

For Mataji

✧ Amita Handa

Learning Goals

- examine the relationship between characters
- analyze an author's use of parallel incidents and a narrative hook
- create a free verse poem based on a text
- write and present a eulogy

"It's like going to sleep with your eyes open," she murmured. I didn't understand. Maybe the true meaning was lost because I didn't know all the Punjabi words. It's like Punjabi jokes, they make me laugh until my stomach aches but when I try telling them in English, they're not funny anymore. I fell asleep next to her and dreamt about the brand new vacuum cleaner I wrote on with pen. Oooh was ma ever mad. She slapped me. I felt so grown up because this time I didn't even cry. In the morning ma dressed me in a white dress, kissed me, and rushed off to work. It was early, eight o'clock, and I was feeling quite cranky. I sat at the kitchen table and tried to count all the little marks on the wall which I had made the day before with my crayon set. Mataji told me to drink my juice. It was in my favourite, old scratched-up thick yellow glass. As I picked up the glass my elbow slipped off the table and the juice ran pretty colours all over my dress. Mataji scolded me for being so clumsy and pulled me into my room. She had never dressed me before, it was always ma. She rummaged through the drawers and pulled out a white slip with lace on it. She started putting it on me. "This is a nice dress," she said.

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The nurse came in and fiddled with the IV. I watched it drip down slowly into the tube. I wondered if she could feel every drop enter her. Her sleep was disturbed. "Were you sitting here all this time?" she asked. "Yeah, I was thinking about when I was little and we lived in Thorncliffe Park." She started to cry. I thought it was nostalgia and sentiment. "I must have done something awful in my last life," she said. "What do you mean?" She was out of breath and couldn't speak. I tried to console her with my hand rubbing hers. "Must have been something horrible," she repeated. "They took me into a room and poked needles in my head. What did I do?" She began to sob. I felt lost, confused, startled. Was she dreaming? Ahh Cat Scan. I thought of her lying on the bed. Doctors and nurses wheeling her into a big room, her protesting in Punjabi. "Now Mrs. Handa, we're going

to do a Cat Scan." Only for her, it was blah, blah, blah, poke, poke. I tried to explain the Cat Scan but she fell asleep again. I drifted off too.

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"Mataji!" I yelled, "I can't wear this, it's a slip." I looked at her in frustration and realized there was no use. She was a stubborn woman. I started to cry, but nonetheless off we went across the street to school. My kindergarten teacher looked at me funny. I tried to keep away from the other kids. We had new blocks and puzzles to play with and I soon forgot about the slip. Mataji sat between the double doors like she always did from the time I went into the classroom until noon, when school was over to walk me home, even though we lived in the apartment building right across the street. She always sat on the floor and leaned against the wall and I'd sneak out to visit her. At about ten o'clock, I got bored with the new games and when the teacher left the room, I went to see Mataji but she wasn't there. I felt frantic and went back to the classroom. Where is she? Five minutes passed and I went back. Sure enough there she was. She had gone out for some fresh air. I sat on her lap. She took out some roti and subji (cooked vegetables) which she had wrapped in foil paper and started feeding me. I pressed my cheek against her sari. I could smell the coconut oil in her hair as she rubbed my head with her hand. "When you finish school, we'll go to the Mall," she said. I loved going to the Mall with her. I would always try to count out the change 'cause she didn't know what all the different sized coins stood for. I felt like an adult when I would translate for her and the cashier.

I wasn't hungry anymore so she put the leftovers back in the foil and took out her copy of the *Gita*. It was written in Punjabi. "Mataji, I thought you couldn't read." "I can't," she said, "but I can make out a little bit from years of hearing it being read." I remember once she told me she wasn't allowed to learn how to read. When her brothers were in school she would sit near the school yard and write out the alphabet with her finger in the sand. She would copy the letters from billboards or any other written material around. But she would always get caught. Her brothers would hit her hands with a stick and tell her she was forbidden to write, so she stopped doing so. "How come girls couldn't go to school?" I asked. "Girls weren't looked at in the same way," she said. She told me that with the birth of a

son the whole village celebrates, but when a daughter is born there is no such fireworks, mostly just condolences. When I was born in England, Mataji was still in India. She told everyone in Ferozepore I was a boy so she could have a big celebration for me. This was my favourite story. How she tricked everyone! She didn't even tell my grandfather. They must have been so mad when they found out I was a girl.

I heard the teacher's voice in the classroom so I hugged her and went back in. I decided to put together the orange puzzle this time. It was difficult. Too many pieces that wouldn't fit so I pushed hard on them until they would.

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The nurse walked in to monitor the IV. They did that according to schedule every hour or so. Mataji wasn't wearing a sari, but some kind of nightie. She looked clownish, she had never worn anything but a sari all her life. I looked down to watch her breathe. Each breath was a struggle—her whole body moved on the inhale and she kept on taking the oxygen mask off. "She's only semi-conscious now, it's the pneumonia," the nurse said. Mataji's eyes were closed. I held her hand and squeezed hard, hoping she could feel me. She began muttering something. She opened her eyes wide and stared at the ceiling. The words got louder and she reached out with both hands to claw at something in the air. She looked frightened. "She's just disoriented," the nurse said as she walked out of the room. Maybe she can really see something that we can't, I thought.

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Puzzles are boring I decided. So now it was time to do some work in my colouring book. I would always cross the lines, never being able to stay within them. But I liked it better when I didn't have to worry about doing it right and could just let my crayons go wherever they wanted, wherever I wanted. The teacher came over, glanced at my artwork and knelt down beside me. "Your grandmother can't come here any more," she said. "But why?" I blurted out. "She can drop you off and pick you up, but that's all." "What did she do wrong, she's not doing any harm," I cried. "I'm sorry," she muttered.

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The phone rang. It was my father telling us to come to the hospital right away. I knew something had happened. We got there as soon as we could and entered the room. Dad was standing beside the bed, eyes closed. "I saw her last breath," he said. She looked really peaceful, just as they say. No more strain in her face, the struggle was gone. We all stood there silently, our eyes closed. The nurse came in, opened the curtains, picked up my grandmother's hand and pressed her fingers to her wrist. She dropped the hand, took out a needle from her pocket, and began to feel around for veins in Mataji's arm. "What are you doing?" my sister gasped. "The doctor ordered to draw some blood," she stated and proceeded to put together the needle. "But she's dead. . . ."

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The bell rang and my teacher walked away. I knew she had already talked to Mataji because she wasn't there any more. The space between the double doors was empty. I tried to open the door but couldn't. I waited until one of the older kids opened it for themselves and quickly leaned my body against it before it shut, so that I could pass through. Maybe Mataji's waiting for me outside, I thought. But she wasn't, I looked everywhere. I approached the street to cross over to the other side. I saw my mom driving by. She sometimes let me ride across the street in the car if she saw me without Mataji on her way home for lunch. I waved and yelled. As she looked over her jaw hung open in embarrassment. She drove right by me. I didn't understand, did she not see me? But she looked right at me. As the wind blew by, I caught a glimpse of cloth. I looked down and remembered about the slip. . . .

¶ Amita Handa was born in England and raised in Toronto, Canada. She has published a series of interviews with South Asian women living in Canada entitled *Caught Between Omissions* (2001). "For Mataji" is from *Fireweed*, February 1990. In a note to the story, Amita Handa wrote: "This is not a story about all South Asian families, about all South Asian grandmothers, mothers, and daughters. This is a story about one family, a story about my grandmother from a pre-industrialized generation and some of the barriers and alienation she faced once she migrated to Canada." (*Born England* 1964)

RESPONDING

Meaning

1. Describe the character of Mataji. How does she attempt to keep her cultural traditions alive in Canada? What barriers does she face?
2. To what degree does the expression, "The acorn doesn't fall far from the tree," apply to the relationship between the narrator and her grandmother?

Form and Style

3. Handa structures her narrative around a series of parallel incidents.
 - a) Describe two of these incidents.
 - b) How effectively does this structure contribute to our understanding of the story and to our emotional response to Mataji's death?
4. A *narrative hook* is a strategy used by a writer to immediately engage the reader's interest. Evaluate the author's use of culturally specific details in the first paragraph in terms of engaging and keeping the interest of the reader.

Creative Extension

5. Write a free verse poem describing Mataji's thoughts and emotions when she is told by the teacher that she may not wait at the school for her granddaughter.
6. Assume the role of the narrator and present a *eulogy* for Mataji. Be sure to include details from the story and your own ideas about Mataji's life.