

ENGLISH

CHAPTER 6: POETS AND PANCAKES



POETS AND PANCAKES

~Summary~

-by Asokamitran

The Make-up Department of Gemini Studios

The make-up department was in a building which was said to be Robert Clive's erstwhile stable. In the studios, the make-up material with the brand name 'Pancake' was used profusely. All actresses of yesteryears were familiar with it. The author feels that modern actresses may not be aware of its existence.

The author mocks Robert Clive by saying that during his short life he is said to have lived in a number of residences in Madras. He fought battles and even got married here.

A Vivid Description of the Make-up room

The make-up room looked like a hair-cutting salon. It was crowded with large mirrors and flooded with light. It was not a very pleasing experience to get the make-up done because of the heat from the dazzling lights.

The Make-up Department and National Integration

The department was initially headed by a Bengali. He was succeeded by a Maharashtrian who was assisted by a Dharwar Kannadiga. Then different people belonging to different states occupied the position there. The author points out that all this shows that the make-up department was an ideal specimen of national integration. The author jokingly tells the readers about the 'skills' of these make-up men. With quite a lot of Pancake and other potions and lotions, they could mar the beauty of any person. However, Asokamitran clarifies by saying that perhaps the hideous crimson coloured make-up was important to look presentable on the screen.

A Strict Hierarchy in the Make-up Department

An elaborate division of work marked the make-up department. The chief make-up man dressed up the actors in lead roles. His senior assistant looked after the 'second' hero and heroine while the junior assistant took charge of the main comedian. The players who played the crowd were looked after by the office boy of the department.

The Office Boy

The office boy was not exactly a boy. He was in his early forties. He joined the studio years back and aspired to be a top film star or top screen writer, director or lyric writer. He also wrote poetry. On the days of crowd-shooting, he mixed the make-up material on a large scale and painted faces.

The Narrator's Work in the Studio

The narrator worked in a cubicle. His work was to cut newspaper clippings and store them in files. Everybody thought that his work was next to nothing and so he was continuously lectured by other employees. The office boy often came to his cubicle and gave vent to his feelings of frustration and irritation. The narrator desperately wished to escape from his continuous tirade and prayed for crowd shooting.

Kothamanglam Subbu

He was the No. 2 at Gemini Studios. According to the office boy, Subbu did not deserve anything because he was neither well educated nor had any exceptional talent. His only virtue was being a Brahmin, due to which he got opportunities readily. He was always cheerful. Even a flop film in which he had a hand couldn't take away his cheerfulness. The narrator takes a dig at him by saying that he always needed people to work for him. He was ever-loyal to the Chief. Subbu could offer countless solutions to the problems of the producer of a film. The narrator comments that film making was quite simple with a man like Subbu around.

Subbu; the Poet

Although he was capable of writing on intricate topics, he wrote poetry for the masses. His success in films overshadowed his literary genius. He composed 'story poems' in folk refrain and diction. He recreated the mood and manner of the Devadasis of the early 20th century.

Subbu; the Actor and the Sycophant

The narrator mocks Subbu by saying that he was an amazing actor. Although he played minor roles, he performed them better than the lead actors. He always said nice things about everything and everyone. His house was crowded with acquaintances and relatives who stayed there permanently. He was really close and intimate with the Boss and so had many enemies.

The Lawyer in the Story Department of Gemini Studios

The Story Department comprised of a lawyer and a group of writers and poets besides Subbu. The lawyer was the legal adviser but everybody referred to him as the illegal adviser! He had unintentionally brought about a sad end to the career of a budding talented actress by recording her outburst against the producer. The legal adviser looked different from the other members of his department as he wore pants and tie while they wore khadi dhotis and white khadi shirts. He was close to the Boss and was allowed to produce a film which flopped. The lawyer lost his job when the Boss closed the Story Department.

Gemini Studios: The Favourite Haunt of Intelligentsia

Gemini Studios was a hot favourite among the poets of that time. It has an excellent mess which supplied good coffee almost round the clock. Those were the days when the Congress government had implemented prohibition and people enjoyed their leisure time over a cup of coffee. Almost everybody seemed to have ample leisure time at the studio.

The Political Ideology at the Studio

Most of the people at the studio wore khadi and greatly appreciated Gandhiji. All of them were opposed to Communism and had many misconceptions about it. They thought Communists to be violent with no filial or conjugal feelings.

Studio Hosts Frank Buchman's MRA (Moral Re-armament Army)

The MRA, a counter-movement to international Communism, visited Madras in 1952. It comprised of 200 people. The narrator had information that the big bosses of Madras played into their hands. The group was criticised by calling it an international circus. The MRA presented two plays, 'Jotham Valley' and 'The Forgotten Factor'. Their sets and costumes were wonderful. The Gemini family comprising of six hundred members saw the plays repeatedly. The Tamil and Madras drama community were really impressed by them. The sunrise and sunset scenes of 'Jotham Valley' were reproduced in almost all Tamil plays in a similar fashion as that play. The narrator feels that hosting the group was a welcome change from their monotonous routine at the studio.

Another Visitor at Gemini Studios

Another visitor was soon going to visit the Gemini Studios. The staff did not have the faintest idea about him. He was rumoured to be a poet or editor. The visitor was not connected with any of the famous British publications. However, the guest arrived and the Boss read out a very long speech that did not have much to say about the visitor. When the guest's turn came to address

the audience, his accent could not be understood by anybody. His visit remained an "unexplained mystery."

A Short Story Contest Organised by 'The Encounter'

The narrator wanted to have an idea about the periodical's credentials before participating in the contest and spending on the postage. He checked at the British Council Library and found out that the editor's name was Stephen Spender. He recalled that this was the same editor who was a guest at the Gemini Studios. The writer felt that he had discovered a long lost brother and immediately sent his entry excitedly.

The Narrator Buys a Low-Priced book 'The God That Failed'

Some years after leaving his job at the Gemini Studios, the narrator bought a low-priced copy of a book 'The God That Failed' released on the 50th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. It was a compilation of six essays by six different authors on their journey into Communism and their disappointed return. Stephen Spender was one of the contributors. The narrator instantly recalled Stephen Spender's visit to the Gemini Studios. Thus, the mystery was finally solved.

Conclusion of Poets and Pancakes

To sum up, Poets and Pancakes summary, we learn about the film industry in detail and the inside functioning as well as when Independent India was in its infancy.

Questions (Page No. 66) (Understanding The Text)

Question 1. The author has used gentle humour to point out human foibles. Pick out instances of this to show how this serves to make the piece interesting.

Answer: The author used gentle humour in various instances, which adds to the story's eccentricity. For example, the author cleverly framed the make-up artists and pancakes. Subbu's point of view was fantastic. It's amazing how he applies his principal and solves problems. Similarly, the author has incorporated gentle humour into the frustration of the office boy, the praising of Gandhi, the episode of an illegal adviser causing the end of an actress's career, hatred against communism, and the mystery surrounding Stephen Spender.

Question 2. Why was Kothamangalam Subbu considered No. 2 in Gemini Studios?

Answer: Using flattery, Kothamangalam Subbu was able to secure the position closest to The Boss. He wasn't brilliant, but he was a cheerful person who was fiercely loyal to The Boss. When The Boss was in a jam, he offered solutions. As a result, the other employees ranked him second in Gemini Studios.

Question 3. How does the author describe the incongruity of an English poet addressing the audience at Gemini Studios?

Answer: The English poet was speaking in English to the Tamil audience at Gemini Studios, with a typical provincial accent. He was speaking to a dazed and silent audience about the joys and tribulations of being an English poet. This was the inconsistency because his audience had no idea what he was saying.

Question 4. What do you understand about the author's literary inclinations from the account?

Answer: The author was often interested in prose, as evidenced by his book choices, his admiration for Stephen Spender, and the account's recurring theme of prose writings.

Questions (Page No. 66) (Talking About The Text)

Question 1. Discuss in small groups taking off from points in the text.

1. Film-production today has come a long way from the early days of the Gemini Studios.
2. Poetry and films.

3. Humour and criticism.

Answer: Do it yourself.

SHIVOM CLASSES
8696608541