

# The White Towel

## Bali Rai

### Pre-Reading Activities

1. Explore this picture.



2. Where is the Punjab?



### 3. Read the text.

Dust, red and dry, burned in my nostrils, as a relentless sun beat down on my uncovered head. The pails of creamy white water buffalo milk I was carrying increased in weight with every step I took along the narrow path between my Grandfather's house and that of his brother. I was helping out with chores. Doing my bit. I was on holiday from England. Three boring weeks in my grandfather's village, getting fried by the sun and eaten by the mosquitoes that droned through the night like the bombers that destroyed parts of London during the war. I spent every night waiting to get bombed. And every morning I woke up itchy, covered in raw, red bumps.

My T-shirt was soaked through; the sky blue fabric was now a kind of dark navy, and my trainers were wrecked, covered in dust, crusted mud and stained by the thick, warm milk that I was spilling everywhere. It was all down my trousers too, like I'd had an accident with a porno mag and my left hand. Something was crawling down my neck, tickling the hairs it found with its legs. I wanted to slap the little bastard, whatever it was, into oblivion, but I couldn't put the pails down. I'd never pick them up again if I did. I couldn't believe the way that my Indian cousins worked in the sun, out tending the fields, and never even complained. The heat was a nightmare. And they were all so strong but skinny with it. Like sticks with string for muscle. Stronger than me. But like my old man used to tell me all the time - me and my sister had it easy.

'Blinkin' easy the life you's got, innit? Everything buy for you an' food on table. Even your bottoms clean for you. Wanna try life in bleedin' India for a week.'

Then he'd chuckle to himself.

'Prob'ly kill you though...'

Suddenly my head grew light and I felt dizzy. I stumbled and then fell, spilling the milk everywhere. My forehead caught the edge of one of the pails as I fell and the metal rim cut through the skin. I turned over onto my back and touched the wound. Blood was streaming out, rich and crimson. I lay there for a while, trying to catch my breath as a cold sweat broke out all over my body. My thoughts were all fuzzy and I began to shiver. I had a fever.

I got up slowly. I was unsure on my feet for a moment before steadying myself and heading for the house. I walked into the open courtyard holding a hand against the gash in my forehead. My fingers were covered with blood which had also dripped onto my dusty, sweaty T-shirt. My father's youngest sister came out and ran towards me, holding her hands to her mouth.

'Beteh, what's happened to you?' she said in Punjabi.

As she spoke her husband came over with a towel and put it to my head, dabbing it gently to the wound.

'I don't know,' I replied, in my best Punjabi. 'I felt dizzy and then I fell over.'

#### Oral Activity

- a) Does the boy like his holidays? Give reasons.
- b) Why did he feel dizzy?
- c) Describe the boy's accident.

#### 4. OPTION 1

You will be read the next part of the text. When you have listened, work in small groups and describe the uncle and aunt's reactions and give reasons for their behaviour.

#### 4. OPTION 2

Read this excerpt.

My uncle pulled the towel away from my head and looked at the cut. As he did so I was looking at my aunt, who saw the towel and then flinched. A sad, distant look crossed her face like a dark cloud and she looked down, squeezing one hand into the other. The white towel was covered in blood. My uncle guided me by the shoulder into the house and sat me down on a *manjah*, which is like a bed, with a wooden frame and interwoven strands of rope to make up the mattress.

'Sohni!' he shouted to my cousin, 'Run and get Sahota doctor-ji.'

I shivered as a strong fever took over and faded out of consciousness, my mind wondering about my aunt's reaction to the towel. She hadn't flinched at it like someone who hates the sight of blood would. She had just looked sad. Like it reminded her of something. I wondered what it could have been as I passed out...

#### OPTION A

In groups of 3 or 4 go through the text and quote the uncle and aunt's reactions.

#### OPTION B

*In groups of 3 or 4 describe the uncle and aunt's reactions and give reasons for that behaviour.*

#### *Aunt's Reaction*

- ▶ \_\_\_\_\_
- ▶ \_\_\_\_\_

#### *Uncle's Reaction*

- ▶ \_\_\_\_\_

## 1. Read the text.

Later, as I lay shivering in the humidity and heat of a Punjabi summer, the fever burning through my body, I asked my aunt why she had reacted in that way.

‘To what, beteh?’ she said, like she was trying to put me off.

‘The towel, Aunty-ji. You looked really sad when you saw the towel. Why?’

She looked away and the same cloud as before passed across her face.

‘It’s nothing....’

I didn’t believe her.

‘It must be something because you’ve just done it again,’ I insisted.

She sighed and then got up, walked over to the door to the room and pushed it shut. Then she returned and sat by my side, picking up a damp cloth and wiping sweat from my burning forehead, carefully avoiding the wound, which had been treated with iodine and then patched up with a dressing.

‘Beteh, there are things that you don’t understand. About our family.’

‘Such as...?’

‘We had a sister, your father and me. A younger sister. Jagpreet. She was so beautiful and clever and full of joy...’

‘The one that went mad and killed herself...?’ I asked, remembering what my dad had told me about her.

‘Yes, only she didn’t go mad.’

A tear welled in my aunt’s eye.

‘So what happened and what does it have to do with a towel covered in blood?’

My aunt let a few tears fall and then pulled herself together. She looked at the door again, as if to make sure no one was listening.

### Look at the sentence:

She was so beautiful and clever and full of joy...

**Discuss with a partner and take notes on what she might look like.**

**Give examples that might show:**

- a) **She is clever.** (Don’t think about being “clever” at school.)
- b) **She is full of joy.**

## 6. OPTION 1

**Listen carefully to the next excerpt and find out:**

Does the information we get about Jagpreet match your ideas? Add any new points to your notes.

**OPTION 2**

In groups of 3 or 4 write down notes about the text. The spokesperson of each group shares the information with the class.7. Write down your ideas about the girl

<b>What kind of girl is this?</b>	
<b>Physical Description</b>	<b>Psychological description</b>

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### While Reading Activities

Read the text

The day that Jagpreet turned sixteen had been the day that her short life began to come to an end. She had returned from the fields one afternoon carrying a small bird that had broken its wing, crying at its pain. Laying it down on a soft pillow she had heard her father calling to her. She left the bird lying on her bed and made her way out to the courtyard where her father was sitting drinking spiced tea with a tall, distinguished looking man from a village two miles to the west, close to the city of Chandigarh. The man was a wealthy trader, a Jat who had earned his wealth selling fabrics and whose brother was living in England, working and sending money back to his family. As she approached, the stranger stood and hugged her as if she were his own daughter and proceeded to tell her of his son, Malkit, a tall, handsome boy of eighteen years, who was studying to become a teacher.

Jagpreet looked to her father, searching his eyes for an explanation. Her father smiled and called her to him. Taking her hand he told her that she had been betrothed to Malkit and that the stranger was her father-in-law, a wonderful man from a big, wealthy family. The kind of family that would look after her as she deserved and love her as her own family did.

Jagpreet turned to their guest and smiled a smile so warm, so loving, that he had to turn away his eyes. A tear ran down his cheek. He turned to Jagpreet's father.

'Bhai-ji - your daughter is surely as you said she would be. Beautiful and so pure. It will make me glad to take her as my daughter-in-law.'

'Today is a day for rejoicing in the blessing of the Guru,' replied Jagpreet's father. 'For today two families have become one.'

The two men embraced warmly and the guest went on his way, eager to return to his son with the good news. Jagpreet took her father's hand again.

'Father, will you still love me as before?' she asked. 'When I am married and part of another's family?'

'Beteh, I could never love you less than I do, only more. But tell me - are you truly happy with the path that I have chosen for you?'

'Yes - if you have chosen for me then I must obey. I know you have chosen well,' she told him.

'Are you sure Jagpreet? I would not wish to make you unhappy.'

'Then tell me what this boy is like - Malkit.'

Her father looked away.

‘I must confess that I haven’t seen him,’ he replied. ‘But his father is a well-respected man and I trust his words. Malkit, he tells me, is tall and handsome, with skin as light as milk and he is as strong as an ox. He is studying to be a teacher and he will take you to England when he goes. England, beteh, where life is so much easier than it is here.’

Jagpreet smiled.

‘Oh he sounds so wonderful,’ she said. ‘When will we be married?’

‘Soon, my love, soon. I will begin organising everything in the morning.’

‘May I go and tell my friends,’ asked Jagpreet.

‘Yes beteh, you may,’ laughed her father. ‘Today we have been blessed by the Lord. *Waheguru Satnam.*’

My aunt stopped for a moment, pausing to wipe her eyes free of tears. If only he had known, she said to me. If only he *could* have known. She swabbed my forehead with a wet towel and then continued...

Discuss these questions:

- What do you know about arranged marriages?
- Do you think Malkit is the best match for Jagpreet and vice versa?

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### After Reading Activities

1. From the boy's point of view write:
  - a. a text message,
  - b. an e-mail to a friend,
  - c. a postcard to a relative in England about his holiday in India.
  
2. Pair Work - When he comes back to England he is eager to tell his mother about his aunt Jagpreet. Write the possible conversation they had and role play it.
  
3. Pair work- Imagine a dialogue between Jagpreet and her mother-in-law, at the moment the white towel was shown to the family. Role play it.
  
4. Webquest about Bali Rai/ religion/ school system/ food/ habits/ weather/... .