

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, English

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture 22

Lecture 22: Understanding Ismat Chughtai's "Roots"

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So, today we are going to start our discussion with a new topic: a story by Ismat Chughtai. So, today we will understand displacement through the lens of Ismat Chughtai's well-known short story titled 'Jaadein,' which is translated into English as 'Roots.' Ismat Chughtai, who lived from 1915 to 1991, was an Indian Urdu novelist and short story writer.

She was also a liberal humanist and a filmmaker. Beginning her writing career in the 1930s, Chughtai wrote extensively on themes including female sexuality, and femininity. She also reflects on the topic of class conflict through many of her artworks, and her approach is often from a Marxist perspective.

Her writings are deeply informed by the tragedies surrounding the partition of the Indian subcontinent; or the brunt of the partition on interpersonal relationships, human memories, as well as the idea of home and community, which began to change drastically. Ismat Chughtai sets her story in the town of Marwar, which symbolizes cultural togetherness between Hindus and Muslims. So, Marwar, as she describes, is a place that signifies Hindu-Muslim togetherness and inter-communal harmony. Until the declaration of the great divide, or the partition of the country, both Hindus and Muslims had been living in close harmony with one another and had almost become culturally inseparable.

They lived like one big family. However, these conditions changed drastically after the administrative decision to divide the country along religious lines. Almost all the Muslim families in Marwar would start reconsidering their future based on their social and economic standing. In other words, it's a story depicting the Muslim population's emigration from the land of Marwar and the emotional consequences—the human impact

of such a poignant situation, such a decision. The majority decided to migrate to what would go on to become another country, Pakistan.

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- *Jadein* discusses the impact of the Partition on interpersonal relationships, memory as well as the idea of 'home' and 'community'. Ismat Chughtai sets her story in the town of Marwar, a place she describes as one signifying the cultural togetherness of the native Hindus and Muslims. Until the declaration of partition of the country, both the Hindus and the Muslims had been living in close harmony with one another, and had become almost culturally inseparable
- However, the conditions changed drastically after the administrative decision to split the country in religious lines. Almost all of the Muslim families in Marwar began reconsidering their future, based on their social and economic standing
- The majority decided to migrate to Pakistan, and the narrator of the story is a member of one such well-to-do joint Muslim family, who were packing their bags and preparing to leave India



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The majority of Muslims emigrated to Pakistan. And we see that the narrator of the story is a member of one such well-to-do joint Muslim family. In the course of the narrative, the family is shown packing their bags and preparing to leave India. So, 'Jaadein' or 'Roots' centers around the narrator's Muslim family and their relations with the neighboring Hindu family, whose head is Roopchand. So, despite their religious differences, both families shared strong bonds of love,

friendship, and camaraderie. They stood united like one human family, and the question of religion hardly created a wall between the two families or between the members of the two families. So, the question of religion would not play a role in separating the two families—the Hindu and the Muslim family. Roopchand was the family doctor of the Muslim family, and his friendship with the narrator's Abba, or father, was highly respected by both families. However, the conditions changed overnight when the news of Partition came. To quote Roopchand,

The two families were so close to each other over three generations that no one had the slightest suspicion that the country's partition would rupture their relationship, unquote. Critic Vinod K. Chopra suggests that That the partition, violence and hatred created a gulf between those who had lived together happily, sharing one another's joys as well as sorrows. So one day someone is well off denizen, only to be reduced to a refugee, only to be changed, you know, into refugee status the other day.

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- Vinod K. Chopra regarding this scenario suggests “the Partition violence and hatred created a gulf between those who had lived together happily sharing one another’s joys as well as sorrows” (177)
- The distance between the families began to grow slowly following one event after another. It all began with a minor fight between the children from both the families, which gradually extended to a fight among the adults
- It was finally decided that the entire Muslim family would migrate to Pakistan. But when all the members of the family began to pack, **the narrator’s Amma** declared that nothing could make her leave her own home and migrate to a new land



Right. So people would have to leave their belongings, their havelis, their mansions, sprawling mansions behind and, you know, come to a new country that would become their nation, now in rags almost with nothing. There have been stories of so many such families who had to be displaced in an emergency situation, and they would often travel without anything. They would just leave all their valuables behind in their homeland.

So, the distance between the families, coming back to Jaadein, we see that the distance between the two families gradually grow. It starts showing slowly following one event after the other and it all begins with a minor squabble, a minor fight between the children from both the families and this fight gradually extends to a fight among the adults. Just like we see in the case of the larger nationalist politics, the politics at the level of nation, we see that the major politicians are actually devising or they are considering partition as an option. And this news does not reach the remote parts of the Indian subcontinent.

For a long time, the villages, the suburban areas, the very remote and, you know, interior parts of India—people living there were not sure what the future of their country would be after the British quit, after the British left. It is only after a long period of waiting and surmising, you know, that the people came to know that indeed the Radcliffe line would pass through certain areas. So, especially, this becomes apparent This kind of dilemma is something that the borderlands are facing, right?



Borderland culture is something that is an important part of our discussion in this course. We see that the borderland is almost like a third space. They belong to neither of the two countries. They are almost like the Toba Tek Singh. It's almost like the Toba Tek Singh syndrome that the borderland culture or the borderland people are facing or suffering.

They don't know which side they belong to for a long time. So, the decision of partition, the consequence of partition, reaches vertically down from the elite sections who are directly in touch with the nation's politics down to the grassroots people much later. So, in the tail end of the entire process of displacement, we see that the Dalit sections, the grassroots people who are already impoverished, who are already a destitute section, are making a move. When there is no other option left, the Dalit sections also shift their base; they move to another country. So here, however, in the case of Chughtai's story, we see that the backdrop is that of, you know, two well-to-do families.

This is generally an aristocratic or a well-to-do background that we are dealing with. And the two families suddenly develop a cold relationship. Families that had been friends for three generations together. It begins with a fight among the children, and this fight, this bitterness, is extended among the adults before long. So, it was finally decided that the entire Muslim family would have to migrate to Pakistan.

However, when all the members of the family begin to pack, we have the character of the elderly lady, Amma or the mother, the eldest member, the oldest member rather, who declares that nothing can make her leave her own home and migrate to a new land. So, the narrator's mother very clearly states that she will not move from her Haveli. So, everyone tries to persuade Amma to change her decision, but she remains silent and sticks to her decision of not moving to Pakistan. So, with the following words,

Ismat Chughtai has very beautifully, very poignantly captured the pathos of this elderly woman who cannot accept this altered reality and finds it almost impossible to detach herself physically as well as emotionally from her roots. So, this is the original version. I am reading it in the original followed by the translation. Agar meri kam sukhan amma ki zbaan tez hoti, to wo zarur kehti, apna vatan hai kis chiriya ka naam logon? Batao to wo hai kahan apna vatan?

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- Everyone tried to persuade her to change her decision but she remained silent and stuck to her decision. In the following words the narrator beautifully captures the pathos of a woman who cannot accept the altered reality and finds it impossible to detach herself physically as well as emotionally from her 'roots'



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Jis mitti me janam liya, jis me lot pot kar bare paley, wahi apna vatan na hua, to phir jahan chaar din ko jaakar bas jao, wo kaise apna vatan ho jayega? Aur phir, kaun jaane, wahan se bhi koi nikaal dey? So this is a very beautiful excerpt from Jaadein. When translated to English... If my taciturn amma had a sharp tongue, she would have retorted with the following lines.

What's this strange word called our land? Tell me, where is that land? This is the place where one was born. One grew up in body and mind. If this cannot be one's own land, then how can the place where one simply goes and settles down for a couple of days be one's land?

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- If my taciturn Amma had a sharp tongue, she would have retorted:
What's this strange bird called 'our land'? Tell me where's that land? This is the place where one was born; one grew up in body and mind. If this cannot be one's own land, then how can the place where one simply goes and settles down for a couple of days be one's own? And who knows whether one won't be driven out from there as well and be told 'Go and inhabit a new land'?...There was a time when the Mughals left their country to inhabit a new country. And today you want to establish a new one. As though the land is no better than a pair of shoes- if it gets a little tight, throw it away and get a new one
(Chughtai 2011, 135)



And who knows whether one won't be driven out from there as well and be told, go and inhabit a new land. There was a time when the Mughals left their country to inhabit a new country. And today you want to establish a new one. As though the land is no better than a pair of shoes. If it gets a little tight, throw it away and get a new one.

So, we see this turmoil, this inner turmoil that Amma is undergoing. Critic Sara Suleri says that men live in homes, women live in their bodies, right? So, basically, in terms of property rights, men own the homes. Women can only own their own body as a territory. They are born

And they die with this body, right? Any inflict, you know, any harm can be inflicted to a woman only through this body, whereas men can own and disown, possess and dispossess land and home. So, land possession is associated with, you know, masculinity, with maleness, right? And a land's owner, a home's owner is usually a patriarch.

However, very paradoxically, women who have never left the precincts of a home, women like Amma from her generation who have never known beyond the home and the hearth, they don't own the home, but they make the home. They don't understand nationalistic politics, the politics of the nation, the decision about partition. They are only deeply affected when the only thing that they have seen, the only place where they have belonged, their home is taken away from them. There is a sort of vacuum. There is a sort of emptiness that comes to haunt an elderly woman like Amma when the home

is taken away. So we see that in the story, eventually the entire family leaves, and Amma, however, is left behind all alone in the empty house, like a ghost from the past, like a phantasmal presence. She occupies that empty house, that Haveli. Now, despite the difference between the two families, we see that despite the differences between the two

families, the patriarch from the Hindu family, the immediate neighbor, Roopchand, who had been a mute witness to the departure of the entire family, finds it impossible to remain calm anymore.

So, because they had shared this warmth, this love for such a long time, it becomes very difficult for Roopchand, who is also the family physician, to stay mute when he finds that the entire Muslim family, their immediate neighbor, has left; they have emigrated. So, Roopchand's wife, we see, she silently goes over to meet Amma, who is staying alone, and both the women spend the night together in silence. Following the entire family's departure, Amma is accompanied by Roopchand's wife, while silently mourning over the situation.

she had been left in. Amma finally falls asleep, and when she awakes, her world has changed once again. So, Roopchand has brought back her entire family, and the bonds of mutual love and respect have proven themselves stronger than any communal rift, any communal divide. So, this is a story where we see that friendship and, you know, good relationships, good feelings, humane feelings actually triumph over any inter-communal divide and sense of hostility.

So, Roopchand brings back the entire family, and so Amma's dreams, in a way, are fulfilled. In this story, written by Ismat Chughtai, we see that the desperation of the narrator's mother is very strongly felt through Chughtai's words. Her desperation to stay back in the home where she has lived, where she has belonged for so many decades. So we see the desperation of the narrator's mother to stay back in the Haveli, in the house where she has lived for so many decades. The house that she has, you know, converted into a home, the house that she has given the shape of a home.

The narrator's mother cannot even imagine leaving her house and the place where she was married. She married and came into this house. And many women from that generation would believe that they would leave the house only in a coffin. Only their dead bodies would leave that house, not before their death. Can they leave their husband's house, their husband's ancestral house?

So the house that she stayed in was filled with so many different memories, so many fond recollections: memories of her marriage, the death of her husband, the cacophony of her children. And the buried umbilical cords in the courtyard. So, with the umbilical cords, it is almost, you know, suggested that her own umbilical cord is tied to this land, and it is

very difficult to sever it, to cut it off. The memories have seeped into the land. They have actually interspersed, intermingled with the land on which the house is built.



And so, to leave it behind for another land does not seem acceptable to her. It's something that makes an old woman, an aged woman, lose her dignity when she has to leave behind all the memories. And that's all that she has at that age. The memory of her husband, her children, their umbilical cords—when she leaves everything behind and has to travel to a new land, that makes her feel like a destitute in the true sense of the term. So, in the short story 'Roots,' the narrator's mother is attached to her private space where she has lived all her life, wherein she refuses to leave her house.

We see the aspect of feminine time when we hear her talk about the house after her family has left her behind. So, we see that here we are talking about two kinds of time or temporality. One is the masculine time, the time which records the formal, you know, incidents—the the chronological events that lead up to the partition, that precipitate the process of partition, and men and masculine activities actually transpire this process. They materialize this process.



Women are away from this politics. They belong to the home and the hearth. They make up the home and the hearth. The feminine time comprises the time inside the house spent with, you know, the female folks, the kin, the children—the kind of parallel personal life that is going on even at the time of partition. For certain members of society, like the children and the women, it is still unfathomable, it is still unbelievable that partition will indeed take place.

Indeed, they have to leave behind everything that they have grown up with, everything that they have grown up seeing and believing. So, that comprises the feminine consciousness, the familial side, the personal sensibilities, and the humane sensibilities. Side, you know, that we parallelly have. The human impact of partition, one could say, is an offshoot of this feminine time. When we understand the feminine time, we understand partition from a very personal axis, through the personal coordinates.

So, in Chughtai's *Roots*, the narrator's mother talks about the umbilical cords that are buried in the courtyard, and she is talking about the delivery of her 10 children in a particular holy room. As well as the death of her husband; the land is almost redolent with—the land is pregnant with memories, memories of people that she calls her own, her family, and she had been married to her husband. For 50 years—so 50 years of togetherness, so many different kinds of memories, fond memories. How can an elderly woman leave all these things behind? And at that advanced age, move to a new land that people call Pakistan.

At the fag end of her life, it is something that robs her dignity, her sense of belonging, her sense of being, her sense of existence. So, her family leaves despite all these memories of the household. They are making a pragmatic decision, like many other families from that time, and they move to the promise of a new land called Pakistan—a land that they have

never seen, however. A land that they have never walked on, but only heard about. So, people would move to Pakistan.

The Muslims would move to Pakistan. And similarly, the Hindus would move to India with high hopes—hopes of employment, a safer life, their property being protected, and their lives being preserved. And, you know, with a dream, with aspirations of prosperity. Right. And also being able to live as a majority among one's co-religionists.

So if one is a Muslim and belongs to Pakistan, then the person is safe in terms of community and religious identity. So, the family moves into a masculine time willingly, leaving the comfort of the feminine time or the private space. So, when we say that the family moves into a masculine time, we are talking about how the family adheres to, the family actually gives in to the logic of partition, which is something that is understood as the need of that moment. Partition is almost a way people are responding to history. The people of the Indian subcontinent are responding to the crisis of communal hatred through partition.

And so this is a very homosocial decision. This is a decision essentially taken by the administrators, by the political leaders. We don't even know how much say the women, the children, and the marginalized communities—it could be the disabled people, it could be the transgender people—had. What say did these human subjects have in the partition? They belong to the feminine time.

They belong to a time, you know, that is defined by individual human feelings and hardly any individual wanted or corroborated, approved the decision of partition. Because the insane human cost that partition demanded, no one actually wanted it. So, it was a very administrative decision coming in a very impersonal way from above, and everyone after a point had to obey it as part of self-preservation, as a part of a practical decision, need of the hour. So, we see that this particular Muslim family that Chughtai describes in *Roots* is responding to the masculine time. They are responding to the contemporary political scenario.



They are responding to the practical situation. They are deciding in a very pragmatic fashion. They are not emotionally driven when they decide to leave their homeland. So, *Roots* by Chughtai is therefore one of the memorable partition scenes, short stories that we have, which portrays the trauma that people were forced to undergo while aligning themselves with the altered national identities.

This short story also holds eminence because it provides a deep insight, a deep perspective into a woman's life regarding the question of national identity and homeland and it is throwing light into a woman's understanding of what is nation, what is a national identity and what is homeland. For Amma, you know, we see that it is impossible to accept this crack between her watan or nation and her desh or desh and homeland. So, she cannot accept her watan and her desh to be two different places. She cannot accept her watan and her desh as two separate geopolitical spaces.

She always expects them to be one and the same. So, at this advanced age, she cannot suffer a fragmented identity. She cannot accept her fragmented identity. That is why she decides not to move to Pakistan. In the words of Rakshanda Jalil, I quote, many of her, referring to Chughtai's contemporaries, so many of Chughtai's contemporaries also wrote on partition-related violence and

But Ismat's writings are unique in that she wrote of issues that concern men and women from a woman's perspective. She used wit and satire as tools to sharpen her depiction of harsh social realities and her trademark poetry. *A Begumati Zuban*, you know, her trademark *Begumati Zuban* gives an extra edge, a piquant flavor that sets her apart from, say, Manto or Krishan Chander. In her hands, Urdu acquired a new zest and added spice that made it not only more readable but also better equipped to reflect new concerns that had hitherto been considered beyond the pale of literature. Unquote.

So, on the one hand, *Roots* portrays the strength of emotional attachment a woman might feel for a place where her ancestral roots lie. On the other hand, the story highlights the strong inter-community ties shared between two families, even during a time when the communal riots had inflamed both sides of the border and had burnt up not just the land but also the dreams, the aspirations of a united nation forever; rather, burned down such a dream of a unified nation forever, right? The dream of togetherness, the dream of being able to stay together despite all the differences and hurdles, was burned down to ashes, to nothingness. And this is where we see that since Chughtai has this Marxist overtone defining and determining her writing, her language, her thoughts, right?

We are also reminded of writers such as Yashpal, who very vehemently pronounced that this freedom is false. The leftist writers—those informed by the leftist ideology—would not accept the partition. They would say that this freedom is false. It is a farce. This freedom is a lie because it is not freedom for everyone.

It is a freedom that comes at the cost of bloodshed and massacre. It demands a huge human cost. So this kind of independence is not acceptable. It is a moth-eaten form of independence that we are being given. Right.

So I just read, you know, an excerpt again from Chughtai's 'Jaadein' in the original, and then I'll try to paraphrase this excerpt. *Dono khandano ki maujhuda teen peerya ek dusre se aise ghuli mili thi ki subha bhi na tha ki Hindustan ki takseem ke baad is muhabbat me phoot pad jayengi.* However, the Muslim League, Congress, and Mahasabha were present in both families, and religious and political parties were also present.

But just like football or cricket matches. Here, Abba was with Congress, so there were Dr. Sahib and the Big Brother League. So there was Gyanchand Mahasabhai. Here, Majle Bhai was a communist, so there was Gulabchand Socialist. And then, according to him, the wives and children of the men were also of the same party.

So Abba and Roopchand ji used to listen to all this and smile, then start trying plans to make all of Asia one. Amma and Chachi used to talk about dhaniya, haldi, and daughters' dowries, and daughters-in-law used to steal each other's fashion. *Namak mirch ke saath saath, doctor sahab ke yahan se dawainya bhi mangwai jaati thi, roz.* So we get a picture of one big family. We don't see Hindu-Muslim here.

What's very interesting here is that at one point, the author says Abba Congressi the. At one point, things become so polarized that Congress is immediately identified with the

Hindus, whereas the League, which goes on to become the Muslim League, is uniformly and homogeneously identified with the Muslims. Here we see that Abba, the patriarch from the Muslim family, was a Congressman. He was a Congress loyalist, whereas Dr. Saab and Roopchand ji, who were Hindus, were with the League.

His elder brother was also in the League. They would join the League. So we get a very heterogeneous picture, a very, you know, discursive understanding of political affiliation, of political ideologies. And then within the same family, this family becomes a microcosm of the nation, you know, where we cannot make direct affiliations, direct associations of Hindus with Congress, Muslims with the League, and so forth.

We see the picture is much more complex. Within the same family, we have Mahasabha, we have communists, we have socialists, we have Congressmen, we have Leaguers, and their families. Kin, their kith and kin would also support their husbands, their respective male folk. We see that siyasi, like at one point they say, siyasi behse jam jam kar hoti thi, magar aise jaise ki football ya cricket match hoti hai. So, there would be a lot of political debates and altercations, but in the same, you know,



manner, with the same sentiment and spirit as we, you know, discuss football or cricket matches, right? And it would be a very celebratory situation, a very, it would be a very celebratory mood where parallelly we see womenfolk are also listening to the political discussions. They are talking about their daughters' marriages. They are making spices, and the women are stealing each other's fashion statements.

So, so many things are happening within a family space. It's almost like a family drama that we see, where it is impossible to believe that two communities, Hindus and Muslims, would finally face off with one another for real and permanently. So, the character of

Amma in 'Jaadein' by Ismat Chughtai also hearkens back—it brings back our readings of other elderly female characters, such as Bebe in Joginder Paul's Urdu story 'Darugao Pyaas,' translated to English as 'Thirst of Rivers.' So, we see that the old matriarch is very adamant, and she carries the Haveli in her mind across the borders.

Continued....

- The character of Amma in *Jadein* ("Roots") by Ismat Chughtai and Bebe in Joginder Paul's Urdu story *Darugaon Pyaas* ("Thirst of Rivers") depict the old matriarchs as too adamant who carries the haveli in her mind across the borders, carrying the keys of the haveli on her person at all time, close to her heart
- In the normative structure of the society, women are completely identified with their homes and had a strong sense of belonging for the same. Shorn from her basic marker of identity means her unnatural psychological death. Herein comes the strategy of conscious forgetting/selective amnesia – a virtual dying of the past



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She's carrying the keys of the Haveli on her person at all times, close to her heart, and she actually believes that after the disturbances calm down, after the political turmoil, you know, passes—it is over, she can go back and reclaim her homestead. So, that is why, with that hope, she is carrying the keys of her Haveli on her person at all times. That is the character of Bebe that Joginder Paul depicts.

In the normative structure of society, women are completely identified with their homes, and they would have a very strong sense of belonging for the same. So, shorn or deprived of their basic marker of identity would mean an unnatural psychological death, even a social death. For a woman who does not know society beyond the thresholds of her home, losing the home would mean an untimely death and a very shameful death—a death that strips her of her dignity. So, herein comes the strategy of conscious forgetting and selective amnesia, where a lot of senior members who saw

The great divide would survive this divide. They would survive the partition and displacement through a conscious, you know, forgetting and virtual dying of the past. They would let the past die, and that's the only way they could survive. In another artwork, *Garam Hawa*, which was a film made in 1974, we see that when the Mirzars are forced to be displaced, The protagonist Salim Mirza's old mother fights back, and she clings to the walls, literally screaming that she would rather die than leave her haveli.

Later in the film, we see that she insists on sleeping on the terrace of their new house because from the terrace she can see the old haveli, which is at a short distance from the new home. So, from the terrace, she can still spot her old haveli, and she sleeps there all the time. Later, we see that this grandmother dies—Salim Mirza's mother dies—as soon as she is returned to her own local habitat. So, the ancestral house becomes a part of the individuals who live in them for decades, and the haveli

may also be considered as a synecdoche for the nation. And this is most eloquently demonstrated through the scenes with Salim's mother. Salim's mother cannot believe—just like Bebe and just like Amma in Jaadein—Salim's mother cannot believe that she has to leave her haveli. Right. So, there is a sequence in the film in which the dying woman is being taken back to this same old haveli in a palki, in a palanquin.

And it evokes her recollections of her first visit to that home, probably as a young bride decades ago. Right. So all the memories come back when she is taken once again to the Haveli, to her own local habitat. And she breathes her last. She gives away her soul.

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- In *Garm Hava*(1974), when the Mirzas are forced to be displaced, **Salim Mirza's old mother fights back**, clinging to the walls and screaming that she'd rather die than leave. She later insists on sleeping on the terrace of their new lodging because she can see their old haveli in the distance from there.
- This figure of grandmother dies as soon as she is returned to her own 'local habitat.
- The *havelis* (ancestral house) become a part of the individuals who live in them for decades (and the *haveli* may also be considered as a symbol for the nation), and this is most eloquently demonstrated in the scenes with Salim's mother.
- There is a sequence in which the dying woman is taken back to her home in a *palki* to evoke her recollections of her first visit to the *haveli* - probably as a young bride in a palanquin decades back.



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She breathes her last. Her ghost leaves her in the same spot, in the same Haveli where she had come as a young bride years ago. So, with this, we come to the end of today's lecture. Let us continue our discussion with another topic in our next lecture. Thank you.

