

Lost Spring: Explanation

Author: Anees Jung

Instructions for the students: Students are asked to go through the text with the explanation of the text. The red coloured portion carries the explanation of the lesson. The meanings of difficult words are also included. Students are asked to contact the teacher if any difficulty is found.

Part I - ‘Sometimes I find a Rupee in the garbage’

“Why do you do this?” I ask Saheb whom I encounter every morning scrounging for gold in the garbage dumps of my neighborhood. Saheb left his home long ago. Set amidst the green fields of Dhaka, his home is not even a distant memory. There were many storms that swept away their fields and homes, his mother tells him. That’s why they left, looking for gold in the big city where he now lives.

Scrounging – searching for

Amidst – in the middle of

Every morning, the writer sees a young rag picker boy who visits the garbage dump near her house and searches for ‘gold’ in it. The writer says that he searches for ‘gold’ ironically because although the garbage dump is full of useless, thrown away things, still he shuffles it so minutely as if he will get something as precious as ‘gold’ from it. The boy’s name is Saheb. His home in Dhaka was in the middle of green fields. They had left it many years ago and he does not remember it anymore. His mother had told him that there were many storms which destroyed their homes and fields. So, they left home and shifted to the cities in search of ‘gold’. The writer again says, “looking for gold in the big city”. Gold here refers to something precious which was not available in their hometown. Basic necessary things like food, clothing, shelter as means of survival were not there. The boy searches for such precious things in the garbage dumps. One day the writer questions Saheb and asks him the reason for shuffling through the garbage.

“I have nothing else to do,” he mutters, looking away.

“Go to school,” I say glibly, realising immediately how hollow the advice must sound.

“There is no school in my neighbourhood. When they build one, I will go.”

“If I start a school, will you come?” I ask, half-joking.

Mutters – to speak in a low voice

Glibly - speaking or spoken in a confident way, but without careful thought or honesty

Hollow – meaningless

Saheb replies to the writer that he has nothing else to do other than rag picking. The writer suggests that he should go to school. She realizes that her advice is meaningless for the poor boy. He replies that there are no schools in the area where he lives. He also assures her that he will go to school when one is built near his house. The writer asks him jokingly that if she opened a school would he attend it.

“Yes,” he says, smiling broadly. A few days later I see him running up to me. “Is your school ready?”

“It takes longer to build a school,” I say, embarrassed at having made a promise that was not meant. But promises like mine abound in every corner of his bleak world.

Embarrassed - feeling ashamed

abound - exist in large numbers

bleak – empty

Saheb says that he would join the writer’s school and after a few days, he runs up to her to ask whether her school is ready. The writer replies that it takes a lot of time to build a school. She feels

ashamed at making such false promise. She said this as a joke and never intended to open a school, so she felt ashamed of herself. Saheb is not hurt because he was used to such false promises made by everyone around him. His world is empty as no promise made to Saheb was ever fulfilled.

After months of knowing him, I ask him his name. “Saheb-e-Alam,” he announces. He does not know what it means. If he knew its meaning — lord of the universe — he would have a hard time believing it. Unaware of what his name represents, he roams the streets with his friends, an army of barefoot boys who appear like the morning birds and disappear at noon. Over the months, I have come to recognise each of them.

barefoot – wearing nothing in the feet

The writer has known Saheb for a few months and she asks him his name. He replies that his name is Saheb – E – Alam. The writer explains that the boy does not know the meaning of his name and if he come to know that his name means “Lord of the Universe” he will not be able to believe it. The meaning of his name is opposite to his present life. He goes around the streets with a group of friends. It is like an army of boys who do not wear any footwear. They appear in the morning like the morning birds and disappear at noon. The writer can recognize all of them as she has been seeing them for the past few months.

“Why aren’t you wearing chappals?” I ask one.

“My mother did not bring them down from the shelf,” he answers simply.

The writer asks one of them that why is he not wearing any footwear. The boy simply replies that his mother did not get them down from the shelf. As they were beyond his reach, he did not wear them.

“Even if she did he will throw them off,” adds another who is wearing shoes that do not match. When I comment on it, he shuffles his feet and says nothing. “I want shoes,” says a third boy who has never owned a pair all his life. Travelling across the country I have seen children walking barefoot, in cities, on village roads. It is not lack of money but a tradition to stay barefoot, is one explanation. I wonder if this is only an excuse to explain away a perpetual state of poverty.

Shuffles - slides them over each other

excuse - a reason to justify a fault

perpetual state of poverty - never ending condition of being poor

Another boy who is wearing a different shoe in each foot said that even if his mother would have given him the footwear, he would have thrown it away. He means that the boy is not wearing footwear because he does not want to wear one. The writer asks the second boy the reason for wearing a different shoe in each foot. He does not reply and shuffles his feet as he tries to hide the shoes. A third boy says that he is eager to get a pair of shoes as he has never owned one all his life. The writer takes the example of shoes to highlight the condition of these boys. They search the garbage dumps looking for such precious things. She further tells us that as she travelled across the country, she had seen many children walking barefoot in the cities as well as the villages. The reason that they are barefoot not due to lack of money to buy footwear, but being barefoot is a tradition for them. The writer wonders and concludes that the reason of it being a tradition is a mere excuse to hide the fact that they are so poor that they cannot afford footwear.

I remember a story a man from Udipi once told me. As a young boy he would go to school past an old temple, where his father was a priest. He would stop briefly at the temple and pray for a pair of shoes. Thirty years later I visited his town and the temple, which was now drowned in an air of desolation. In the backyard, where lived the new priest, there were red and white plastic chairs. A young boy dressed in a grey uniform, wearing socks and shoes, arrived panting and threw his school bag on a folding bed. Looking at the boy, I remembered the prayer another boy had made to the goddess when he had finally got a pair of shoes, “Let me never lose them.” The goddess had

granted his prayer. Young boys like the son of the priest now wore shoes. But many others like the ragpickers in my neighbourhood remain shoeless

Desolation - the state of being empty

Panting - taking short and quick breathes

The writer narrates a story told to her by a man from Udipi. (Udipi is a town in Karnataka).

When he was a young boy, he would walk to his school. On the way, he would cross a temple where his father worked as a priest. He would stop at the temple and pray to God to bless him with a pair of shoes. After thirty years the writer visited the town and the temple. Now the place was nearly empty. The new priest lived in the backyard of the temple. Plastic chairs in red and white colour were kept there. A young boy came running. He was wearing grey coloured school uniform, socks and shoes. He had a school bag hung on his shoulders. He threw it on the bed and ran away. The writer wants to say that the financial position of the priest at the temple had improved over the last thirty years. Now, he could afford shoes for this children. She is now reminded of another boy who got a pair of shoes. He prayed to the goddess that he may never lose the shoes that he had got. The goddess had granted his prayer as the boy never lost his footwear. This shows us that the underprivileged value anything that they get because they have been longing for it.

My acquaintance with the barefoot ragpickers leads me to Seemapuri, a place on periphery of Delhi yet miles away from it, metaphorically. Those who live here are squatters who came from Bangladesh back in 1971. Saheb's family is among them. Seemapuri was then a wilderness. It still is, but it is no longer empty. In structures of mud, with roofs of tin and tarpaulin, devoid of sewage, drainage or running water, live 10,000 ragpickers.

Acquaintance - contact

periphery- outer area

metaphorically—symbolically

squatters - a person who unlawfully occupies an uninhabited building or unused land

wilderness- a wasteland

tarpaulin- heavy-duty waterproof cloth

The writer describes the area where these rag picker boys live. Seemapuri, located on the outskirts of Delhi is very different from the capital of the country. In 1971 when these rag pickers had migrated from Bangladesh, the area had been a wasteland. Seemapuri is still a wasteland but now it is not empty as almost ten thousand rag pickers lived there in structures made of mud, with roofs made of thin sheets of tin or plastic material called tarpaulin. There is no sewage, drainage or running water facility available in Seemapuri. They live in unhygienic conditions. It is a piece of wasteland where the garbage of the city is collected. These people had started living there illegally.

They have lived here for more than thirty years without an identity, without permits but with ration cards that get their names on voters' lists and enable them to buy grain. Food is more important for survival than an identity. "If at the end of the day we can feed our families and go to bed without an aching stomach, we would rather live here than in the fields that gave us no grain," say a group of women in tattered saris when I ask them why they left their beautiful land of green fields and rivers.

Permits – legal documents

Tattered – torn

The ragpickers had been living illegally in Seemapuri for the last thirty years. They have occupied the area without government permission or ownership. The politicians of the area have provided them ration cards and voter identity cards. They got grocery for their family through these ration cards and in return, they cast their votes in favour of the politician who had helped them. The writer asked a group of women who were wearing torn saris that why did they leave their homes in Dhaka. They replied that if they were able to satisfy the hunger of their families and sleep well at night, they were happier to live in Seemapuri than their fields in Dhaka which were ruined and gave them no food.

Wherever they find food, they pitch their tents that become transit homes. Children grow up in them, becoming partners in survival. And survival in Seemapuri means rag-picking. Through the years, it has acquired the proportions of a fine art. Garbage to them is gold. It is their daily bread, a roof over their heads, even if it is a leaking roof. But for a child it is even more.

Transit homes – a temporary home

These people travelled in search of food and wherever they found it, they set up temporary homes and started living there. Their children kept on growing there and gradually, they also started helping their parents in seeking means of survival. For those who lived in Seemapuri, the means of survival was rag picking. As they had been doing it for many years, they became trained at rag picking and did it well. For the rag pickers the garbage was as precious as gold. These families searched the garbage dumps and got things which they sold to earn their food. For the children, the garbage dumps were more than a means of survival.

“I sometimes find a rupee, even a ten-rupee note,” Saheb says, his eyes lighting up. When you can find a silver coin in a heap of garbage, you don’t stop scrounging, for there is hope of finding more. It seems that for children, garbage has a meaning different from what it means to their parents. For the children it is wrapped in wonder, for the elders it is a means of survival.

Lighting up – show joy and happiness

Saheb is happy to say that sometimes he finds a rupee and even a ten – rupee note in the dump. As one often finds even a silver coin in the garbage dump, he keeps on searching hoping to find more. For the children, the garbage dump is a means of fulfilling their dreams although partially while for their parents, it is a means of aiding survival by providing the basics - food, clothing and shelter.

One winter morning I see Saheb standing by the fenced gate of the neighbourhood club, watching two young men dressed in white, playing tennis. “I like the game,” he hums, content to watch it

standing behind the fence. “I go inside when no one is around,” he admits. “The gatekeeper lets me use the swing.”

Content – satisfied

One winter morning the writer sees Saheb standing by the fence of a club. He is watching a tennis game being played by two young men. Saheb likes the game but could not play it. He tells the writer that he goes inside the club when it is be closed. He is allowed to take swings by the guard there.

Saheb too is wearing tennis shoes that look strange over his discoloured shirt and shorts. “Someone gave them to me,” he says in the manner of an explanation. The fact that they are discarded shoes of some rich boy, who perhaps refused to wear them because of a hole in one of them, does not bother him. For one who has walked barefoot, even shoes with a hole is a dream come true. But the game he is watching so intently is out of his reach.

Discarded – thrown away

Bother – worry

The writer sees that Saheb is also wearing tennis shoes. They do not look appropriate with his dress which is worn out and has faded. He tells the writer in an attempt to justify himself that someone gave him the shoes. She however figures out that he has got them from a garbage dump. They must have been thrown away by a boy from a rich family as he did not want to wear them anymore. They had a hole or two in them due to which he did not want to wear them. On the contrary, Saheb is not bothered by this fact and has no problem wearing them as he cannot afford anything better than that. He walked barefoot and to wear a shoe even with a hole is like a dream for him. Although due to the garbage dump, Saheb’s dream of wearing shoes has been partially fulfilled but his desire to play tennis would never be fulfilled.

This morning, Saheb is on his way to the milk booth. In his hand is a steel canister. "I now work in a tea stall down the road," he says, pointing in the distance. "I am paid 800 rupees and all my meals." Does he like the job? I ask. His face, I see, has lost the carefree look. The steel canister seems heavier than the plastic bag he would carry so light over his shoulder. The bag was his. The canister belongs to the man who owns the tea shop. Saheb is no longer his own master.

One morning the writer meets Saheb who is on his way to the milk booth. He is holding a steel container. He tells her that he has got a job at the nearby tea stall. He will earn eight hundred rupees a month and get meals too. The writer asked him if he likes the job as she could see that he has lost the carefree look. As now Saheb is working for someone else and is carrying his master's container, he is burdened with responsibility. Earlier, as a rag picker, Saheb would carry his own bag and was his own master. Now, he was no longer his own master.