



Materials for the 2nd activity:

EXTRACTS FROM THE BOOKS

1st NOVEL

Done.

My eyes are open again.

11:52 p.m.—and it really is time to start.

A statutory warning—as they say on cigarette packs—before we begin.

One day, as I was driving my ex-employers Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam in their Honda City car, Mr. Ashok put a hand on my shoulder, and said, “Pull over to the side.” Following this command, he leaned forward so close that I could smell his aftershave—it was a delicious, fruitlike smell that day —and said, politely as ever, “Balram, I have a few questions to ask you, all right?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Balram,” Mr. Ashok asked, “how many planets are there in the sky?”

I gave the answer as best as I could.

“Balram, who was the first prime minister of India?”

And then: “Balram, what is the difference between a Hindu and a Muslim?”

And then: “What is the name of our continent?”

Mr. Ashok leaned back and asked Pinky Madam, “Did you hear his answers?”

“Was he joking?” she asked, and my heart beat faster, as it did every time she said something.

“No. That’s really what he thinks the correct answers are.”

She giggled when she heard this: but his face, which I saw reflected in my rearview mirror, was serious.

“The thing is, he probably has...what, two, three years of schooling in him? He can read and write, but he doesn’t get what he’s read. He’s half-baked. The country is full of people like him, I’ll tell you that. And we entrust our glorious parliamentary democracy”—he pointed at me—“to characters like these. That’s the whole tragedy of this country.”

He sighed. “All right, Balram, start the car again.”

That night, I was lying in bed, inside my mosquito net, thinking about his words. He was right, sir —I didn’t like the way he had spoken about me, but he was right.

“The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian.” That’s what I ought to call my life’s story.



2nd NOVEL

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun. The nights are clear, but suffused with sloth and sullen expectation. But by early June the southwest monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn moss green. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways.

It was raining when Rahel came back to Ayemenem. Slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, plowing it up like gunfire. The old house on the hill wore its steep, gabled roof pulled over its ears like a low hat. The walls, streaked with moss, had grown soft, and bulged a little with dampness that seeped up from the ground. The wild, overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives. In the undergrowth a rat snake rubbed itself against a glistening stone. Hopeful yellow bullfrogs cruised the scummy pond for mates. A drenched mongoose flashed across the leaf-strewn driveway.

The house itself looked empty. The doors and windows were locked. The front verandah bare. Unfurnished. But the skyblue Plymouth with chrome tailfins was still parked outside, and inside, Baby Kochamma was still alive. She was Rahel's baby grandaunt, her grandfather's younger sister. Her name was really Navomi, Navomi Ipe, but everybody called her Baby. She became Baby Kochamma when she was old enough to be an aunt. Rahel hadn't come to see her, though. Neither niece nor baby grandaunt labored under any illusions on that account. Rahel had come to see her brother, Estha. They were two-egg twins. "Dizygotic" doctors called them. Born from separate but simultaneously fertilized eggs. Estha—Esthappen was the older by eighteen minutes.

They never did look much like each other, Estha and Rahel, and even when they were thin-armed children, flat-chested, wormridden and Elvis Presley-puffed, there was none of the usual "Who is who?" and "Which is which?" from oversmiling relatives or the Syrian Orthodox bishops who frequently visited the Ayemenem House for donations.



3rd NOVEL

Each morning she escapes to the mansion where Manorama is teaching her how to become a proper daughter-in-law of the Chowdhury household. She had hoped that her engagement—and the fact that she has given up the clinic as Bina had demanded—would make her mother happy.

But an inexplicable coldness continues to emanate from Bina, so Priya is thankful for this refuge.

Her time at the Chowdhury home is more pampered vacation than rigorous training. A brief visit to the kitchen where she watches Manorama discuss the menu with Keshto, a beauty treatment or two, a head massage with perfumed coconut oil, then off to chess with the eagerly waiting Somnath. The three eat lunch together. Most days Amit cannot join them; he is taking his estate management duties very seriously.

It is because he is going to be a married man,' Manorama declares, 'and perhaps a father soon after, God willing.'

Priya smiles. She does not plan to have children until she finishes medical college and establishes a practice. But she does not tell anyone this.

Why invite arguments before they become unavoidable?

Baba, I think you would agree that some wisdom is finally seeping into your daughter's stubborn skull.

In the afternoon, while the elders nap, Priya reads the papers. Somnath started having them sent regularly from Calcutta after Nabakumar died.

Perhaps he felt guilty for not paying attention to the news earlier, not knowing enough to warn his friend to stay away from the city during Direct Action Day. Over tea he and Priya discuss events, though sometimes they do not agree. He believes in Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel, their pragmatic approach to power; she is unwilling to relinquish Gandhi's vision of a united India, utopian though it might be. The papers are guardedly optimistic about a possible separation that will satisfy both Hindus and Muslims and give autonomy to the Congress and the Muslim League. The new nation will be called Pakistan, land of the pure.

But there are disturbing rumbles. A riot here, a burning there. Women abducted. Men shot. Already, people are taking precautions in case the situation deteriorates. The rich and canny exchange mansions in Dacca or Lahore for garden estates in the Calcutta suburbs or stately residences in Delhi. The less fortunate abandon generations-old dwellings and make their way across the border—or where they think the border will be because no one quite knows yet—their possessions reduced to the bundles on their heads. Bus owners and lorry drivers grow fat on the hopes and fears of passengers; people perch precariously atop speeding trains.

An uneasy time. Priya wonders how much worse it will get before it becomes better.