

POETS AND PANCAKES
ASOKAMITHRAN

Theme :An account of the events and personalities in a film company in the early days of Indian cinema.

Sub-Theme

Poets and writers in a film company environment.

Main Points

- ☐ The Gemini studio was located in Madras(Chennai)
- ☐ The writer recounts his years in the company
- ☐ The make-up department was in the upstairs of a building that was believed to have been Robert Clive's stables.
- ☐ Pancake was the brand name of the make- up material used by the artists in Gemini studios.
- ☐ The make-up room had the look of a hair -cutting salon with incandescent lights at all angles around half a dozen large mirrors, writer speaks about the 'fiery misery' 'of those subjected to make-up.
- ☐ There was a great deal of 'national integration' in the department and a strict hierarchy was maintained there.
- ☐ The players who played the crowd were the responsibility of the 'office boy' in his early forties, a frustrated person, who turned all his anger towards Kothamanagalam Subbu.
- ☐ The author's job was to cut out newspaper clippings and store them in files.
- ☐ Most people including the 'boy' thought author was doing 'next to nothing'.
- ☐ S SVasan (editor of Tamil weekly Ananada Vikatan') was the owner of the studios. Subbu was No.2.
- ☐ Subbu -a Brahmin ,had the ability to look cheerful at all times ,could be 'inspired when commanded', was tailor -made for films, had a separate identity as a poet and actor, had genuine love for others , was charitable, always seen with The Boss, attached to Story Department.
- ☐ Story Department-assembly of poets and writers, wore khadi
- ☐ A lawyer(legal adviser) -referred to as 'the opposite'-caused the end of a brief and brilliant career of a talented actress, looked 'alone and helpless', man of cold logic in a crowd of dreamers ,close to the Boss, wore pants, coat and a tie, attached to Story Department, lost his job when the Story Department was closed down.

- Gemini studios –favourite haunt of poets, excellent mess which supplied good coffee, Congress rule meant prohibition, almost everyone radiated leisure, wore Khadi and worshipped Gandhi, averse to Communism.
- Visit of MRA (a kind of counter movement to international Communism) in 1952-presented two plays ‘The Forgotten Factor’ and ‘Jotham Valley’ in a professional manner, impressed Madras and Tamil drama community
- Another visitor-a poet from England, tall man, very English ,addressed ‘a more dazed and silent audience’, visit remained an unexplained mystery, staff did not know whether he was a poet or an editor
- Author’s conviction about prose-writers –‘prose writing is for the patient, persistent, persevering drudge’, short story contest by a British periodical ‘The Encounter’-found in the British Council Library almost ‘untouched by readers’, discovered Stephen Spender was the editor
- Author bought ‘The God That Failed’ years later –six essays describing the disillusionment of six eminent men of letters with Communism, Stephen Spender one among them, author suddenly realized the relevance of his visit to Gemini studios.

Short Answer Questions

1. What does the writer mean by ‘the fiery misery’ of those subjected to make-up’?

The make-up room of Gemini Studios looked like a hair cutting salon. It had around half a dozen mirrors with incandescent lights at all angles around them. The artists would feel the heat emanating from these lights. Thus, the writer uses the term ‘fiery misery’ to denote the uncomfortable situation of those subjected to make-up.

: 2.What is the example of national integration that the author refers to?

The make-up division of the Gemini Studios was an example of national integration. According to the author, this is so because people from different regions and religious groups worked together in the same department. The department was headed by a Bengali who was succeeded by a Maharashtrian. The other helpers included a Dharwar Kannadiga, an Andhra, a Madras Indian Christian, an Anglo-Burmese and the local Tamils.

3 .Why was the office boy frustrated? Who did he show his anger on?

The office boy had joined the studio years ago in the hope of becoming an actor or a screenwriter, or a director, or a lyricist. The fact that he ended up becoming none of these left him frustrated. According to him, “great literary talent was

being allowed to go waste in a department fit only for barbers and perverts”. He used to direct his anger at the author even though it was meant for Kothamangalam Subbu.

4. Subbu is described as a many-sided genius. List four of his special abilities. Subbu was a multi-disciplinarian. He could provide solutions to problems and remain cheerful all the time. He was an actor, a poet and a novelist.

5. Did the people at Gemini Studios have any particular political affiliations? The people at Gemini Studios did not have any particular political affiliations. The common political notions of the day managed to influence them but that was limited to wearing Khadi and admiring the Gandhian philosophy. They were averse to the term ‘Communism’ but had only an erroneous understanding of the concept.

6. Why was the Moral Re-Armament army welcomed at the studio? Frank Buchman’s Moral Re-Armament army was welcomed at the studio mainly because of their political association. The people at the Gemini Studios were averse to Communism, and hence, were ready to play host to the MRA. Apart from that, the studio people hardly had any occupation and suffered from boredom. The MRA came as a welcome change to their monotonous days at the studio.

LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS

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

The audience at the Gemini studios was not knowledgeable enough to understand the thrills and travails of an English poet, of which the visitor poet-editor talked about, in his speech. The studio made films for simple people whose limited resources did not provide them with an opportunity to develop a taste in English poetry. The audience failed to understand anything the poet said, all the more, because of the latter’s accent. The poet-editor, in turn, looked baffled realizing the utter inappropriateness of his speech being directed to such an audience.

2. What do you understand about the author’s literary inclinations from the account?

Though the author had a very tedious and unchallenging job at the studios, his interest in literature and writing is apparent in his willingness to participate in the short story contest organized by the British periodical, ‘The Encounter’. Moreover, the author appears to be a keen reader visiting libraries and buying books on wide-ranging topics whenever he could afford them. The narrative also establishes the fact that the author was one of the most knowledgeable

persons in Gemini Studios. His idea about how prose writing was not meant for geniuses but for those with patience and perseverance, highlights his deep thoughts on literature and creative writing.

QUESTIONS BASED ON EXTRACTS

(1) Gemini Studios was the favourite haunt of poets.'

- a). Name any two poets who used to meet there regularly.
- b). Why was the Gemini Studios the favourite haunt of poets?
- c). Did the people at the studios have any political affiliations?
- d). Find a word/phrase which means 'a place often visited'

Answers

- a).S.D,S Yogiar/Sangu Subramaniam/Krishna Sastry /Harindranath Chattopadhyaya
- b).It was an excellent place for coffee at all times.
- c).Most of the people wore Khadi and worshipped Gandhiji but beyond that they did not appreciate any political thought.
- d).haunt

(2)"He is not a poet. He is an editor. That's why The Boss is giving him a big reception."

- a) Who is 'he' being talked about?
- b) Why was he invited to the Gemini Studios?
- c) Who is The Boss?
- d) Was 'he' able to make his visit meaningful?

Answers

- a) He refers to the poet Stephen Spender.
- b) He was invited to address the staff of the Gemini Studios.
- c) The Boss is Mr.S S Vasan ,the owner of the studio.
- d) His visit could not be proved meaningful as none could understand what he intended to say as his accent was beyond their comprehension.

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