

FICTION: THE LETTER

SUMMARY

The story deals with the boundless faith and trust of an individual who believes in destiny and God.

Ali, a weakening old man regularly comes to the post office early in the morning with the expectation of receiving a letter of his only daughter Miriam who has settled far away from him after her marriage.

Ali's wait for the letter gets prolonged and becomes a test of his patience and faith.

The post office staff always makes him a laughing stock and plays pranks with him, calls him mad and disrespects his fatherly sentiments, even then he remains undeterred.

Ali was not such a person in his youthful days, he was a passionate 'shikari' and loved killing animals and birds. His only daughter lived with him. A transformation takes place in him after the marriage of her and then he realises that everything in this world is governed by love and that pain of separation is unavoidable. He gives up hunting and since then he comes to the post office to know about the wellbeing of his daughter.

His trust in humanity and humans suffers as he is ill-treated by everyone in the post office including the Post Master whose daughter has also settled far away from him after the marriage.

Ali makes request to the Post Master to help him out in getting the letter of his daughter but the Post Master insults him by calling him a 'pest'.

Ali does not come to the post office for many days and when he returns he feels like approaching the end of his life. In frustration he decided to make an offer to one clerk of the post office. He requests the clerk to place the letter of his daughter at his grave yard when it comes and as a favour for this he offers five golden guineas to him.

The story takes an interesting turn around when the Post Master finds himself in trouble as his daughter get ill at her in-laws place and he becomes anxious to know about her well- being. Now he understands the fatherly emotions of Ali. The Post Master changes his attitude and outlook towards humans & letters.

Finally a letter arrives which is addressed to Ali and then the Post Master decides to hand it over to Ali personally as part of his repentance. He waits for Ali in the morning and gets an illusion that he has faced Ali and handed him the letter of his daughter, but to his greater shock he comes to know that Ali has died a few days back.

CHARACTER SKETCH OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS

COACHMAN ALI

Ali symbolises faith, determination and patience. His later part of life is in total contrast with his earlier part. In the earlier part of his life his only identity is his passion for hunting. In fact, it is his addiction without which he can't dream his life. He is merciless, cruel and insensitive but as soon as his daughter gets married, we find a contrasting Ali in him. Now he understands human life in a better way. He experiences the pain of separation and very soon he gives up hunting. He shows great determination and patience in dealing with life and people. It is only because of his unbinding faith and patience he is able to drag his otherwise a cheerless life.

EXTRACT BASED COMPREHENSION QUESTION EXERCISES

[A] "Beholding the wooden arch of this building, the old man was filled with the joy that the pilgrim feels when he first sees the goal of his journey."

- (a) What makes the old man feel joyful?
- (b) Why is the old man called a pilgrim?
- (c) What is the meaning of the word- 'pilgrim'?

Answers.

- (a) The sight of the post office of the town makes him feel joyful.
- (b) The old man comes to the post office with the devotion and faith of a pilgrim heading for a worship place and in that respect he is called a pilgrim.
- (c) a person who makes a journey to a holy place

[B] "But for the faith and love that warmed him, he could not have borne the bitter cold."

- (a) How could the old man bear the bitter cold?
- (b) Why does he go to the post office regularly?
- (c) What do you mean by 'faith and love' in the given context?

Answers.

- (a) His faith in the Almighty and his love for his daughter helped Ali in bearing the bitter cold.
- (b) Ali regularly goes to the post office with the expectation of getting the letter of his only daughter.
- (c) 'Faith' stands for Ali's faith in the Almighty and 'love' stands for Ali's love for his daughter.

[C] "Now he understood the meaning of love and separation. He could no longer enjoy the sportsman's pleasure and laughter at the bewildered terror of the young partridges bereft of their parents."

- (a) How has Ali understood the meaning of love and separation?
- (b) How he used to react at the hunting of young partridges?
- (c) What is the meaning of the word-'bewildered'?

Answers.

- (a) Ali's only daughter gets married and settles far away from him, he has not got any news of his daughter for the past five years. His loneliness and separation with his daughter makes him understand these feelings.
- (b) Earlier, Ali used to enjoy and laugh at the hunting of the young partridges.
- (c) confused or unable to understand anything

[D] "Here look at this!" and Ali produced an old tin box and emptied five golden guineas into the surprised clerk's hands. "Do not look so startled", he continued. "They will be useful to you and they can never be to me."

- (a) Why did Ali give five golden guineas to the clerk?
- (b) Why were the golden guineas of no use to Ali now?
- (c) What is the meaning of the word-'startled'?

Answers.

- (a) Ali gave five golden guineas to the clerk so that the clerk placed his daughter's at his graveyard.
- (b) The golden guineas were of no use to Ali now as he believed that he was going to die soon.
- (c) shocked/surprised

SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

Q.1. Why did Ali give up hunting?

Ans. After the marriage of his only daughter Ali became alone. This loneliness made him realise the meaning of love and pain of separation. He understood that by hunting he was separating young animals and birds with their parents and so he decided to give up hunting.

Q.2. The Postmaster says to Ali, 'What a pest you are, brother!' Do you agree with the statement? Give reasons for your answer.

Ans. No, Ali is not a pest. Though he daily comes to the post office, he never disturbs the staff in imparting their duties. In fact, he never tries to enter the room and waits patiently outside and only tries to enter the room when he is called by the post office staff jestingly. He also never argues with anyone. All this goes to show that he is not a pest.

Q.3. What brought about a change in the Postmaster's attitude?

Ans. The Postmaster's attitude changed when his daughter lay ill in another town and he waited anxiously for her news. This worry and anxiety about his daughter changed him. His fatherly heart recognised Ali's emotions for his daughter. Because of this realisation he gave up his arrogance and became a genuine human being who could understand others.

Q.4. How did the post office staff treat Ali?

Ans. For the post office staff Ali was a laughing stock. They treated him to be a mad person who visited the post office without any reason. They used to play with his emotions. They could never realise the fatherly emotions of Ali. Their behavior was undesirable.

**VALUE BASED QUESTION WITH
ANSWER**

Q. It is essential to respect everyone's feelings. Bring out this message with reference to the story.

Answer. The value that one can derive from the story is that we should always respect the feelings of others irrespective of the status or the position of the individual and must not disrespect and disregard the sentiments of others. Life has its own ways and means and it returns to us whatever we offer to it.

In the story the same idea is reflected. Coachman Ali's daughter gets married and leaves him. Now, he understands the meaning of love and separation. Since then he has been making visits to the post office with the expectation of getting a letter of his daughter. In place of helping him out and consoling him, the post office staff ridicules him. Even the Postmaster also behaves rudely with him and even terms him a pest. But when he suffers with the same trauma and agony, he realises his mistakes and regrets for his behavior and wishes to help Ali. In this way, we come to realise that it is imperative to respect everyone's feelings because one never knows when one will have to face the same situation.

**ADDITIONAL SHORT ANSWER/VALUE BASED QUESTIONS FOR
PRACTICE SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS:**

- Q.1. How does the Postmaster understand the feelings of Ali?
- Q.2. The post office staff displays a total lack of empathy towards Ali. Justify the statement.
- Q.3. Why did Ali stop coming to the post office?
- Q.4. Why were Ali's eyes filled with the tears of helplessness when he visited the post office after many days?
- Q.5. How can you say that Ali was a great shikari?
- Q.6. Why is the Postmaster shocked when Lakshmi Das informs him about Ali's death?
- Q.7. Why was the Postmaster tortured by doubt and remorse?

VALUE BASED QUESTIONS

- Q.1. 'Ali symbolises love, patience and faith.' These are the essential elements which bind this world. Justify the statement in the context of the story.
- Q.2. The story also reflects upon the fact that persons at higher posts must carry greater sense of sympathy and responsibility. Express your views in the light of the story.
- Q.3 'Life ensures balance and justice for everyone.' Justify the statement in the context of the story.