If You Sing like That for Me Study Guide

If You Sing like That for Me by Akhil Sharma

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"If You Sing like That for Me," a short story by the young Indian American writer Akhil Sharma, first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in May, 1995, when Sharma was just 24 years old. It was featured in *The Best American Short Stories of 1996* and was awarded an O. Henry award that same year, marking Sharma as a young writer to watch.

Told in the first person by Anita, a young Hindu woman living in the suburban areas of New Delhi between 1966 and 1977, during the time when Indira Gandhi was prime minister, it is a story that explores the rather classic theme of the evolution of a character from a naive idealist to a realist. Anita's family arranges for her to marry Rajinder, a young banker from a family of farmers. Anita is secretly opposed to the marriage, but nevertheless, simply because she cannot think of a valid reason not to, she accepts. The story chronicles Anita's initial feeling of panic at being married to a stranger, her feelings of jealousy towards her younger, more ambitious sister, and the conditional love she and her parents reciprocate□a relationship that is characterized by artificiality and resentment, ultimately affecting Anita's fundamental ability to love herself.

As time goes by, Anita's anxiety and terror at the thought of her marriage subsides, and she slowly learns to accept Rajinder, until suddenly, one evening, she awakens to both an oncoming monsoon and an overwhelming feeling of being in love. However, when she attempts to act on this feeling of love she realizes, through Rajinder's pragmatic and stoic reaction to her, that her idea of love is based on artificiality and idealism and does not reflect the reality of her life.

Author Biography

Akhil Sharma was born in 1972 in New Delhi, India. Subsequently, he moved with his family to Edison, New Jersey, where he grew up. His parents spoke Hindi exclusively while at home, and Sharma visited India every other summer during his childhood and adolescence. His strong ties to India and familiarity with the common culture provides the basis for his authentic portrayals of the details of everyday life in India that characterize his works.

As a child, Sharma enjoyed writing and attempted to emulate the style of the science fiction writers he admired. He attended Princeton University where he received a bachelor of arts degree in public policy, but he did not abandon his love of writing and went on to study creative writing under such luminaries as Toni Morrison, Tony Kushner, Russell Banks, and John McPhee. He spent one year as a Wallace Stegner Fellow in creative writing at Stanford, and worked briefly in Hollywood as a screenplay writer. He went on to graduate from Harvard Law School.

Sharma has developed a reputation as one of the most promising up-and-coming writers in the United States. His first published story, "If You Sing like That for Me," appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in May 1995, just as he was entering Harvard Law School. It was subsequently published in *The Best American Short Stories of 1996*, and received the prestigious Second Place O. Henry Award in 1998. Since then, he has had several stories published in both *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*.

After law school, Sharma went on to work as an investment banker. In 2000, at the age of 29, Sharma debuted his first novel, *An Obedient Father*, which he wrote between his long work hours. An excerpt of the novel was published in the June, 2000 issue of *The New Yorker*; it generated a fair amount of outcry and controversy for its frank depiction of incest between the main character and his young daughter. Nevertheless, the novel was released to widespread critical acclaim. It was named a *New York Times* Notable Book for 2000. Sharma himself won *The Voice Literary Supplement*'s Year 2000 "Writers on the Verge" prize. He also received the Hemingway/PEN New England Award in 2001 for his novel.

In January 2004, W.W. Norton announced that they would publish Sharma's next novel, tentatively titled *Mother and Son*. This novel is based on his previous New Yorker short story, "Surrounded by Sleep."

Plot Summary

The story opens with a scene that will also close the story: Anita, the narrator, awakens from a short sleep to find herself, for the first time and the last time, deeply in love with her husband. The narrative voice, which is placed 30 years after this moment, proceeds to relate the events leading up to this pivotal instance of intense emotion.

The story flashes back to seven months before that moment, two days after Anita and Rajinder are married. They are moving into a small flat in Defense Colony, a community outside of New Delhi. Anita feels terror and anxiety at being married to Rajinder, a small, slightly overweight man whom she barely knows. However, her anxiety is also coupled with the compulsion she feels, as an obedient wife, to be pleasing to him, even though she knows she is not physically attractive. Anita's sharp sense of inadequacy and guiltiness pervades the narrator's tone throughout the story.

As the furniture is moved into the new flat□which Rajinder selected himself□the only thing that gives Anita a sense of happiness or relief is the sight of the mattress because it represents sleep, and with sleep, her dreams. Throughout the story, sleep and dreams will remain the only thing that Anita looks forward to.

Anita and Rajinder are formal with each other, and Anita does not often speak. Over dinner, she gathers the courage to say she admires the prime minister Indira Gandhi, only to have her courage squelched by Rajinder's brother Ashok, who ridicules her opinion.

The story flashes back to three months before the wedding, during the matchmaking session between Anita's family and Rajinder's family at a restaurant. Ashok, Rajinder, and their widowed mother are present; Anita is present with her mother and her father, whom she calls Pitaji. Conversation between the two parties is stilted at best, and Rajinder and Anita do not speak at all. Rajinder's mother reveals that he is a banker and, with a master of arts degree, the most educated member of their family. Anita's mother, with characteristic unthinking cruelty, says that Anita was too lazy to get an education beyond her bachelor of arts degree, but her little sister Asha is obtaining her doctorate. Anita's feelings are hurt, but she indicates that it was normal for her mother to treat her that way.

Anita is not impressed by Rajinder's appearance and does not necessarily have the desire to get married. However, she does not express her feelings, expecting that the match with Rajinder will not go through.

Before leaving, Anita summons the courage to ask Rajinder if he enjoys movies. She asserts herself by saying she likes them "very much."

Two days later, Anita agrees to marry Rajinder even though she does not want to. She still believes that something will happen to sabotage their plans. She persists in this denial until the day of the engagement ceremony which she, as tradition dictates, does

not attend. As her sister, Asha, relates the details of the ceremony between Pitaji and Rajinder, Anita, feeling disconnected and shocked, realizes that she is truly going to marry Rajinder. She grows sadder at the realization that she will stay in India and grow old, while the more ambitious Asha will complete her Ph.D. and go to the United States.

On their wedding night, when the new couple receives blessings from their parents, Pitaji whispers "I love you" to Anita, in English. The use of English sets off a series of sad memories for Anita: she remembers how, when she was young, Pitaji would come home drunk. After receiving a sharp rebuke from his wife, he would hold Anita and cry, telling her in English that she was the only one who loved him. Anita would feel sad and distrustful at the same time, not knowing if his tears were a farce.

Ma would then tell the girls in language that was as theatrical as Pitjai's tears how Pitaji refused to come home while their youngest brother, Baby, was ill; and when Baby died, she did not bother to telegraph him. This flashback for Anita reveals not only the source of hatred between her parents, but the damaged version of love that she was exposed to as a child, characterized by manipulation and deceit.

The narration continues on with the wedding night. Anita repeatedly imagines telling Rajinder that she has made a mistake in marrying him, up until the moment they awkwardly make love. Making love with Rajinder remains a chore to Anita through the coming months. Through the completion of the winter and into the spring months, she slowly becomes used to being married to Rajinder, whom she finds "thoughtful and generous." She would spend her time during the hot, drought-ridden summer attending to household chores, bathing, and escaping to the world of her dreams during her much-anticipated afternoon naps. She would pretend that the monsoon was coming because "the smell of the wet earth and the sound of the rain have always made me feel as if I have been waiting for someone all my life."

Two weeks before the coming of the monsoon, Pitaji suffers a heart attack. As Asha and Anita ride to the hospital together, Asha speaks frankly of her abhorrence of her father, a severely obese, lifelong alcoholic who mistreated their mother. Anita is shocked and awed at her ability to be so frank and feels ashamed of her own sentimental feelings. Anita, Asha, and her mother take turns staying with Pitaji at the hospital over the next two weeks. Pitaji tells Anita stories about his childhood, and Anita began feeling tender towards him, but remained ever distrustful. He sobs to Anita at the thought that his wife cannot forgive him for Baby's death. Still, Anita does not trust him. "Something about the story was both awkward and polished, which indicated deceit. But Pitaji never lied completely, and the tiring part was not knowing."

When Anita returns to her flat two weeks later she falls asleep, only to be awakened not only by the coming monsoon, but by a sudden, intense feeling of being completely in love with her husband. She prepares for Rajinder to come home and anxiously plans her approach to him.

When Rajinder comes home, although Anita is overcome by the new feeling of being in love, they go about their evening routine of a meal and listening to the radio. However,

as the evening wears on and the monsoon begins its entrance to the city, Anita seduces Rajinder amid the downpour.

After making love, Rajinder and Anita lie in bed, talking. Anita's feeling of being in love is still very strong. Rajinder, however, seems to not perceive the change in Anita; he talks about himself and his pending promotion at the bank, and refuses to allow Anita to caress him. Rajinder goes on to talk about how his life is going according to a schedule he had made up when he was in college□a schedule that included obtaining a good job, obtaining promotions, obtaining material goods, and obtaining a wife. When Anita asks if she was part of his plans, he says that she did not fulfill his initial requirements, but he accepted her because he "believe[s] in moderation" and not in the idealized romances portrayed in the movies. "There are so many people in the world that it is hard not to think that there are others you could love more," he says, and, seeing that he has hurt Anita, quickly reassures her that he does love her, but he tries "not to be too emotional about it."

The conversation with Rajinder squelches the idealized, hyper-feeling of romance and love that Anita had cultivated all evening, and she sinks into disappointment.

Summary

"If You Sing Like That for Me" is the short story of a Hindu woman, Anita, whose arranged marriage thirty years prior never evolves into the love she desires. She is impotent to alter its course just as she had been powerless to object to the marriage initially.

As the story begins, Anita wakes from a nap and finds herself in love with her husband, Rajinder, for the first time since their marriage seven months ago. From this point, Anita tells the story from memory and shares that the love she feels on that particular day would never again be felt despite their three children and the five houses they share throughout their marriage.

Anita remembers the stark, New Delhi flat into which she and Rajinder move two days after their wedding. Rajinder points out where all the furniture will be placed, and Anita's only sense of pleasure is the mention of the mattress. It represents sleep and a temporary reprieve from her current situation.

Anita never expected to marry Rajinder and is surprised to find herself a bride standing in this foreign place. Her father considered other men to become Anita's husband, but Rajinder is the first to go through with the arrangement. During all the time that wedding plans are being made, Anita thinks only that the upcoming marriage is a mistake and that something will happen to prevent it.

Anita knows that she is not a beautiful girl, and although she is smart enough, she is not educated. She is probably lucky to marry an ambitious man like Rajinder. Rajinder chooses Anita because his own mother does not want a daughter-in-law who is educated, a fact that Anita learns during a dinner between the two families prior to the engagement.

At the dinner, Anita's waning self-confidence is weighted down even further when her own mother tells all the guests that Anita was too lazy to study and finish her degree unlike her other daughter, Asha, who will be going to the United States to complete her doctorate degree.

A few days after the dinner between the families, Anita's father asks if she wants to marry Rajinder, and she replies that she will marry him. She still does not believe that the wedding will take place. Anita does not attend the engagement ceremony, following the dictates of custom, but Asha relates everything that happens at the event. Only then does Anita think that the marriage may soon be a reality.

As the days to her wedding fly by, Anita cannot help but wonder why she must stay in India, be married to a man she does not know, have children and grow old. Her sister will be going to America soon to begin an exciting life. Anita wonders about the difference between her sister and her self. When their father pulled them out of school, Asha had the audacity to re-enroll while Anita waited for their father to change his mind.

The wedding takes place with all the ceremonial rituals. When Anita touches Rajinder's neck, placing the marigold necklace around it, she understands the reality of what has just happened. On the wedding night, Anita tries but is not able to form the words to tell Rajinder that the union is a mistake. The marriage is consummated without finesse in a Spartan room.

Through the years, Rajinder is a good husband and sometimes does thoughtful things like bringing Anita small gifts upon his return from business trips and taking her to the Taj Mahal on her birthday. Anita has a sense that she needs something else, but she is not sure what it is. The months turn into years of an unfulfilled marriage.

Anita can remember the stifling summer after her marriage. She takes many baths during the course of the day and naps each afternoon to minimize the intense heat. After one of these naps, Anita wakes and realizes that she is in love with her husband, as she states at the beginning of the story.

The narrative now transitions to the present, and Anita is at the hospital where her father is being treated for a heart attack. The family members take turns keeping the bedside vigil out of obligation rather than love because the man is an alcoholic who has abused his wife and children for years.

The man's illness has made him sentimental, and he cries in Anita's presence. He says she is the only one who ever really cared for him, a statement that Anita cannot affirm. Eventually, Anita feels pity for her father, who still mourns the death of his only son who died while a young boy. Anita tires of her father's waxing and waning emotional displays and is glad when her duty at the bedside is relinquished. Soon Anita's father is well enough to return home, and Anita accompanies the ambulance workers to make sure that her father is settled and comfortable before she returns to her own home for the first time in two weeks.

Anita notices that the rains are coming. She is relieved to be back in the safety of her own home, where she may nap and relieve the exhaustion from her father's illness. When Anita awakes, she senses the cool air of the approaching monsoon and also realizes that she is deeply in love with her husband. The balance of the afternoon is spent in preparation for her husband's return from work, and she is excited to hear his scooter pull up to the house.

As Anita hears Rajinder's footsteps on the stairs outside, she practices what she will say to her husband about his day and with what degree of informality she will talk to him. Anita's anticipation is heightened when she sees Rajinder for the first time in two weeks, although she senses that his reception is not as ardent. Rajinder changes his clothes and asks perfunctory questions about Anita's father's health. Anita wonders if love might be different in other countries where people can be freer with emotions.

Rajinder comments on the rain, and Anita fixes him a drink so that he may sit outside and read the paper. Anita is thrilled to be near her husband again, although Rajinder does not seem to be in a mood to talk much. As Anita cooks dinner, she gazes out to

see the back of Rajinder's neck as he sits outside. She wants to see if she still feels the same about him, and she does.

Over dinner, Anita mentions that her father cried when she left him earlier that day. Rajinder says that she could have stayed longer, and she wants to say that she would have missed Rajinder too much. She restrains herself for fear of appearing too forward and because it is becoming evident that Rajinder did not miss Anita as much as she missed him during her two-week absence.

Rajinder takes his evening bath while Anita cleans the kitchen. He emerges from the bathroom and asks Anita if she, too, is ready to bathe. Anita interprets this as Rajinder's overture to sex. Anita bristles at her husband's insensitivity but does not have the courage to reject him. The only power she has is in staving him off until her favorite comedy program is over in another hour.

Finally in a reversal of power, Anita seduces Rajinder while the monsoon moves in, and the intimate encounter is almost electric in its intensity. Afterwards Anita wants to speak about her love and asks Rajinder if he had planned to have her as his wife. He bluntly says that he did not. Rajinder wanted someone with an advanced degree or at least someone who had a job, but his mother disapproved.

Rajinder has a successful career at the bank, and at least in that regard everything is moving along according to his plan. As far as love, though, Rajinder believes it is best left to the movies. Anita asks if Rajinder at least loves her and his own mother. He replies that there are so many people in the world that it would be impossible to say that there is not someone whom he could love more.

Anita's hurt washes over her face, and Rajinder tries to undo the emotional damage he has created. He tells Anita that he does love her, but he believes in moderation and tries not to be too emotional about these things. The couple makes love again, and Anita lies in the dark. She listens to the rain and tries to wrap herself in the sheet, which does not feel large enough.

Analysis

Anita is a romantic and an idealist at heart, but unfortunately her marriage and love life are arranged by her parents. She is destined to live with a man who settles for the woman his mother has selected. All her life, Anita's dreams are thwarted, first by her alcoholic father and then by her inability to continue her formal education. It is as if Anita lets life happen to her, in contrast to her willful sister who makes her own decisions. Anita cannot understand why she cannot act with the same forcefulness.

The story is told from the first person narrative perspective as Anita relates her story in memory and in the present day. Amazingly, there is little change in her relationship with Rajinder. She feels the same sense of reserve thirty years into the marriage as she did at the onset. At the end of the story, Anita is fueled to create some spark with her husband, but he remains aloof. She is doomed to a passionless marriage.

The author uses metaphors to exemplify Anita's romantic view of life, even in the simple things. She describes the monotony of a typing job she once held: "I learned to stop thinking. I floated above the days." This visual imagery helps to portray Anita's feelings of removing herself from the mundane rituals of her job. Again, Anita seems almost absent from her own life, merely letting things happen.

In another instance, when describing the intense summer heat, Anita "wakes at four each morning to have an hour when breathing air would not be like inhaling liquid." With this description, the author helps the reader understand the oppressive humidity of a pre-monsoon Indian summer.

The most important literary element in the story is the monsoon, which mirrors Anita's growing love for Rajinder. In the days before the rains come, Anita realizes her deep love for her husband and feels the growing anticipation of sharing her feelings. Finally the clouds burst, and Anita seduces Rajinder. Their lovemaking mirrors the intensity of the storm. In the cool moonlight after Rajinder's subtle rejections, Anita lies in the dark and listens to the rain make scratching noises on the window, symbolizing the string of small hurts inflicted by Rajinder in the past, with more pain certainly to come in the future.

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Characters

Anita

Anita is the narrator of the story. She is approximately 56 years old at the time that she relates the story, which takes place when she is 26 years of age and newly married. The focus of Anita's story is the one moment in her life that she felt completely in love with her husband, Rajinder. Anita and Rajinder's marriage was arranged. Although Anita was opposed to the marriage from the beginning, Anita, with a lack of action that characterizes her throughout the story, says nothing to derail the marriage. Instead, she expects that something will come up to cancel it. When the marriage does happen, it initially causes her great anxiety and feelings of terror. Anita characterizes herself as timid, unambitious, and as having been slow in school. She is prone to daydreaming and to self-delusion, both of which she uses as tools to escape from the anxiety her marriage causes her. Anita is also plagued by a sense of guilt and inadequacy that is the effect of her parents' manipulation of her, and especially, of her mother's favoritism of her more talented younger sister. Anita's fantasies and idealizations of love are contrasted sharply with the pragmatism of her husband, Rajinder□a pragmatism that ultimately shatters Anita's cherished idealizations.

Asha

Asha is Anita's younger sister. She is her sister's complete opposite: where Anita is timid and fearful of speaking her thoughts truthfully, Asha is forthright. Anita describes her as hard-working, ambitious, and intelligent. Asha eventually obtains a Ph.D. and moves to America, where she ends up in a happy marriage. Anita contrasts herself with her sister constantly and suffers from feelings of jealousy and inadequacy in comparison to her.

Ashok

Rajinder's older brother Ashok is a contrast to Rajinder. Anita describes him as "burly," and she is intimidated by him. He, unlike Rajinder, who went on to obtain a higher education in the city, remained a farmer in Busra like the rest of his family.

Baby

Anita's little brother, known as Baby, has died many years before the setting of the story. His death is the source of the bitterness that characterizes the relationship between Anita's parents.

Pitaji

Anita's father, Pitaji, suffers a heart attack; his recuperation in the hospital, and Anita's time spent taking care of him, comprise a significant portion of the story's plot. Anita has mixed feelings for Pitaji. Since her childhood, Pitaji has used Anita as a pawn against her mother. When he would come home drunk and her mother would treat him with disdain, Pitaji would manipulate Anita with his "impressive" tears and self-pity. Anita regards him as deceitful, as well as weak-willed.

The bitterness between Pitaji and Ratha is rooted in the death of Baby, the youngest in the family. Pitaji refused to come home from working in another city when Baby was sick, and Ratha therefore refused to inform Pitaji of Baby's death. Despite this deep bitterness, Pitaji claims to love his wife, but is unable to realize it.

Rajinder

In contrast to Anita's propensity for delusion, fantasy, and inaction, Rajinder, her husband, is a pure pragmatist and a man of action. He is the first in his family to obtain a college degree, and he is quickly moving up the ranks as a banker in Delhi. He and Anita are married via arrangement between their families. Anita at first regards Rajinder as a small, unattractive man and is privately opposed to marriage to him. However, over the months he proves to be an attentive and thoughtful husband, and she gets used to him. Rajinder shatters the love that Anita begins to feel for him at the conclusion of the story with his pragmatic views of love and his utterly practical description of their arranged marriage as an exchange of commodities.

Rajinder's Mother

Rajinder's mother clearly regards Rajinder as her favorite son. She is proud of him for becoming a banker and breaking away from the family farm. It is under his mother's influence that Rajinder chooses to marry Anita, who did not fulfill his earlier requirements for a wife; while he would have preferred someone with a higher degree, he bowed to his mother's wish for a daughter-in-law who was better suited to the traditional role of housekeeper.

Ratha

Anita describes her mother, Ratha, whom she calls "Ma," as clever and hard-working, much like her sister Asha. Although she loves her daughter Anita, Ratha favors the more ambitious Asha and is prone to making Anita feel inadequate and unworthy of love. Ratha is resentful of her husband for his negligence during the sickness and death of their youngest child. Nevertheless, she claims to love her husband, but she is unable to realize it through her bitterness.

Themes

Love

"If You Sing like That for Me" portrays several differing views on love through ways in which different characters relate to the idea of love.

For Anita, having love is something that she dreams about, but is ultimately something she finds unattainable. Throughout her childhood and up until she is married, she feels loneliness, largely as a result of her mother favoring Asha, the more intelligent and ambitious daughter, over Anita. While Anita does not wish to have an arranged marriage, the one good thing she believes a marriage could bring is an end to her loneliness. Now, trapped in an arranged marriage characterized by formality and a lack of passion, she spends her days dreaming of the coming of the monsoon and, with it, an idealized lover who will dispel her loneliness: "I liked to lie on the bed imaging that the monsoon had come . . . the smell of wet earth and the sound of the rain have always made me feel as if I have been waiting for someone all my life and that person has not yet come." Love is in the realm of dreams, romance, and idealization for Anita. But when she finally attempts to project her ideas of love onto Rajinder, her husband, by transferring her idealizations to him, her idealistic approach to love is shattered by the reality that she and her husband Rajinder have a relationship based on commodity, and not on love. Anita's disillusionment is the central moment of the story.

Anita's father, whom she calls Pitaji, often uses love to manipulate his daughters and wife. For example, in order to retaliate against his wife, who has treated him with bitterness since the death of their youngest child, Pitaji would tell the young Anita, "No one loves me. You love me, don't you, my little sun-ripened mango?" When Pitaji tells Anita that he loves her best of all, she thinks he is manipulative and does not believe him, because she has always known Pitaji to use love as a tool of manipulation.

Rajinder, in stark contrast to Anita's romanticized idealizations of love, approaches the idea of love with a complete lack of romance and fantasy and, instead, with utter pragmatism. To Rajinder, the pursuit of love is an impediment to progress and success. Citing his successes in life and career thus far, he says, "I believe in moderation . . . Other people got caught up in love and friendship. I've always felt that these things only became a big deal because of the movies." And later: "There are so many people in the world that it is hard not to think that there are others you could love more." As well as regarding love as an obstacle in life, rather than a goal, Rajinder makes it clear that his marriage to Anita was based on his life goals and on commodity, rather than on any pursuit of love on his part: "I had wanted at least [a wife with] an M.A. and someone who worked, but Mummy didn't approve of a daughter-in-law who worked. I was willing to change my requirements." To him, obtaining a wife is like obtaining a promotion and obtaining a car. Rajinder's clear articulation of his views on love cause Anita's disillusionment.

Arranged Marriage

Arranged marriage is still the norm in India, and it is the means by which Rajinder and Anita are brought together. Anita is opposed to marrying Rajinder, but she agrees because, as a woman in India, in a culture that looks down on women remaining single and provides little opportunity for financial freedom for women, she has little option but to get married.

Ultimately, "If You Sing like That for Me" can be seen as a subtle indictment of the practice of arranged marriages as an institution that treats people as little more than commodities and neglects to take human emotion and passion into consideration. Rajinder's words to Anita at the end of the story make it perfectly clear that their relationship is one based on commodity. She was chosen for her ability to make a good housewife and mother; he, it is known, was chosen by Pitaji for his ability to provide a comfortable life for Anita. Rajinder does not see love as an important facet of their relationship. His pragmatic understanding of their marriage as a practical arrangement ultimately denies Anita a relationship based on love for the rest of their marriage.

Sentimentality

In the same way that Pitaji uses love to manipulate his family, so too is he a master of using sentimentality as a tool of manipulation. Sentimentality is, by definition, the opposite of sincerity; the aim of sentimentality is to appeal to the emotions to elicit a desired response. In Pitaji's case, his sentimental words about his wife are designed to make Anita feel sorry for him. He says to her: "At your birthday, when [Ratha] sang, I said, 'If you sing like that for me every day, I will love you forever.'" Anita recognizes that these words are rehearsed; the practiced, staged nature of his expression of sentiment is therefore indicative of manipulation and deceit.

Subsequently, Anita herself indulges in sentimentality towards Rajinder in her sudden, over-the-top, over-romantic feelings towards him. The recurring motif of sentimentality throughout the story serves to question the authenticity of each character's love, especially that of Pitaji for his family and, later, of Anita for her husband.

Sibling Rivalry

Anita suffers throughout the story from a sharp sense of inadequacy. This is a direct result of her mother's constant comparison of her to her younger sister, Asha, whom Anita describes as ambitious, hard-working, and clever. Anita feels betrayed by her mother's public comparison between her daughters; likewise, Asha's own straightforward and confident behavior makes the timid Anita feel even more inadequate. Anita is plagued throughout the story by a feeling of bitterness at her sister's better fortune. This, together with her loneliness, causes Anita to constantly escape into daydreams.

Style

Point of View

"If You Sing like That for Me" is told in the first-person narrative voice from the point of view of the main character, Anita. A significant portion of the story is devoted to Anita's interior life and her very private feelings: she is secretly opposed to her arranged marriage; she experiences a barely controlled anxiety and depression when she is first married; and she indulges in daydreams and fantasies. Most significantly, Anita experiences a life-changing, intense, but temporary feeling of love towards her husband. It is the explanation of this feeling that is the central, driving purpose of the story. This focus would not be possible without the insider perspective that only a first-person voice can give.

Symbolism

The most prevalent symbol in the story is that of the monsoon. Anita directly associates the coming of the monsoon, which brings relief from the drought of summer, as a symbol of the arrival of an imaginary lover, who, like the monsoon, would bring relief from the drought of her loneliness.

The monsoon becomes a reality as the story progresses, but it still remains a symbol of the arrival of love for Anita, so much so that she comes to believe that, with the coming of the monsoon, she has fallen deeply in love with Rajinder. The monsoon continues to carry its direct association with love as Anita, for the first time, kisses and fondles Rajinder with passion and desire in the rain.

By the end of the story, however, Anita, having been harshly disillusioned from her idealization of Rajinder as being the true love she had been waiting for, no longer sees romance in the rain: "The rain scratched against the windows. . . I was cold and tried to wrap myself in the sheet, but it was not large enough." No longer does the rain symbolize the arrival of relief, but merely the arrival of more disappointment and dissatisfaction.

Character as Foil

A "foil" is a character whose nature contrasts strongly with that of another character, thus highlighting the aspects that differ between them. Anita's sister Asha works as a foil to Anita. Asha is ambitious, clever, and hard-working, and her talents have enabled her to go to America. Her personality, which is also strong, confident, and not afraid of her own opinions, contrasts sharply with Anita, whose approach to life is characterized by inaction and feelings of inadequacy, timidity, and passivity. The sharp contrast between the sisters, particularly the contrast between proactivity and inaction suggests that

Anita could have escaped the fate of an arranged marriage and that her unhappiness is her own doing.

Historical Context

Political and Cultural Orientation of India

Although Akhil Sharma wrote "If You Sing like That for Me" in 1995, he placed it sometime during the prime ministership of Indira Gandhi, which lasted from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 to 1984, when she was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. Presumably, because the main character Anita speaks in praise of Gandhi, the story takes place before 1975, when Gandhi declared a State of Emergency in order to avoid impeachment, governing India as a regime and imprisoning scores of intellectuals and dissidents, causing the prime minister to fall, for a time, from favor.

Although there are no politics directly involved in the story, small details are included that hint at the political and cultural environment that Anita and Rajinder would have lived under in New Delhi during this time. Most notably Anita complains, "Perhaps love is different in other countries . . . where the climate is cooler, where a woman can say her husband's name, where the power does not go out every day, where not every clerk demands a bribe." As evidenced in this quote, the India that Sharma portrays with accuracy is characterized by government corruption on every level.

Sharma explained his interest in writing about India in an interview with *Publishers Weekly*:

I presented India as incurably corrupt because it is. It's a place where individual power is so rampant because there are so few checks and balances. Once at a train station in India I saw this man who was chained to a bench. He had been caught [boarding a train] without a ticket. The stationmaster decided to punish him, and he kept him chained there three or four days. That's the sort of absolute power you see everywhere.

The India of Sharma's work is also characterized by certain contradictions: it is a country in which a woman is the prime minister, but where Anita is subservient to her husband; it is an India of high levels of education among its population, but is also surrounded by squalor; it is an India that is the largest democratic country on earth, but in which government corruption pervades even to the lowest everyday levels of operation.

The Practice of Arranged Marriages

The arrangement of marriages is still the prevalent custom in India, not only among Hindus but across other religious and cultural groups as well. The practice extends to Indian families across the diaspora, especially among first generation immigrants, who often return to India to find spouses for their sons and daughters.

Arranging marriages involves two families taking active roles in procuring spouses for their children. This usually involves determining the suitability of a match based on

caste□or class□and the level of education, as well as on the dowry offered by a woman's family to that of the man. For women, there is an emphasis on beauty and suitability as a housekeeper and mother; for men, there is an emphasis on the ability to provide for a family. While in the past it was not uncommon for children to be betrothed at a young age, often to spouses whom they did not know or consent to, the story "If You Sing like That for Me" portrays arranging marriages as a more democratic practice□into which, in modern times, it has largely evolved. Anita, although she does not take advantage of her position, nevertheless has the opportunity to back out of the marriage; and her sister ends up choosing her own husband in America. Arranged marriages, it must be remembered, are the norm in India and are widely accepted, even though it is a foreign concept to Western sensibilities.

But arranged marriages in India have not gone without problems, particularly in light of women's rights. Most notably, in recent years there has been an epidemic of a practice known as "bride burning," in which a family, usually out of spite for receiving an unsatisfactory dowry, would cause a so-called kitchen accident in which the new daughter-in-law would be burned to death. CNN reported on August 18, 1996, that Indian police had received more than 2,500 reports of bride burning per year. Salman Rushdie's story "The Firebird's Nest," published in the June 23, 1997 issue of *The New Yorker*, directly addresses this topic.

Critical Overview

Akhil Sharma is one of a generation of up-and-coming Indian writers across the English-speaking diaspora that have appeared since the later 1990s. "If You Sing like That for Me," his debut work published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1995, drew instantaneous critical acclaim for him. It received the Second Place O. Henry Award for that year (beating out such better-known short story writers as Joyce Carol Oates and Jane Smiley) and was listed in *The Best American Short Stories* of 1996.

But Sharma did not become a well-known literary name on the national scale until the publication of his first novel, *An Obedient Father*, which received nationwide review, was named a *New York Times* Notable Book, and was the recipient of the prestigious literary award, the Hemingway/PEN New England Award. The novel is set in India, as is much of Sharma's other work including "If You Sing like That for Me." Even though Sharma grew up in New Jersey, much of his work hearkens back to strictly Indian themes, placing him by virtue of not just his ethnicity but his subject matter amid a new generation of interesting, up-and-coming Indian writers working in the English language.

An Obedient Father was published a year after Jhumpa Lahiri, another Indian American writer based in Boston, won the Pultizer Prize for her collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, and three years after the Indian writer Arundhati Roy received worldwide acclaim for her novel *The God of Small Things*?two big achievements in the literary world that have opened the doors of publishing houses to a new generation of Indian writers.

The sudden interest of publishers in Indian writers working in English was the subject of several newspieces at the turn of the twenty-first century. Mervyn Rothstein wrote in *The New York Times* of these writers:

They are often called Midnight?s Grandchildren in homage to another seminal Indian novel, Salman Rushdie?s *Midnight's Children*, the dark parable of Indian history since independence . . . . Now the new generation of writers have in many ways broken away from the magic realism that characterizes much of Mr. Rushdie's work.

Until the publication of Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Rushdie's most influential works —published in the 1980s—had been regarded as the quintessential English-language literature of India; but the new generation of writers is replacing Rushdie?s magical realism and evolving a new voice.

Both Rothstein and *Time* magazine place Sharma amid this new generation of Indian writers. Rothstein calls his style "quintessentially American" and *Time* says his writing "should appeal to anyone with a taste for red-blooded American realism and farce."

Notably, these books, written by Indian writers in English from across the globe, focus on the subject of India and on Indian immigrants. In a market—English-language literature—that is dominated by white writers and white readers, it is remarkable that

Indian writers have of late garnered so much attention, bringing a multicultural angle to the American experience, and giving a new voice to the experience of the Indian immigrant that had not previously been heard in the mainstream.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Fernando is a freelance writer and editor based in Seattle, Washington. In this essay, Fernando presents how the character of Anita in Sharma's story uses fantasy and idealism in an unsuccessful attempt to escape from reality.

The short story "If You Sing like That for Me," by Akhil Sharma, opens with a scene that is the focus of the story. Anita, the first person narrator, relates:

. . . [S]even months after my wedding, I woke from a short, deep sleep in love with my husband. I did not know then, lying in bed and looking out the window at the line of gray clouds, that my love would last only a few hours and that I would never again care for Rajinder with the same urgency. . . .

This opening scene is the central point around which the entire story is constructed. The story continues to relate the events leading up to this pivotal moment of intense and singular emotion for Anita, and then goes on to relate the events that cause her love to "last only a few hours" and never return. The narrative movement of the story, through its concentration on this pivotal moment in Anita's life, reveals the source of this otherwise inexplicable intense feeling of love: it is born of an idealism and escapism that characterizes Anita's views of life; and its equally inexplicable, permanent disappearance is likewise brought about by the very reality that Anita continuously tries to escape.

The reality that Anita continuously tries to escape from is that of her marriage and, by extension, her position as a woman in India. As a woman in India, Anita doesn't have much of a choice but to have an arranged marriage to a man who can support her, and to raise his family. Although she does not want to, she is betrothed and wed to Rajinder, a man whom she meets only one time before her engagement, and whom she finds, at best, unremarkable.

Anita is bitter and sad that this is her assigned lot in life; she questions why she must remain in India and get married, while her younger sister, who was blessed with more ambition and cleverness than she, will get to go to America and enjoy greater freedom there. However, Anita says nothing to anyone about being against marrying Rajinder, and instead faces the impending marriage by not accepting the reality of the situation. She does not believe that the match between her and Rajinder will be made, and she deludes herself into thinking that something will come up—"His family might decide that my B.A. and B.Ed. were not enough, or Rajinder might suddenly announce that he was in love with his typist"—that will save her from being married off. This ability to delude herself from reality is shown again and again in the story, and is crucial to the development of the climactic moment at which she suddenly feels in love with her husband.

The marriage initially causes Anita intense anxiety:

I would think of myself with [Rajinder's] smallness forever, bearing his children, going where he went, having to open always to his touch, and whatever I was looking at would begin to waver, and I would want to run.

But slowly, she adapts to her life as a married housewife by pretending that it is not her that is leading her life: "I did not feel as if I were the one making love or cooking dinner or going home to see Ma and Pitaji . . . No one guessed that it was not me."

As before, Anita finds herself retreating into self-delusion in self-defense, and eventually, delusion becomes the driving impetus in her life; the most active part of her existence during these early months of marriage, the part of her life that brought her happiness, were her daily naps and the accompanying dreams. Throughout the narrative, Anita often discusses how she looks forward to sleeping with an urgency that eclipses other aspects of her life, even the sickness of her father. While she is caring for him, for example, she wants "desperately for Asha to come, so that I could leave, and bathe, and lie down to dream of a house with a red-tiled roof near the sea." Her obsession with sleep is indicative of a clinical depression; however, her obsession with sleep also reveals that she spends a significant portion of her life indulging in dreams as a method of escapism from that very life. In fact, she has replaced her real life□her dispassionate and formal marriage to Rajinder, her small flat in a stifling city□with a dream that represents her ideal of life.

That house near the sea she mentions is discussed at length earlier in the narrative, when Anita describes her daily routine, which of course includes a time especially for sleep:

Around two, before taking my nap, I would pour a few mugs of water on my head. I liked to lie on the bed imagining that the monsoon had come. Sometimes this made me sad, for the smell of wet earth and the sound of the rain have always made me feel as if I have been waiting for someone all my life and that person has not yet come. I dreamed often of living near the sea, in a house with a sloping red roof and bright-blue window frames, and woke happy, hearing water on sand.

Her dreams are a constructed, fantasy landscape that allow her to escape from her life and provide her with happiness, and to imagine that she is living not in a small flat with an insignificant man, but with a nameless figure who represents her one, ideal, love. Significantly, Anita associates the coming of the monsoon, which signals relief from the stifling heat of summer, with the arrival of the one special person into her life, thus, bringing relief from her loneliness. The coming of the monsoon becomes, then, a symbol for Anita of her version of an "ideal love": that is, one, specific, designated person that is meant for her. It is a feeling and a fantasy that, as indicated in the passage above, she indulges in as a daily ritual.

So disconnected is Anita from the realities of her daily life, that, when the pivotal moment occurs in which Anita suddenly finds herself intensely in love with Rajinder, it comes as a surprise. For although she has come to regard Rajinder, over the first seven months of their marriage, with affability, there is no indication of the development of

stronger feelings. Indeed, immediately prior to experiencing this feeling, Anita had spent two weeks completely separated from Rajinder while she tended to her sick father. She specifically indicates that she did not miss Rajinder in the least.

However, looking closely at the passage describing her experience of this sudden feeling of love, certain clues that echo earlier aspects of the novel arise to help explain her extreme emotional state. Significantly, the highly-charged motif of the monsoon enters the afternoon that Anita awakens to the feeling of being in love: "The sleep that afternoon was like falling. . . . I woke as suddenly. . . . It was cool, I noticed, unsurprised by the monsoon's approach□for I was in love."

The true arrival of the monsoon recalls the fantasy of the monsoon that Anita plays over and over in her mind and, with it, the arrival of her "ideal love" to dispel her loneliness. Now, Anita awakens to the arrival of the monsoon and, simultaneously, to the otherwise inexplicable feeling of being in love with Rajinder.

So direct is this association, and so sudden and intense is her feeling, that the reader is led to believe that her feeling is somehow based, not on an authentic love specifically for Rajinder, but on the delusion she has been cultivating over the past months. It is almost as if her feeling is a conditioned response to her very deeply cultivated association between the coming of rain and her dream of experiencing true love. The monsoon□that which she has been dreaming of for months□has finally become a reality. Likewise, it seems that Anita makes the jump from dreaming of an ideal lover to idealizing Rajinder. She dotes on him nervously and idealize his physical appearance, thinking, for the first time, that he looks handsome and suddenly she desires to know him intimately.

At the opening of the story Anita says that her feeling of love, which came upon her only once in 30 years of marriage, lasted but a few hours. Such a sudden and complete ending to so intense an emotion seems as inexplicable as the sudden appearance of this emotion. However, just as the emotion grew suddenly from her idealism, it was shattered by the sudden clarity of the reality of her marriage, which comes at the end of the story.

That night, after she and Rajinder make love, while her intense idealization of Rajinder persists, they lie together in bed. Rajinder speaks, with satisfaction, at how his life is going according to a self-imposed schedule. He lists all of his accomplishments and desires: "I wanted a car, and we'll have that in a year. I wanted a wife, and I have that." But when Anita asks playfully if he had planned for her specifically, he answers:

No. I had wanted at least an M.A. and someone who worked, but Mummy didn't approve of a daughter-in-law who worked. I was willing to change my requirements. Because I believe in moderation. . . . Other people got caught up in love and friendship. I've always felt these things only became a big deal because of the movies. . . .

There are so many people in the world that it is hard not to think that there are others you could love more.

Rajinder's words show Rajinder to be a pragmatist, which a person whose approach to life is based on practicality and reality□the complete opposite of Anita, whose mind is occupied with ideals and fantasies. Rajinder's words describe the philosophies guiding his life. He does not believe that finding "true love" is a worthy pursuit of one's life, because he believes□as is evident through his mention of movies□that any importance placed on romance is based on fantasy and not on reality. He approaches the idea of love with a mathematic practicality□based on the sheer number of people in the world, the chances are that you can always find someone to love more. Thus, love is not a worthy pursuit for him.

Instead, he describes his marriage to Anita in terms that strip it of any romance, presenting it, with characteristic pragmatism, as what it literally is: an arrangement that was not based on love to begin with, but an exchange of commodities. Rajinder refers to "his wife" as a commodity, placing her in the same category as his job and a car. He recognizes that he was chosen by Anita's father for his proven ability to be a good provider. Anita, it turns out, was chosen for her potential to be a traditional housewife.

Rajinder's pragmatism towards love and marriage is based on reality and, thus, by its very nature, deconstructive of Anita's ideals and fantasies about love. It is the cause of the complete disappearance of her intense love for Rajinder. Her feeling of love is squelched not so much because Rajinder's pragmatism is cruel, but because Rajinder's realistic pragmatism reveals her feelings to be based not in reality, but in the ideals about love that he derides.

The story closes with a line that represents the sudden inadequacy that Anita, stripped of her ideals and fantasies of her husband and her life, now faces: "I was cold and tried to wrap myself in the sheet, but it was not large enough." Stripped of her ideals and fantasies, she is left to the cold reality that all of her escapism has been designed to protect her from□her despair at being, as a woman in India, a commodity to be given in marriage.

Source: Tamara Fernando, Critical Essay on "If You Sing like That for Me," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Hart is a freelance writer and author of several books. In the following essay, Hart searches for the source of the protagonist's unrequited love in Sharma's short story.

Anita, the protagonist in Akhil Sharma's story "If You Sing like That for Me" is a tragic figure of sorts. She appears to be in great need of love but cannot figure out how to get it. She does not ask for much out of life, and maybe that, in itself, is a major part of her problem. Does she truly know what she wants? Or does she just take whatever comes her way? Anita also comes from what appears to be an unsupportive emotional environment. But have these circumstances permanently scarred her or does she use her previous experiences as excuses to close herself off, denying herself the small but possibly significant opportunities to feel loved. The end of Sharma's short story has the power to wrench the hearts of even the most detached readers, knowing what they do about Anita by the time the conclusion of this sad story is reached. So are the consequences that befall Anita at the end of the story unearned or did she set herself up for the tragedy?

There are four major characters in Anita's life who are sources of potential love: her mother, her father, her sister, and her husband. None of them appears to understand Anita or know what she needs. For example, Anita believes that her mother loves her. But the comments that her mother shares at the restaurant when Anita is introduced to her future husband, Rajinder, make the reader question the significance of that love. "I wanted Anita to be a doctor," Anita's mother says after having just boasted about Anita's sister and two of Anita's uncles. Then her mother adds: "but she was lazy and did not study." Anita quickly dismisses her mother's criticism. She and her mother loved each other, Anita states, but there were times when something inside her mother "would slip and she would attack me." Now, is this statement an honest analysis of her mother or is Anita rationalizing away an emotional pain?

In an attempt to further explain her mother, Anita adds more information that pretty much sums up Anita's own personality. First, Anita builds her mother up by stating that she is "so clever." And it is this cleverness that stymies Anita. It throws her off guard, leaving her feeling inferior. But Anita does not seem to reflect on this, or at least not at this point in the story. Rather, she deflects it, preferring to believe that it is her love of her mother that makes Anita feel "helpless." Later in the story, however, Anita states a little more honestly that she believes her mother did not love her as much as she loved Anita's sister. Once Anita admits this to the reader (and therefore to herself), she is also able to confess that knowing this fact has allowed her to rescind some of love she originally expresses for her mother. She takes a step once removed from her emotions and even boldly mocks her mother's tears and her mother's pain at the loss of a baby. "Ma knew how to let her voice falter as if the pain were too much to speak of," Anita says, inferring that her mother's tears were merely a dramatic display, intended to arouse emotions in those who were observing her. But Anita does not fall for her mother's play-acting. In contrast, Anita states that she is "more impressed" with her father's tears. Her comparison is done, but necessarily to demonstrate how much she

loves her father. Rather, she seems to do this as if to say that she does not much love her father, but she loves her mother even less. It is difficult to understand where the love exists between daughter and mother. Although Anita believes there is love between them, the story does not portray any moment in which that love is truly exposed. It is also impossible to determine whether it is the mother who has not nourished the daughter or the daughter who has turned away. In other words, has the mother not given love to Anita, or does Anita not know how to receive it?

What is known is that in the absence of a full-hearted mother's love, Anita turns to her father. She does not, however, rush into his arms. She might love her father, but she does so from a great distance. And from the details that are provided in the story, there are many reasons why she has moved far away from him. The first time Anita's father is introduced, he does not make a remarkable impact. He tries "to impress Rajinder [Anita's future husband] with his sophistication," by speaking in English. However, Anita demonstrates to the reader that her father's English is not very good. As soon as Anita shares this information with the reader, the story immediately jumps to a scene in the restaurant where the family is dining. It is a visual image of a swinging door opening to the kitchen, where a cow is standing "near a skillet." It is hard not to associate Anita's father with this cow, since just previous to this image, Anita was talking about her father. Now, since the story takes place in India, the cow is not as misplaced as it would have been had the restaurant been located in New York City, for example. But keep in mind that the intrusion of the cow into the story was purposeful. So what was intended? Well, at the least, the image is distracting enough to make the reader have an uneasy feeling. And this could be the author's attempt to convey a similar uneasiness that Anita was experiencing as she listened to her father's broken English, especially in knowing that his display was intended to impress her future husband. In other words, through Anita's eyes, her father is as misplaced as the cow.

In another part of the story, Anita recalls a different time that her father used English. It was shortly after her wedding ceremony, when her father whispers that he loves her. These words make her cry but not for the sentiment that could have been shared between them. Rather, Anita cries because she remembers her father coming home drunk so many times in her youth. "No one loves me," her father would often tell her as he held her in his lap, the smell of alcohol saturating his breath. "You love me, don't you, my little sun-ripened mango?" One would think that Anita might have received some emotional nourishment from these outbursts. But she was well aware that her father was drunk when he would say this, and she knew his intentions were not fully directed at her. She was wise enough to realize her father's comments were expressed in an attempt to grab Anita's mother's attention: "He would be watching Ma to make sure she heard." In the morning after his drunken sprees, Anita would care for him, bringing him water so he could take medicine that would make him heave. And it was his vomit, not his love, that Anita associated with the whispered words of English that he offered on her wedding day. And it was these experiences that eventually caused her callous feelings toward her father.

So by the time her father suffered a heart attack, Anita had very little compassion left for him. He was "so fat," she states, that the heart attack did not come as a surprise. "I felt

no fear," Anita says, referring to the idea of her father's possible death. Then she adds: "perhaps because I just did not care." Momentarily, however, Anita does feel a resurgence of love. Her father's scare with death shakes a vague apology out of him as he is recovering. Anita is not sure what he is apologizing for, but she is somewhat pleasantly surprised by his words. "I suddenly wanted to love him," she states. But it might have been too little, too late. Their chances of love were scarred by the past they share. Anita could no longer trust him. Instead of accepting her father's apologies and offering forgiveness in exchange, Anita ends up turning cynical. "Why do people always think hurting others is all right, as long as they hurt themselves as well?" In the end, Anita decides that she has had enough. When she hears her father lament one more time about how his wife does not love him, Anita tries to persuade him that he is wrong. But it is not evident that Anita believes her own arguments. If she cannot forgive her father, how could she believe that any one else could? Even though she tries to convince her sister to see some good in their father, one can't help but imagine that it is really Anita trying to convince herself. She seems only to pretend to love her father, imagining some merit in his character, no matter how small it might be. Her heart is closed to him, even though she might wish somewhere deep inside of her, that it was not.

Anita's sister Asha barely appears in the story at all. In comparison to the other characters, Asha seems insignificant. But this is not completely true. Asha could have been a role model for Anita, even though she is younger than Anita. Instead, Asha is a sort of thorn in Anita's side. Anita wishes she had done everything that Asha has done. When their father takes them out of school at a very young age, Asha fights her way back to the classroom, insisting on a good education despite her father's belief that it was a waste of time to educate women. When they go to college, it is Asha who works hard and earns a scholarship to go to the United States, a place that Anita had dreamed of going. And when she marries, it is Asha who finds a partner whom she can love. Anita has done none of these things. But she could have. She lacks ambition and determination. She also lacks self-esteem. But why is this so? Why has one come out a fighter and the other come out a loser? At one point in the story, Anita implies her own guilt, admitting that one cannot always blame parents for the disappointments of life.

And finally, there is Anita's husband, Rajinder□a man that Anita only passively chose to marry and, admittedly, a man she does not love. As the story opens, Anita is staring out at the sky. It is a summer morning sky but it is "a line of gray clouds" that Anita is focusing on. The clouds will eventually blossom, filling the skies with darkness and finally bursting in rain. These rain clouds are a good metaphor of Anita's life. Although the rain brings a welcomed relief from the heat and drought, if one focuses only on the temporary loss of sunlight, the rain can be depressive. Likewise, it depends on how one looks at life. For instance, Anita seems barely interested in her own life. She allows others to make decisions for her. Then, she attempts to make do with what comes her way. She has no one to blame for her situation but herself. She had no intention of marrying Rajinder. "The neutrality of Rajinder's features, across the restaurant table from me," Anita relates upon the first time she saw him, "reassured me that we would not meet after that dinner." She then adds that she could not "imagine spending my life with someone so anonymous." This conclusion, however, does not stop her from

responding in the affirmative, when a couple of days later her father asks her if she would marry the man. For the remainder of the story, Anita attempts to attract her husband's attention. Although she believes herself to be unattractive, she does her best to wrap herself in decorative apparel that might allure him, even to the point of forsaking her own comfort. But nothing seems to work. It is not until she has left Rajinder in order to assist her father during his recuperation from a heart attack, that Anita thinks of Rajinder in terms of love. She comes home hopeful that at last she has found what she has been looking for. Rajinder, however, quickly dismisses her, letting her know that she is but one more detail in his plan to become a successful man. Rajinder, in the end, is incapable of love.

So when one carefully examines the circumstances that are presented, one has to question this short story as a caution or a tragedy, or perhaps both. Yes, it is tragic when people cannot find love. But who in this story is truly to blame for that? Is Anita a tragic figure because she did everything within her means to find love and was turned down at every opportunity? Or is she a pathetic character who did not have enough gumption to fight for what she wanted? These are questions the reader must attend carefully, for the narrative and the plot oscillate between tragic circumstance and passive desire. As a result, unrequited love is exposed in all its complexity as the source of very personal and familial tensions.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "If You Sing like That for Me," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

"If You Sing like That for Me" opens with the scene that closes the story: that of Anita awaking to the feeling of being in love with her husband Rajinder. Why do you think Sharma introduces the story this way? How does it affect the way in which the story is written and the story is told?

How would you characterize the relationship between Anita and her mother? Anita and her father? Between Anita's parents themselves? How do these relationships affect Anita's ability to love Rajinder?

A "foil" is the literary term for a character whose attributes contrast sharply with those of the main character. Describe Anita's sister, Asha. How does Sharma use her as a foil to help us see Anita more clearly? What purpose do you think Asha has as a character and as a literary device in the story?

The marriage of Anita and Rajinder, the main plot device of the story, is an arranged marriage□a common custom in India. Do you think that the story makes a statement about the practice of arranged marriage? What does the story say about this type of relationship and how do you think it is said?

What Do I Read Next?

Winner of the 1980 Booker Prize, *Midnight's Children* is by India's most famous English-language writer, Salman Rushdie. Written in his trademark style of magical realism, the epic-like novel takes an angry and satirical aim at the political corruption of India and its post-colonial relationship with Pakistan.

The God of Small Things, a novel by Arundhati Roy, was awarded the Booker Prize in 1997. Roy lives and writes in India. This, her debut novel, takes place in Kerala, India, in the 1960s. Roy tells the story of a young brother and sister who are subject to tragedy involving the death of their English cousin, caste brutality, and the squelching of socialist uprisings that marked the era and location.

The Interpreter of Maladies, a collection of short stories written by Indian American Jhumpa Lahiri, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1999. The collection of stories depicts the experiences of several different Indian characters, both in the United States and in India, and their struggles with their relationships in love and life.

"Cosmopolitan," a short story by Akhil Sharma, first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1997 and received an O. Henry Award in 1998, for which it was published in *Prize Stories 1998: The O. Henry Awards*, edited by Larry Dark. "Cosmopolitan" is the story of a man who, after being abandoned by his wife and daughter, leads a lonely and solitary life in a New Jersey suburb until he begins a romance with the woman next door.

Sharma's debut novel, *An Obedient Father*, received much critical acclaim upon publication in 2000, as well as controversy over its unflinching scenes of incest. The novel takes place in India during the presidency of Rajiv Gandhi. Told in the first person by Ram Karan, a corrupt civil servant with the guilt of past crimes on his shoulders, the corruption and downfall of Ram mirrors the political landscape of India at the time. *An Obedient Father* was long-listed for the Booker Prize, named a New York Times Notable Book, and received the Hemingway/PEN New England award for 2001.

"Surrounded by Sleep," by Akhil Sharma, a short story published in the *New Yorker*, December 2001, is the story of a young Indian boy whose family deals with the tragic paralysis of his older brother shortly after they move to New York state from India.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989, reprint, Grove Press, 1999) is an almost fablesque account of what it means to become an American. Jasmine, widowed in India at a young age, travels as an illegal immigrant to the United States, crossing the country and reinventing her identity time and time again, while accumulating an extended, multi-cultural family for herself.

Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy* (1993) is set in India during the presidency of Jawaharlal Nehru. It relates in a saga-like fashion the complex relationships between several families, both Hindu and Muslim, painting a realistic portrait of Indian society at the time.

Arranged Marriages: Stories (1995), by Indian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, presents the fictional stories of eleven Indian women, both in the United States and in India, and their different experiences with arranged marriage. As related in Sharma's "If You Sing like That for Me," arranged marriage remains the prevalent means of forming marriages in India today.

Mimic Men (1967), by Nobel Laureate V. S. Naipaul, is the story of a Caribbean-Indian's life as he travels from the Caribbean to Britain. The novel addresses, with satire and irony, issues of displacement that faced members of the diaspora of the post-colonial, Indian community.

Further Study

Forbes, Geraldine, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

A history of women, politically and socially, from the nineteenth century through the end of the twentieth century in India, Forbes's well-researched work includes first-person accounts of women's true experiences of living in India.

Hagedorn, Jessica, ed., *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, Penguin Books, 1993.

Hagedorn's anthology was a breakthrough publication when it came out; it is perhaps the best known anthology of writing from across the Asian American spectrum, including writers with origins in East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. It was published at a time when the study of Asian American literature was just coming into focus in universities, and writers like Amy Tan were just beginning to receive attention from the general American readership.

Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna, *History of Indian Literature in English*, Columbia University Press, 2003.

Two hundred years of Indian literature written in English□up to the publication of *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy□are covered in this collection of historical essays, including well-known poets and novelists as well as scientists and sociologists whose writings have made a significant mark on the development of English-language literature in India.

Rustomji-Kerns, Roshni, ed., *Living in America*, Westview Press, 1995.

Living in America is one of the first anthologies published in the United States featuring fiction and poetry from largely unknown Indian writers in America, reflecting on the Indian American experience.

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Rothstein, Mervyn, "India's Post-Rushdie Generation; Young Writers Leave Magic Realism and Look at Reality," in the *New York Times*, July 3, 2000, p. E1.

Rushdie, Salman, "The Firebird's Nest," in the *New Yorker*, June 23, 1997.

Sachs, Andrea, "The Subcontinentals: Young, Internationally Savvy Indian Writers Are Making Smart, Splashy Literary Debuts," in *Time*, Vol. 155, No. 14, April 10, 2000, p. 130.

Sharma, Akhil, "If You Sing like That for Me," in *The Best American Short Stories, 1996*, edited by John Edgar Wideman and Katrina Kenison, Houghton Mifflin, 1996, pp. 282—306.

Yasui, Brian, "Bride-Burning Claims Hundreds in India," *CNN.com*, http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9608/18/bride.burn/, August 18, 1996, (accessed November 19, 2004).

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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