

# SIXTH FINGER

A SHORT STORY BY  
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Classroom Notes for  
BA English, Semester VI  
ENGL3025: Dalit Literature

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# A note on these notes...

- Do you think this PPT can replace an actual classroom, where you gossip with your friends and peacefully sleep during by my long-winded antics?
- **Of course, not.**
- Do you think this PPT can replace the texts prescribed in your syllabus?
- **Of course, not. Then what are these notes worth?**
- These notes are just to excite your curiosity for the ideas discussed. To reap most benefits of the notes, read the texts first.
- By the time, you must have noticed there are two inks used here. It's an interactive PPT. The black ink is for me and the red is yours. Pause and think when the **red ink** appears. Wow end-rhyme. And, click on the hyperlinks.



# Urmila Pawar

- Urmila Pawar “identifies herself as a Dalit woman writer who is a Buddhist and a feminist.” (Veena Deo, xii)
- Born in a Dalit family in Maharashtra in 1945, she converted into Buddhism along with her family members in the age of 12 inspired by Dr Ambedkar.
- After Masters in Marathi Literature, Pawar served in the Public Works Department in Maharashtra while contributing to literature and actively engaging in social and political activism.
- Her short stories, autobiography, and critical articles shed light on the condition of women in Dalit household as well as the modern workforce with a literary flourish.
- You know what. You have the rare privilege of actually listening to Pawar talking about her craft in [Marathi here](#) or in [Hindi here](#). You can also enjoy her conversation about her [autobiography here](#).



# The Writings of Urmila Pawar

- Along with Meenakshi Moon, she co-authored *Amhihi Itihas Ghadavala* (1989) which has been translated to English as *We Also Made History – Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (2008) by Wandana Sonalkar.
- In *Udaan* (1989), she translates Buddha’s teachings from the Hindi translation by Jagdish Kashyap of the texts originally found in Pali.
- She published collections of Marathi short stories *Sahav Bot* (1988) and *Chauthi Bhint* (1990) as well as a travelogue *Mauritius: Ek Pravasa*.
- She also wrote Marathi one-act plays in a volume titled *Doan Ekankika* (1996).
- *Mother Wit* is a collection of English translations of her select Marathi short stories. Translated by Veena Deo with a foreword by Eleanor Zelliot, this book is the source of our story “Sixth Finger” under discussion.



# Let's get into the story...

- 'Sixth Finger' (Sahav Bot) is one of Pawar's most famous stories.
- It deals with the theme of marital suspicion that has spawned many literary narratives across the globe. Remember *Othello* by Shakespeare? The worm of suspicion wrecked havoc in the conjugal life of Othello who suffocated Desdemona to death.
- Sixth Finger also employs a surprise ending which is a feature a many of Pawar's stories. Have you read short stories by O Henry, Chekov, and Saki? In your free time, check out how their stories also employ surprise endings.
- Pawar's stories often showcase strong and modern women characters in workforce. Check out her story "The Odd One" (Vegli). Her stories show women beyond the domestic walls, yet facing different forms of discrimination in a male-dominated work environment.
- Are you curious about the title "sixth finger"? Most human beings have five fingers, right! Do you know any famous celebrity with a sixth finger?



# Narrator and Characters

- The tale is told in a first person narrative. That is to say the narrator is one of the characters in the story.
- She is Viju Kothare who shares with us some incidents about her life, chiefly involving her friend Sneha Dani, her husband Umesh Dani, their mutual friend Nayan Rege, and a small child.
- We also get to know a little about Viju's own life. We know that she is married, she used to work with Sneha earlier, but over the course of the story, their offices have been shifted.
- She is a reliable narrator. That is to say, we can believe what she says. That said, of course, she does not approve of a number of things that her friend Sneha does.
- Her cultural upbringing has swayed her to be a little opinionated, but she has an open mind. She says, “there are as many people as there are opinions”.



# Beginning with a **non-veg story**

- The tale begins with a stray conversation in a railway carriage. While two ladies talk about a honeymoon episode of their mutual friend, one of them says, “**I can't tell you, It's all non-veg you know**”.
- All the people in the earshot are as excited, as you are, hearing the word ‘non-veg’. We then cut to the narrator who says, “Clearly men aren't the only ones engaged in “nonveg” gossip. Women can talk up a storm too. As a matter of fact, if men heard what women talk about, they would hide their faces in shame.”
- **What do you think are nonveg stories? Do they deal with taboo subjects, concerning sex, and concealed body parts? Do you think that non-veg stories like non-veg food are forbidden in some cultures?**
- One of the ways of patriarchal domination is through a linguistic boundary for women who are not supposed to utter non-veg or unparliamentary language in public.
- **One of the ways of feminist assertion was through acceptance of female body parts through openly talking about it. Remember “Laugh of Medusa” by Helen Cixous?**



# How the story unfolds...

- The narrator tells us that her friend Sneha was never shy of talking nonveg things. And one of the things that she remembers is Sneha's stories about her husband's sixth finger.
- Sneha, a chirpy, lively girl once talks about a joke by her husband, Mr Dani. Childless in a marriage after 8 years, once he says "I hope you and Nayan at least can have a baby together."
- Viju is shocked, "Didn't that make you mad"? Sneha says, "my mister is funny and says much worse things sometimes". He didn't say that out of suspicion regarding Nayan and Sneha. In fact, Nayan is their mutual friend. Apparently Sneha and her husband are much free in their conversation that Viju and hers.
- One day, Sneha moves to a different branch of the office. So Viju and Sneha haven't talked for a while. After a year or so, Viju meets Sneha who is much distressed this time. Not the usual funny, free-spirited girl.
- **Why? Let's find out...**





# How the story unfolds...

- When Viju meets Sneha, the latter is pregnant, but distressed. Apparently, her husband doesn't believe that she has conceived a child **by him**. He suspects, rather, he is sure that she is carrying a baby by Nayan.
- You can imagine how distressed and miserable Sneha is in her house right now. About to deliver a baby, and her husband is indifferent, rather hostile to her. Is there a way he can find out if the child is his? May be through blood test, but only after the baby is born.
- The next time Viju sees Sneha is the day when she gets a call from Nayan from hospital. Sneha has delivered a baby, but she has died just after the delivery. In the hospital, she meets Nayan and Mr Dani, both aggrieved. Sneha inquires if her husband could be convinced that the child was his.
- Viju comes to know that he was finally convinced. Because the “baby also had six fingers”. **Remember, her husband had six fingers in one hand.**
- Sneha died with a sigh of relief, having proven her fidelity to her husband. But he could only be convinced of the same when she was about to die.



# Proving Fidelity

- Sneha's story is a tragic and realistic portrayal of the fire ordeal women have gone through ages after ages to prove their fidelity or faithfulness.
- While marriage requires a sense of faithfulness among spouses, a woman often bears the brunt of suspicion more than the man, because of her natural ability to conceive a child.
- Pawar also showcases the way an upfront woman is perceived even by an apparently modern husband like Mr Dani.
- In Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* as well, the woman had to perform a deadly test to prove her fidelity. We also remember the myth of Ahalya who was turned into a stone as her husband Goutam suspected her alliance with Indra, the king of gods.
- Pawar's stories situate the woman in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seemingly unshackled, yet liable to the same kind of ordeal that demands nothing short of death.



# Symbols

- The most potent symbol in the story is the most obvious one. It's the 'sixth finger'. It serves as a phallic symbol which proves conclusively that the child was in fact Mr Dani's. It is also the symbol of Sneha's love for her husband which remains alive even after her death.
- The language of Sneha is a symbol of her freedom. She used to say sleezy tales, nonveg jokes when she was happy in her conjugal life. When saddened, her language became matter-of-factly and formal. **Do you think your language also changes based on your mood?**
- Viju's lunch-break gossip with Sneha stands for the female bonding in the modern society. Domesticated, women used to find avenues of bonding and stress-relief through gossip and folk songs. Employed at an office, Viju and Sneha find that in the lunch break. Their lunch-time discussions acquaint us with the major events of the story.
- **Are there other symbols in the story worth noticing? Find out.**



# References

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**“Mad? Whatever for? He was just joking.”**

...Says Sneha to Viju.  
May be it was more than a joke.

