While-reading:

1: While you read the story, you should carefully highlight anything that may tell you something about Indian culture.

2: Find examples of communication gaps between mother and son. Try to explain why these gaps occur.

Mother and Son

R.K. Narayan (1956)

Ramu's mother waited till he was halfway through dinner and then introduced the subject of marriage. Ramu merely replied, 'So you are at it again!' He appeared more amused than angry, and so she brought out her favourite points one by one: her brother's daughter was getting on to fourteen, the girl was good-looking and her brother was prepared to give a handsome dowry; she (Ramu's mother) was getting old and wanted a holiday from housekeeping: she might die any moment and then who would cook Ramu's food and look after him? And the most indisputable argument: a man's luck changed with marriage
Earlier in the evening Ramu's mother had decided that if he refused again or exhibited the usual sullenness at the mention of marriage, she would leave him to his fate; she would leave him absolutely alone even if she saw him falling down before a coming train. She would never more interfere in his affairs. She realized what a resolute mind she possessed, and felt proud of the fact. That was the kind of person one ought to be. It was all very well having a mother's heart and so on, but even a mother could have a limit to her feelings. If Ramu thought he could do what he pleased just because she was only a mother, she would show him he was mistaken. If he was going to slight her judgement and feelings, she was going to show how indifferent she herself could be…

With so much preparation she broached the subject of marriage and presented a formidable array of reasons. But Ramu just brushed them aside and spoke slightingly of the appearance of her brother's daughter. And then she announced, 'This is the last time I am speaking about this. Hereafter I will leave you alone. Even if I see you drowning I will never ask why you are drowning. Do you understand? 'Yes.' Ramu brooded. He could not get through his Intermediate even at the fourth attempt; he could not get a job, even at twenty rupees a month.

And here was Mother worrying him to marry. Of all girls, his uncle's! That protruding tooth alone would put off any man. It was incredible that he should be expected to marry that girl. He had always felt that when he married he would marry a girl like Rezia, whom he had seen in two or three Hindi films. Life was rusty and sterile, and Ramu lived in a stage of perpetual melancholia and depression; he loafed away his time, or slept, or read old newspapers in a free reading room…

He now sat before his dining leaf and brooded. His mother watched him for a moment and said, 'I hate your face. I hate anyone who sits before his leaf with that face. A woman only ten days old in widowhood would put on a more cheerful look. "You are saying all sorts of things because I refuse to marry your brother's daughter,' he replied.
What do I care? She is a fortunate girl and will get a really decent husband.' Ramu's mother hated him for his sullenness. It was this gloomy look that she hated in people. It was unbearable. She spoke for a few minutes, and he asked, 'When are you going to shut up?' 'My life is nearly over,' said the mother. 'You will see me shutting up once and for all very soon. Don't be impatient. You ask me to shut up! Has it come to this? 'Well, I only asked you to give me some time to eat.' 'Oh, yes. You will have it soon, my boy. When I am gone you will have plenty of time, my boy.'

Ramu did not reply. He ate his food in silence. 'I only want you to look a little more human when you eat,' she said.

'How is it possible with this food? asked Ramu.

'What do you say?' screamed the mother. 'If you are so fastidious, work and earn like all men. Throw down the money and demand what you want. Don't command when you are a pauper.' When the meat was over, Ramu was seen putting on his sandals. 'Where are you going?' asked the mother.

Going out,' he curtly replied, and walked out, leaving the street door ajar.

Her duties for the day were over. She had scrubbed the floor of the kitchen, washed the vessels and put them in a shining row on the wooden shelf, returned the short scrubbing broom to its corner and closed the kitchen window.

Taking the lantern and closing the kitchen door, she came to the front room. The street door stood ajar. She became indignant at her son's carelessness. The boy was indifferent and irresponsible and didn't feel bound even to shut the street door. Here she was wearing out her palm scrubbing the floor night after night. Why should she slave if he was indifferent? He was old enough to realize his responsibilities in life.

She took out her small wooden box and put into her mouth a clove, a cardamom and a piece of areca nut. Chewing these, she felt more at peace with life. She shut the door without bolting it and lay down to sleep.

Where could Ramu have gone? She began to feel uneasy. She rolled her mat, went out, spread it on the pyo/ and lay down. She muttered to herself the holy name of Sri Rama in order to keep out disturbing thought. She went on whispering, "Sita Rama Rama..." But she ceased unconsciously. Her thoughts returned to Ramu. What did he say before going out? "I am just going out for a stroll, Mother. Don't worry. I shall be back soon. "No, it was not that. Not he. Why was the boy so secretive about his movements? That was impudent and exasperating. But, she told herself, she deserved no better treatment with that terrible temper and cutting tongue of hers. There was no doubt that she had conducted herself abominably during the meal. All her life this had been her worst failing: this tendency, while

in a temper, to talk without restraint. She even felt that her husband would have lived for a few more years if she had spoken to him less... Ramu had said something about the food. She would include more vegetables and cook better from tomorrow. Poor boy...
She fell asleep. Somewhere a gong sounded one, and she woke up. One o'clock? She called, "Ramu, Ramu."

She did not dare to contemplate what he might have done with himself. Gradually she came to believe that her words during the meal had driven him to suicide. She sat up and wept. She was working herself up to a hysterical pitch. When she closed her eyes to press out the gathering tears, the vision of her son's body floating in Kukanahalli Tank came before her. His striped shirt and mill dhoti were sodden and clung close to his body. His sandals were left on one of the tank steps. His face was bloated beyond all recognition.

She screamed aloud and jumped down from the pyola She ran along the whole length of Old Agrahar Street. It was deserted. Electric lights twinkled here and there. Far away a tonga was rattling on, the tonga-driver's song faintly disturbing the silence; the blast of a night constable's whistle came to her ears, and she stopped running. She realized that after all it might be only her imagination. He might have gone away to the drama, which didn't usually close before three in the morning. She rapidly uttered the holy name of Sri Rama in order to prevent the picture of Kukanahalli Tank coming before her mind.

She had a restless night. Unknown to herself, she slept in snatches and woke up with a start every time the gong boomed. The gong struck six through the chill morning. Tears streaming down her face, she started for Skukanahalli Tank, Mysore was just waking to fresh life. Milkmen with slow cows passed along. Municipal sweepers were busy with their long brooms. One or two cycles passed her.

She reached the tank, not daring even once to look at the water. She found him steeping on one of the benches that lined the bund, For just a second she wondered if it might be his corpse. She shook him vigorously, crying "Ramu!" She heaved a tremendous sigh of relief when he stirred.

He sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Why are you here, Mother?" "What a place to sleep in!'
"Oh, I just fell asleep," he said.

"Come home," she said. She walked on and he followed her. She saw him going down the tank steps, "Where are you going?" "'Just for a wash," Ramu explained.

She clung to his arm and said nervously, "No, don't go near the water."

He obeyed her, though he was slightly surprised by her intensity.

Tasks for Mother and Son