, though we have no clear understanding as to where they appear from, lead us back to a cocoon of familiarity, of safety and comfort. They stand for the secure, that which leads us home, something which will help us wade through the mass of meaninglessness to find, once more, the need and reason to move on. A variety of feelings are implicit in the gory mention of the young boy’s suicide. He kills himself inexplicably; his tragic end forever darkens the lives of his parents. The shadows from his life and home extend over the home and lives of the inhabitants of S–7 as well. And yet it affords some comic relief. The narrator’s acquaintance finds himself at a strange door, consoling the parents of a dead son he never knew. And, the trilling of a bird fills the house with a sound which fits poorly in a house of death. It is this jumble of emotions, of events, which make up life. And, to me, this is what the story is trying to convey.

There are some inexplicable aspects to the story. For instance, the case of the narrator’s friend; perhaps, acquaintance would be a word better suited. If he is a friend, he should know his friend’s address. So how does he mistake S–7 for N–7? Has the narrator done the impossible, called this person up to convey the news of his own death? How do we look at these instances in the plot? Do these reinforce the meaninglessness that the story is trying to convey? My advice would be that though we must interpret the details of the story, we should do so with caution and not to such an extent that it chips away at the “meaningless” core.
I see Ahmed giving us a story which speaks of the lives we lead everyday, a mix of snatches of sense, with periods of incomprehension. What makes no sense to the narrator himself, makes much sense to his wife, who reads in his incoherence a logic of her own. On the other hand, is the policeman who comprehends the narrator’s insensible grouping of words in a way that he can draw joy out of it. In between all the meaningless incantations are questions about the state, the system, democracy, the ills that plague modern society, and so on. The juxtaposition of two such variant streams of thought, perhaps, highlights what the writer understands of life. The story, in fact, makes me recall the idea of “deference”, of “slippages”, which show how meaning hides in the crevices of words and sentences, of how the true meaning is always “deferred”, something that we may attempt to reach but which always slips out of grip. The title of the story, Headmaster, Prawn, Chanachur, uses three words which are very familiar and close to the Bengali heart. Individually, they convey sense; together they become “non-sense”. Their continuous chorus through the story forces us to look for their “purpose”. We are unable to dismiss them or their relevance. The narrator himself vacillates between periods of no-sense and phases of lucidity. After all, he does not have the complete luxury of slipping into “meaninglessness”; the world awaits him — in the form of his wife, his daughter, the policeman, the friend.

To me, the story plays very interestingly with certain everyday ideas that we don’t normally think about. When the narrator’s wife and daughter return home, they continue to ring the bell. But it does not occur to them that the door may be unlatched and a small push will open it. To them, the certainty that doors are meant to be latched is more valid than the effort needed to give the matter fresh thought. On the other side, the narrator, aware that he has left the door open, is amazed that the situation does not appear different to anyone but himself. In fact, when he strings random words together, he knows that they mean nothing. But his wife reads situations and excuses in what he says. If we think carefully, this is normal behaviour for most of us. The spirit of positive questioning is sometimes missing from us. We accept unthinkingly. Perhaps, to Ahmed, this is “meaninglessness”.

To me, such a story is ultimately a reader’s story. Each of us will understand it as our situation and perspective permits. To some, and I think back to discussions I’ve had on the story, the challenge is to dissect each word to unearth exactly what the writer is trying to say. I have nothing against such an attempt. Personally, however, I would like to allow the story to seep into my being, without becoming overly burdened by each little bit in it. I wish to understand my own world, as well as the one around me, as I think Ahmed would like us to. One that is riddled with problems, one that is imperfect, one that makes no sense at times, and yet one that helps us to live and be who we are.

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3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have discussed a story which has a powerful idiom. It has different genres jostle with each other to depict the intelligent rationality of a seemingly unintelligible man taking recourse to meaningless expressions and mad behaviour. We fathom out reasons for the narrator’s counter provoking behaviour and see the reasons behind his consciously staged split madness. What is paradoxical about the story is that madness is a weapon of sanity for up keeping one’s bearings in the wake of upheavals in society. We have also seen the three dimensional effect of words when used in particular contexts. Lastly, we have also seen that a short story need not contain itself by strict modalities of plot character and theme. A writer if he so chooses can work out various possibilities within the genre as is unfolded by the story Headmaster. Prawn, Chanachur. The story frightens and bewilders us even as it enchants us. It obviously has a multidimensional effect on us.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the persona of Arupda.
2. What are the reasons that provoke the narrator to take recourse to seemingly mad behaviour?
3. How do people surrounding Arupda react to his insanity?
4. How does Arupda’s insanity get thwarted?
5. What is the role of the police in the story?
6. What event in the story leads you to think that that was the height of Arupda’s stage-act of insanity?
7. In what way is the verse in the story utterly poetic?
8. Discuss the character of Pramita.
9. Do Arupda and Pramita present a picture of harmony or are they discordant?
10. What lend humor to the story?
11. Write the story from Pramita’s point of view or Tinni’s point of view.