

Ode On The Lungi Summary

Writer: Kaiser Haq | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Background: Kaiser Haq's poem "Ode On The Lungi" is rooted in deep cultural experience, personal observation, and the long-standing social realities of Bangladesh. This poem is not a lighthearted piece written simply about a garment. It grows out of colonial mentality, class division, clothing-based discrimination, and the struggle for cultural identity. In Bangladesh, the lungi is an extremely common garment. Farmers, rickshaw pullers, labourers, and village people, millions of men wear it every day. It is comfortable, affordable, and practical. But in urban elite society, corporate spaces, and Western-influenced culture, the lungi is often seen as the clothing of the poor, a "shameful dress," or an "inferior attire." Kaiser Haq witnessed this dual attitude from childhood, the same garment appears natural to one class, yet shameful to another.

This experience became even more personal inside his own family. Kaiser Haq mentions that one of his relatives in America would relax at home in a lungi, but his son felt ashamed and would hide the lungi. This scene deeply affected the poet. He realised how a simple item of clothing can create cultural inferiority, colonial thinking, and identity conflict. Another major source of inspiration is the influence of Walt Whitman. Whitman stood for democracy, diversity, freedom, and human equality. In Haq's poem, Whitman is addressed as "Grandpa Walt." While reading Whitman's poem "Passage to India," Haq imagines that if Whitman were alive today, he would surely embrace the lungi as a symbol of equality. This imaginative dialogue and admiration become an important force behind the poem.

There is another crucial background, the politics of clothing in postcolonial societies. Haq noticed that the Scottish kilt (which is worn around the waist in a way very similar to the lungi) is celebrated with pride in Western societies, while the lungi remains ignored or looked down upon in the same world. This contradiction sharpens the poem's satirical tone. That is why the poem mixes political satire, humour, and cultural resistance. Eventually, Kaiser Haq arrives at a clear realization: the lungi is not merely a garment; it is a symbol of identity, equality, resistance, and pride. This combination of personal experience, social reality, and cultural awareness shapes "Ode On The Lungi." It stands as Kaiser Haq's declaration of the dignity and pride of Bengali culture.

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Clothing Equality and Social Hypocrisy:

The poet directly addresses “Grandpa Walt,” meaning the American poet Walt Whitman. He says that whenever he reads Whitman’s “Passage to India” and comes across the line “passage to more than India,” he imagines that Whitman wanted to cross one more boundary and reach Bangladesh. Here, the poet blends past and present, creating an imaginative dialogue.

He then says that he has recently been thinking a lot about equality in clothing. He observes that society has still not achieved true equality. People say, “All clothes have equal rights,” but in reality, some clothes are valued more and others are ignored or looked down upon.

The poet senses hypocrisy in this attitude. He does not complain about jackets or ties, since those are simply rules in certain places. He sees them as part of a game, much like wearing costumes at a fancy-dress party. But his main focus is the everyday discrimination people face based on clothing.

Global Use of the Lungi and Illogical Cultural Discrimination: In this section, the poet explains that he is talking about something much more fundamental. From East Africa to Indonesia, hundreds of millions of people wear the lungi every day, known in different regions as sarong, munda, htamain, saaram, ma’awais, kitenge, kanga, or kaiki. Although it is worn everywhere, indoors and outdoors, many still do not consider it important or respectable.

The poet notes that at any given moment, the number of people wearing lungis is greater than the total population of the United States. Yet wearing a lungi to a place like the White House is unimaginable. Even Walt Whitman, the poet of democracy himself, would not be allowed inside wearing one, though he would be accepted instantly if he wore a kilt.

The poet questions why such discrimination exists. Is it a clash of civilizations? He argues that the bias is completely illogical, because a kilt is accepted as part of “our” culture, while the lungi is dismissed as something belonging to “them.” Through this, he shows how clothing becomes a tool for cultural division and class inequality.

Artistic Hegemony and Personal Shame: In this part, the poet says that the problem is not limited to ordinary people alone. In today’s world, there is neo-imperialism and domination

even in clothing. Some people, who themselves wear stylish Western suits, look down upon their own countrymen for wearing lungis. They consider themselves superior.

Only in a few places does the lungi receive real respect. In Sri Lanka, lungis are even accepted as fashionable party wear. In Myanmar, political leaders wear lungis while receiving foreign dignitaries. Yet Myanmar often remains isolated on the world stage. The poet sarcastically remarks that when the world finally accepts the lungi, even fashion centers like Savile Row will welcome it. Then the poet gives a personal example.

His cousin in America would wear a lungi at home to relax after work, but his son began to feel ashamed of his father. The son would hide the lungi, calling it a “ridiculous ethnic attire.” This shows how cultural pressure and hegemonic influence enter even private family spaces, causing people to lose their own identity.

A Call for a Lungi Movement and Cultural Pride: In this part, the poet admits that the entire situation deeply depresses him. But he does not want to stop there. He believes that it is no longer the time to remain silent; something must be done. So he promises that if anyone mocks him as a man living in an “Ivory Tower,” he will proudly declare, “I AM A LUNGI ACTIVIST!” He urges his friends and fellow lungi lovers to organize lungi parties and lungi parades, and even lobby Hallmark and Archies to introduce an International Lungi Day. He imagines a day when the UN Secretary-General will wear a lungi and address the world.

Then he once again addresses Walt Whitman, saying that he celebrates his lungi, sings his lungi, and wants Whitman to wear it too. The poet says that Whitman’s journey should now go beyond India and reach Bangladesh. He imagines Whitman lounging in a cottage on Cox’s Bazar beach, wearing a lungi and watching twenty-eight young men bathing in the sea. In this section, the lungi becomes a symbol of cultural pride, joy, equality, and national identity.

Explanation of the Lungi’s Simple Form and Its Multifunctional Nature: In this part, the poet humorously asks readers what exactly he has been talking about all along. He alludes to Beau Brummell, the symbol of Western fashion, to suggest that even such a simple garment deserves attention. He then describes the basic structure of a lungi. It is a rectangular piece of cloth, white, colored, checked, or plaid, roughly 45 by 80 inches. It is folded lengthwise and stitched to form a tube one can easily step into and fasten around the waist with a small slipknot. One size fits everyone. If the lungi gets dirty while sitting somewhere, one can simply turn it inside out. When not worn, it can be folded like a scarf.

The poet adds that an old lungi also has value. It can be used as a dish rag, a floor cleaner, or as material for a kantha quilt. With humorous imagination, he says this tubular cloth could even be used to illustrate Stephen Hawking's "Theory of Everything" and its superstring concept. In this section, the poet shows the lungi's simplicity, practicality, and multifunctionality, mixing humor with scientific imagination to highlight its unique importance.

The Fundamental Role of the Lungi and Its Versatile Uses: In this part, the poet returns to the essential significance of the lungi. He says that for ordinary people, the lungi is a symbol of modesty and a kind of "fig-leaf" that provides social decency. In a hot climate, two lungis are enough to live a simple yet dignified life. One can swim in a pond or river wearing a lungi folded into a G-string, then change into the other one afterward. Under the blazing sun, the lungi can be wrapped around the head as Arab-style headgear or as a Sikh-style turban. In cold weather, a spare lungi can be draped around the body as an improvised poncho.

The poet also notes that the lungi can be tied like a G-string for wrestling or playing kabaddi. But for football, cricket, or walking through monsoon mud, it is folded vertically and kilted at the knee. In this section, the poet shows how the lungi is practical, comfortable, culturally rooted, and adaptable for many physical activities. It stands out as a truly versatile garment, suitable for various climates, tasks, and lifestyles.

Lungi as a Symbol of Universality, Joy, Survival, and Resistance: In this section, the poet concludes the discussion by saying that the lungi is, in one word, a complete wardrobe. Anyone can meet all their clothing needs with just a lungi. It is a symbol of equality because it is equally accessible to both the rich and the poor. At the same time, it represents the identity of marginalized people worldwide, a kind of subaltern voice that expresses its presence even through humor and laughter.

The poet jokes that in moments of romance, the lungi can become a sleeping bag for two. A book of poems, a little drink, and your beloved inside the lungi, within this simplicity lies the joy of paradise. He then describes the brutal challenges of the monsoon season. If everything floods away in a terrible deluge, the lungi can be inflated with air and turned into a small boat or "ark."

And if one manages to find shelter on a treetop, the lungi can be washed and held up high. It becomes a flag of helplessness, which he humorously calls the "flag of your indisposition." He says to wave that flag at the "useless stars." In this part, the lungi emerges not just as a

garment but as a powerful symbol of life, love, struggle, survival, and resistance.

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