

Everest

By Balli Kaur Jaswal

From "Hook & Eye: Stories from the Margins"

Note: These are reflection notes, done by Teacher Jo (www.teacher-jo.com). You will find that there's a distinct lack of opinion and not that much annotation. This is because this collection was put together with the intention that readers develop their own meaning based on their own life experiences.

How then should you use these notes to help yourself?

Reflect on and answer all the questions I have listed.

When attempting to answer these questions, be as open-minded and honest as possible. Where your opinion is needed, try to answer those questions in the PEEL format. Have evidence and reason, and elaborate as if trying to explain it to someone else who doesn't understand. Pretend to persuade someone else to accept your opinion.

Good luck!

Teacher Jo

Scene Summary	Analysis & Reflection
<p>The story begins with Mahesh announcing that he is going to become a mountain climber. This is immediately met with discouragement from his father. Queries into his health leads to an argument about his struggles with dyslexia.</p> <p>We find out about his father's dream, his parents' guilt that they might have contributed to his condition, and the persona's jealousy over the preferential treatment he seems to receive.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hook: The story begins with an interesting but confusing statement. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Firstly, anticipating that this would be a local story, it is uncommon that one might dream of becoming a mountain climber. This is especially as we just have hills so what might lead one to have such a dream. ○ Secondly, it starts by stating "That was the year..." What year? ○ The confusion and surprise created by this beginning statement grabs the reader's attention and keeps them interested. ○ This line is also meaningful because this story is about the dreams we have and the journey we go through to achieve those dreams or give up on them. ○ It keeps us reading, especially the more jaded amongst us, wondering if perhaps, this adorable but unfairly restricted boy will achieve that dream. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unfairly restricted: This is my opinion because I find it unfair that he should have to struggle this much with a learning condition. Also, being in Singapore, there aren't many opportunities for someone who cannot excel academically. Especially in 1993. • Tone: The tone in his father's discouraging reply is exceedingly bitter. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The persona further elaborates on her father's tendency to reply bitterly → he is upset because he struggled to fulfill his dreams. ○ Every time he looks out, the environment is in direct contrast to the environment of his dreams, with roofs and yards. Most Singaporeans only have ceilings and, maybe, a tiny balcony to turn into an indoor garden of sorts. ○ Our first impressions of their father is probably negative; we might assume that he's a terrible father, raining down on his children's dreams and perspectives. • Feelings: Although we're only at the start of the text, feelings are running wild. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Their father is upset and needs time alone to himself. ○ Meena feels slighted and seeks vengeance by mocking her brother's learning disability. This is childish but she is a child and we should not expect too much from her. ○ Mahesh is hurt by her childish retorts because his learning disability is clearly a source of frustration for him. Even younger, he resorts to violence but is unfulfilled as his mother stops him.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Their mother is very upset, because she hates to see her son battle a problem that is beyond his control. It is especially frustrating that the one hurting her son is her daughter. • Characterisation: Their mother is the more emotionally mature adult between the two parents. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ We understand that the father is frustrated about failing to achieve his dreams, but by walking away, he leaves his children to her yet again, as if she's not spent the entire day with them. ○ By leaving, the task of disciplining the children falls upon her shoulders too. And she has to do it without support from her husband, which must be hard for her, because she's clearly upset. ○ As a result, the father is just a provider whilst the mother fulfills the role of a parent. • Characterisation: For all that Meena is mostly childish (and again, she is a child so we should not be overly harsh), she can be quite insightful from time to time. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ "It seemed an unfairly prolonged punishment for a moment of carelessness." ○ To be fair, she isn't being sympathetic here. Rather, she is remarking on their behaviour because it affects the way they treat him versus how they treat her. ○ They are more generous with praise towards him over minor achievements, and she is jealous. <p>Reflect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving their father the benefit of the doubt, why do you think he is so bitter and quashes his children's dreams? • What are your impressions of their mother? • What are your opinions of Mahesh's dream? Were you in favour or did you think his dream is unrealistic? Why? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Relate your answer back to your experience of living in Singapore and the culture of this country.
<p>Meena describes what Singapore is like to her, contrasting her perspective with the</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronology: It becomes apparent that her intention is not to tell a chronologically linear story about her brother's dreams to become a mountain climber and how that turns out. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Her motivations with this story runs deeper, and we'll have to unpack this.

<p>same of India. She further describes how life in Singapore was like for her and her family when they first moved. We better understand her father's frustration - his actual plans for them and how those plans seem to be drifting further and further away from his grasp. Their mother, on the other hand, has vastly different priorities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Juxtaposition: She juxtaposes her initial impressions of Singapore with those of India. Based on the things she focuses on, we learn a lot about what she's impressed by. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ She appreciates how neat and organised buildings are laid out here, with clear demarcations between the properties. • Visual Imagery: As she describes waking up in the middle of the night and heading out to the balcony, she describes the various scenes she would witness in the flats around her, each depicting a facet of Singaporean life. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ There's a warm, soothing, fairytale quality to her retelling but if you imagine it, based on the visual imagery, we can imagine her sitting there, looking at them, like an alien observing earth. • This highlight the Theme of Marginalisation, which is the basis of this anthology. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ As foreigners with the intent of living in Singapore temporarily, it is easy to appreciate the country but difficult to integrate or assimilate. ○ Feelings: In realising this, we also realise how lonely it must be for them to always feel like outsiders who do not quite belong. • Even their flat was sparse, at the beginning, Emphasizing their intention not to settle down. • Motivation: This does not last, though. As soon as she can, and in waves with every month's paycheck, she makes additions to the house to make it more homely. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ As a nurturing parent, she cares only about having a stable and comfortable environment for her children to grow up in. ○ She doesn't care about where they settle, unlike her husband. To her, home is wherever they make it. • Note the Contrasts presented: she's always describing based on "outside" and "inside" their home, as if they are separate from the rest of Singapore. <p>Reflect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on what we've read so far, what do you think the persona is trying to tell us with this story? What are her intentions?
<p>The story's style changes again from a reflective one to a descriptive one. It is a short section which comprises of two parts: firstly, that Mahesh, undeterred, began his</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings: Despite his initial reservations, their father feels proud of Mahesh for having a dream and striving hard to achieve it, despite the difficulties he's encountered.

<p>training. The second part describes Meena's first experience integrating with the environment she lives in.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The Parallels he sees between his son and himself has him empathising with his son. He is able to understand the desire that his son feels and the determination to keep going even when the going gets tough. ○ He might also feel encouraged by his son's determination to keep trying, possibly because it justifies his determination to stubbornly hold on to his dream, even as the likelihood of it fades with every day. • Theme: The theme of role-reversal is presented through the swapping of roles between father and son, and how the father who discouraged the son is instead spurred and made proud by that very same son. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ It is normally the role of the parent to encourage children, and to be an inspiration to them. The opposite occurs here. • In a bid to have fun outside of the house, Meena pretends to run errands for her mother so that she can explore her neighbourhood and play pretend. Note: she does not talk about playing with the neighbour kids. This emphasises how isolated they are, despite mother's efforts. • However, she describes the time she meets someone her age and befriends her. This marks her transition into integrating. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ She even tries a curry puff - it is familiar because of the use of Indian spices, yet different enough for it to be a new experience and one that she enjoys. ○ Even the conversation they have is a mish-mash of random topics but all of them quintessentially Singaporean.
<p>Mahesh continues to practice, getting better and better. However, as he succeeds with every day, his father's dreams become harder and harder to reach. With every rejection, he dies a little more inside. The one who suffers most is their mother who is innocent in all this yet has to put up with his stubbornness and anger. Bad news follows more bad news, and Mahesh's teacher calls informing them that he is doing poorly in school. She defends him over the phone and breaks down in tears.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's very encouraging for readers as Mahesh gets better and better. It gives us a sense of hope and we are inspired. This is especially as he is trying to achieve an "impossible" dream. • Contrast. Alas, that is immediately contrasted by the dashing of his father's dream as he receives yet another rejection. What makes this depressing is how, between the two of them and their dreams, the father's dream seemed more achievable than Mahesh. • Before the kids get home, they experience yet another quintessentially Singaporean experience: irritating an elderly neighbour and being chased away by them. This is significant because they are accumulating these experiences, unintentionally and bit by bit, but at the end of this section, Meena is confused by her mother's labelling of them as Singaporeans.

- She perceives Singaporeans as the people “outside” and they are people “inside” their flat and restricted to that space.
- It is very possible that, despite her mother’s efforts, they are still very much marginalised because of their father’s refusal to give in and make do with what they have.
- Note: they aren’t being marginalised by society. If anything, their experiences in this story show how they are accepted and treated normally like regular Singaporeans by other Singaporeans. Rather, they have marginalised themselves by their father’s insistence that this arrangement is temporary.
- **Atmosphere:** The atmosphere is extremely tense and whilst we do feel somewhat sorry for their father, it is their mother whom we feel most sorry for. She is the one who is constantly trying, for her children that they may have a stable family life. It must be very trying for her.
- **Theme - Family:** As bad as things look, what is encouraging about this section is the lesson it teaches us about what it means to be family.
 - Their father’s stubbornness, refusal to give up, bitterness, and emotional immaturity makes their father very difficult to live with and love. Yet, they do. They understand enough to skirt around him and walk on eggshells when he’s being rejected yet again. Their mother is long-suffering, patient, compassionate, strong, and supportive. She tries so very hard to keep things as normal as possible for her children whilst not blowing up at her husband for his poor behaviour.
 - Likewise, Mahesh’s dream is unrealistic and he really should be spending more time on his studies, given his grades, instead of running up and down stairs. Yet, when she receives that disappointing phone call from his teacher, she stands up for him, insisting that she is proud of him. It doesn’t change the fact that she is extremely worried about him and feels guilty for the part she might have played in his condition. Nevertheless, she does not burden him with this, bearing it herself and encouraging his dream.

Reflect:

- If their father’s dream is the more achievable one, whereas Mahesh’s is the fantastical one, how does it make you feel to realize that even the achievable dreams seem so unachievable? What more our big dreams?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think Mahesh’s mother encourages his dream even though it is unrealistic and might not be beneficial to his future as compared to his studies?
<p>Their father drops a bombshell on them: they are moving back to India. It is part of a plan to increase their chances of moving to America. This news shocks everyone, and an emotional but controlled argument breaks out between the two parents. It becomes apparent that a huge concern is Mahesh’s academic future. Meena, reading the room, drags Mahesh along with her to buy dinner. To prolong the journey home, and to cheer him up, Meena encourages Mahesh to climb the stairs and is left wheezing but in awe of his capability.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atmosphere - Tense: The atmosphere in this section is very, very tense for both readers as well as Meena and Mahesh. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Characterisation: Once again, their father is so stubborn and emotionally immature that he made such a big decision, which impacts the entire family, without informing his wife. ○ This is insulting to her and she Feels angry. She has done so much, putting up with him for so long, and he disregards her like this. • As they argue, it becomes apparent that he wasn’t being completely selfish. Rather, they were both concerned about Mahesh. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ He thinks that Mahesh has no future in a small country that is so focused on academics. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To be fair, he is not wrong. It is a fact that students with learning disabilities are disadvantaged in Singapore. Teachers here aren’t trained enough to know how best to teach and manage students who are neurodivergent. It is also a fact that, especially in the 90s, academics are extremely important when it comes to finding a job that helps one thrive instead of survive. ○ However, their mother is concerned that uprooting the children where they have settled (even if they aren’t aware of this) will be traumatic and difficult for them. She also appreciates the safety of Singapore. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ She is also not wrong. When it came to choosing dinner, Meena wanted chicken rice and Mahesh wanted Hokkien noodles. Very Singaporean dishes. ▪ When she’s walking back, she could rattle off all the places around her even with her eyes closed. This shows how she has adapted to her environment and is so comfortable in it. ▪ It is also a fact that Singapore is far safer than many other countries. • Theme - The Power of Dreams: the story ends with Meena encouraging Mahesh to do what he does best. As she does so, her character experiences a moment of Anagnorisis (moment of revelation). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For all that they have been trying to pretend, for the sake of their father, the fact is they have been adapting and integrating.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ She brings up some great insight into <i>What it means to be Singaporean [Theme]</i>: to make do with what we have and make them, staircases and tall blocks of flats, into mountains. Whatever it takes to achieve our dreams.○ Being Singaporean is also not about being average, achieving good grades like everyone else, but about reaching beyond the expectations of others and becoming spectacular.● It ends with her realising that Mahesh has been influenced by the culture here, reaching for the impossible, in spite of the discouragements and disbeliefs of others.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ This is very cheesy but it is very Singaporean.○ When we separated from Malaysia, many believed that Singapore could not survive on her own. That we did becomes our Singapore story - about achieving the impossible.
--	--

Reflect:

- The story is told from Meena's perspective, specifically based on memories from when she was a child. This calls her reliability as a narrator into question. Why do you think the writer chose to tell the story from her perspective?
- The central topic of this story is about Dreams. What do you learn about dreams and how they motivate and/or break people?
- Singapore is unique in that her residents are made up of citizens and foreigners. Despite our openness towards foreigners, what have you learnt about the process of assimilating and integrating into Singapore's society?
- What does it mean to be Singaporean? What does that entail?