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Phenomenal Literature
A Global Journal devoted to
**Language
and
Literature**

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Chief Editor:

Dr. VIVEKANAND JHA

Associate Editor:

Dr. RAJNISH MISHRA



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PHENOMENAL LITERATURE

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Editorial

Phenomenal Literature is an attempt at foregrounding the understanding of the world as perceived in and through literature. It attempts at “a disinterested endeavour” to select the creative and critical gems from the fields of literature and criticism and present them to the reader looking at the world with a changed perspective afterwards. It takes the complete creative spectrum and contour of novels, poetry, short stories, drama, plays, translations, book reviews, interviews, critical/academic/research articles, essays, biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, travelogues and other creative writings in English as its province. The approach that it adopts is interdisciplinary, and its focus is upon literature. The array of works and creators that find space on the pages of *Phenomenal Literature* will make it clear that the literature presented there is *weltliteratur*.

The journal embodies its promise and is global in true sense as its inaugural issue features authors from all parts of the world. In a journal such as this, many people deserve an affectionate thanks. First we express sincere thanks to all of the authors who contributed work to this promising journal and waited patiently for more than half a year to feel it through their senses.

As editors of this journal we dwelt our attention on showcasing our contributors and their creativity in the best possible shades and light. We would like to extend our heartfelt obligation for exhibiting deep association with this journal and for making us realized of a dream and many dreams that wrap up within its cover and that lie within its pages. We hope our humble presentation will not be a disappointment and dismal display.

Vivekanand Jha & Rajnish Mishra

POETRY

1

Afternoon Song

SUNIL SHARMA

In the coastal town,
In the silent afternoon shops
That yawn on semi-deserted roads,
The power outages common and long,
And the humid day drips droplets of sweat
A dry hot dust-devil swirls up fast,
Leaving layers of dust everywhere
On the trees and houses,
A miller reads on a hard bench
Under the shade,
A barber talks on his cell phone
Outside his empty shop,
A cobbler sits in his roadside stall
Looking blank at the blank road,
A maid walks gingerly on hot surface,
The bored auto-rickshaw drivers wait for their fares
At the corner stop,
The school kids come back prancing
All of them creating a great Indian urban song.



2

A Shoulder for the Subaltern

JAYDEEP SARANGI

There're quite a few things to be crossed over
Before the door opens
With the key
So that you may reach
Strange continents of the mind
Where parallel lines meet.

These years that dream lie in wait,
Near a small river
Mind whispers in love
When night unfurls its mysterious box.

Your poetic dreams
Before you knew there was yet another,
Writes a new history
Of a rickshaw puller
Paddling through ages
In a caste ridden stratified discourse.
He is denied everywhere
Denied by all who matter in power.

Only a sensitive shoulder
Insane and maniac
Rooted in the milieu
Move hearts
With strokes of fours and sixes.



3

Crosswinds

TOM PESCATORE

caught a glimpse of an
old man crying, having lived
anonymously 98 wasted years
unrecognized, seized his
aged heart in helpless wrinkled hand,
going with nothing to prove
his existence but frayed
stack of journals, unread,
unappreciated, piles of emotions
unrequited, ignored,
asked why me? with blind eyes
used to seeing so much, begged
for the probationary clause of god's whim,
wondering why not me?
what did I do wrong? was I not good enough?
what didn't I say?
and
I didn't have the time to
pick his lifeless body from the street
or say a meaningless word,
what with all the poems
blowing away—



4

Sky Fell

STEPHEN MEAD

Fog was the first clue,
The sense of scattered jet streams,
White shred & the next
Fed to the black night.
I thought:
That's what we are, dense
Vapor spirals so easily cut loose...
You could trace the tree-line
In my body & in yours', coursed
A road
The shade of charcoal,
Aquarium-green, water running over...
Then the sky fell & we assumed light,
Having to assume something
For so suddenly everything
Changed



5

Lone Vigil

ROB HARLE

Keeping a lone vigil
the mermaid waits for his return,
her mesmerising melodies cascading
watching the ever changing sea,
the calmness of an aqua mirror
morphing into violent avalanches of foam.
Great spiritual magnet
pulls the devoted closer,
but destroys the careless.
The lure is enticing
a baptismal font of enigmatic blue,
where communion brings renewal.
Promises of rebirth
resound in the intoxicating silver salt spray
dancing in the soothing breeze
lifting the spirit to heavenly heights,
careening in the sounds of pulsing waves
as they caress the tidal zone,
the gateway from material to spiritual.
This transition realm a deep and taunting mystery
an arcana of veils,
a gateway holding many secrets,
the key to their revealing
is the locksmith of universal love.



6

Child's Play

PAM RILEY

Death is not a child's toy –
red crayons
and the strings of kites
left wandering the attic.
It is not a game
of brick and mortar,
or the collapse of sticks
left chattering like
magpies in the dark.
It does not rhyme
or turn pages,
dogeared and thick
with summer's warm bristle.
It is old men in the park,
and surgery festering
where it is cold.
It is the stench of peat
gargled in a glass,
pious yellow
moldering in skin.
And it nestles –
quietly and breeched
beetle bright and resting
in our haunches.



7

Lobes

JIM BENNETT

some leaves are yellow green
their truth like their skeleton
revealed in the sunlight

others are wintered to a dry
golden brown soon to join
the rest on the ground

a few nights ago the leaves
were still clinging on
but the wind put paid to that

forest paths disappear
under the fall oak leaves
lie like confetti on the church porch

their fractal lobes
an Escher drawing repeating endlessly
repeating but never the same



8

Terrestrial Illumination No. 428

DUANE LOCKE

Out on a pole, the passage of time and the flow
Of air
Darkening the pole's raw once bright beige wood,
 stands on its claws
A cormorant preening its drying feathers, the
 cormorant appears
Tranquil. We sitting on a platform's bench, gaze at
Each other's face.

What do we see? Do I see her face? Does she see my face?
Or do we see our own face and displace the looked-at face.

As we gaze are we forgetting the other and forfeiting life?
Is our gaze separating us, pushing us farther away,
Imprisoning us in solitary confinement.

Has our backgrounds, what has been spoken into us,
Put an opaque, black sheet of vapor between us to blindfold
And then whiting into a tabula rasa to serve as a
 movie screen
While our nerves become script writers and compose
 a fiction?

Has anyone ever seen the other?

Or do we just have a false faith that the other is seen?
Why be disturbed by what is? A glimpse of truth, of reality
In a whole life time is an extreme rarity, a miracle.
If this miracle happens to a person, others will not
 believe it happened.
A person who experiences an authentic and
 this-worldly miracle
Is sentenced by the slave mentalities that form the majority
Of the people to solitary confinement.

An authentic life is solitary confinement.



9

With Amplitude

A.J. HUFFMAN

I am echoing in my own
absentia. A surrealistic nightmare,
I am condemned to follow
a path of my own dissolving
voice. Circling inside
a designated expanse carved out
of my brain. The neon
sign blinking over the bricked-
in door screams: *Futility*.



10

I Am Crucifixion

A.J. HUFFMAN

abandoned idol, hanging in penance
for others' sins. Stripped to the waist, nailed
to splintering symbol of my own faith.
Wearing crown of thorns, I am blessed rose,
marking universal grave. Sacrificed,
I am anonymous figure, assuming blame. I am
mother, daughter, holy ghost
of flesh discarded. I am expendable
angel, dying in plain sight.



11

My Fair Lady

AVDHESH JHA

Ocean like eyes of hopes
Nature like ears of silent listening
Sky like lips of pious words
And much more is my fair lady.

Leaf like hands of alms
Trees like legs of limitations
Sun like face of effulgence and glory
And much more is my fair lady.

Rivers like acts of selflessness and satisfaction
Moon like body of beauty
Religion like mind of righteousness and emancipation
And much more is my fair lady.

Flowers like heart full of soft feelings, love and affection
Star like shining and charming
Caring, loving, sweet and beloved
And much more is my fair lady.



12

A Door in the Moon

STEVE KLEPETAR

There is a door in the moon
seductive as cinnamon and ice,
a cave opening to gleaming
walls and water trickling along
grooves worn deep into rock.

All night shadows play across
moon's broad face
reminding those who stare
of bats and cool fruit hanging
heavy from late summer trees.

In a while, stars disappear, lakes
ripple in moonlight. Every door
swings open for those few
walkers dreaming in darkness
of places beneath the flesh of sky.



SHORT STORY

1

Under a Darkening Sky

TERRY SANVILLE

A feather from my right wing flutters downward into the canyon. My mate circles above me. She dives toward the black quill and snatches it in her beak before it can drop into the oaks and sycamores that crowd the creek. Climbing, she flies past me, rolling in the soft afternoon air, croaking with delight, like she did as a young raven before we paired. She's still playful after more than a decade of summers, though her feathers are as ragged as mine.

Our nest is old and used by many others before us. It sits in the crotch of a huge eucalyptus on a hillside overlooking the harbor. Directly below rests an orange-tiled estate where we hunt for bugs under its eaves, drink from the fountain, and bask in the afternoon sun on its roof. As young birds we flew the island's entire length to play with our brethren who nest in the cliffs near the two harbors. But now, we sit on the estate's warm tiles and call to those sailing past. They beckon for us to follow, and when the wind is right, to fly north across the channel to the mainland. But we've flown enough, have claimed our territory, and know how to enjoy our days. The same can't always be said for the humans who live at the estate.

When we first occupied our nest only the man lived in the main house. He stood twice as tall as a fence post with

brown hair on top of his pale body. One afternoon he staggered into the flat yard next to the house and slumped into a chair. In one claw, he clutched a bottle half-filled with amber liquid and in the other a glass. His head dripped blood. A woman wearing a dove gray uniform hurried after him. He sat trembling while she cut off his hair and stopped the bleeding. He touched her brown face with his mouth and she pushed him away, but not too hard. They moved inside. We swooped down, snatched up the hair from where it had fallen onto the patio stones, and used it to line the bottom of our nest. It felt soft, perfect for cradling eggs.

It took several moon cycles for the man's hair to grow back, streaked with silver and thinner than before. He spent long days in the yard, staring into the small window of some kind of machine and picking with his claws at its buttoned board with odd markings on it. One day when he'd gone inside, I flew down and pecked at the board. It made weird beeping sounds and the scene in the window changed from a view of our island to strange markings – like those on the sheets of paper that sail through the town when the east wind blows hard. I dipped my beak into his glass of amber liquid. It tasted awful and I choked.

The man must have heard the commotion. He ran into the yard and shooed me away. I ruffled my feathers. My mate and I perched on the rim of our nest and complained loudly, our voices echoing down the canyon. I thought he would throw something at us. But instead, he just stared. Disappearing inside the house, he returned with a flat rock covered with pieces of something. He laid it on top of the stone wall that surrounded the estate then retreated to his seat.

"What do you think?" my mate asked. "Is it safe?"

"Stay here and keep watch," I told her. "If he makes a move toward me, swoop down and give him a good peck. If he stays put, come join me."

I flew from our tree and landed on the wall, croaking softly and watching the man. He leaned back, his mouth split

open, showing teeth. I edged toward the flat rock, bobbing and weaving across the top of the wall. I smelled the food. The man didn't move. I had devoured half of it before my mate joined me. We gobbled the rest, savoring the sweet taste of fruits that the humans often left behind in the side canyons where they lived in cloth houses and huddled around fires at night.

When we finished we flew to our nest. The man held some kind of machine to his eyes and pointed it at us. A soft click, click, click broke the mid-afternoon stillness. The brown woman joined him. She leaned forward and pressed her face against his. They sat together, face to face, and made low sounds. My mate dug me in the shoulder with her beak and flew out over the town toward the seaside rocks where pelicans and cormorants gathered to dry their wings in the afternoon sun. We danced and spun in the air, riding the currents. I flew upside-down with my claws linked with hers and cried out to other ravens. We didn't return to our tree until the sun dipped below the ridgeline and the cold settled in.

Seasons passed. The brown woman grew large and then a little human joined the pair. The man continued putting out plates of food every day and my mate and I grew heavy. She hatched many chicks until last spring when she stopped. Another small one joined the man and woman. On warm afternoons, adult humans crowded the yard, drank much amber liquid, and ate until late at night, being more raucous than any of us ravens could ever be. On one afternoon, the man placed chunks of meat over a fire. The other humans stood back from the pit and away from its smoke.

"Look what he's laying out for us," my mate said.

"There's too many of them around for us to try," I said.

"Ah, come on. We're ravens. We can do what we want. I'll perch on the roof and start croaking while you grab some meat."

I always knew my mate had a loud call; but that day she outdid herself. All the humans stopped what they were doing

and stared at her, spreading their mouths and showing teeth. I flew high above the estate and dove at a steep angle toward the fire pit. At the last moment, I stuck out my legs and braked with fluttering wings. Landing on the edge of the pit, I leaned forward, stabbed a chunk of meat, and I took off. It felt hot and smelled delicious. The man ran toward me, his mouth open and complaining. I flapped hard and managed to climb to our nest where my mate joined me. A loud roar rose up from the crowd below. They lifted their glasses of amber and clear liquid into the air. We ate well that night and didn't fly the whole next day.

The little humans grew bigger. They left the estate each morning and returned in the afternoon. The man's hair turned silver and he slept most afternoons in the yard, winter and summer, with his blinking window machine and his bottles. Sometimes the brown woman would join him and they would call loudly to each other. Once he reached out and struck her across the face and she ran from his grasping claws. We didn't see her for days. But our food plates kept coming and we decorated our nest with pieces of cloth swiped from the couple's outdoor tables, scraps of pretty paper left from their gatherings, and fur from their fat tomcat. We had fun gently pulling out clumps of his soft gray coat while he lay sleeping in the sun. If we kept quiet, he wouldn't even wake.

One evening, I woke from my nap to the sound of a large yellow machine with a light on its roof rumbling on the road next to the estate. The sun had dropped below the canyon ridge and the sky would soon be black.

"What's going on?" my mate asked.

"Someone must be leaving," I said. "Anytime one of those machines shows up someone leaves...or arrives."

In the yard, the man and his brown mate called loudly to each other. The little ones clutched her blue-green dress and made strange whining sounds. The woman's face looked wet and glistening, just like the small ones, like they had all been

caught in a thunderstorm. At her feet rested boxy things with handles. The pair's cries grew louder. The woman moved to the far edge of the yard, pulled something from one of her claws, something gold with a bright flash. She flung it into the dark canyon below. Grabbing the boxy things, she herded the little ones before her and they all climbed into the yellow machine. It rolled downhill to the ferry landing.

"What do you think that was all..." I began to ask. But my mate had flown from our tree and dove down canyon, disappearing into the black shadows. I called to her but got no reply. I waited. The light had almost disappeared before I heard the whoosh of her wings.

"Where did you go? I was..." I stopped speaking. In her beak she held a gold ring with shiny pieces of glass attached to it.

"I couldn't leave it down there," she said, her whole body shaking.

"It is pretty. But why go to all that trouble?"

"I don't know. I just have a feeling that it's important." She pressed the ring into the side of our nest, right above a piece of yellow cloth, where the morning sun would catch it and make it gleam brightly.

For days we didn't see the man. A strange old woman came from the house each morning and placed our food on top of the wall. The rains came and when the man finally returned to the yard, he sat in his chair and stared across the channel at the mainland while draining bottles of amber liquid. But when the sky brightened and the yellow coreopsis bloomed across the hillsides, he seemed to change. He drank from a clear bottle that he carried with him everywhere. During the day, my mate and I found him running along the ridge trails above the town, his body wet and glistening. He became slim, spent afternoons pounding madly on the window machine's panel until darkness came. He showed his teeth a lot when he talked with other humans and always pointed us out to his friends.

One summer afternoon, a yellow machine pulled up to the estate and the brown woman and the two little ones climbed out. The man met them outside the main building. They moved to the yard and he sat with the woman. They linked claws while the little ones played in the fountain and chased each other in and out of the house, calling loudly, their voices high and burbling like the canyon creek after a storm. The man pressed his face against her face. They stayed that way for a long time.

With a flurry of action, my mate snatched the gold ring with its bright glass from the wall of our nest and soared upward into the darkening sky. I followed her, my shoulders aching from the effort and from age. We circled the humans in the yard. I called loudly until they looked up at us. My mate dove toward them and I followed. With a flutter of wings we landed on the table. They stared at us, open-mouthed. My mate waddled forward and dropped the ring from her beak in front of the woman.

Tracks of water glistened down the woman's face. She picked up the ring. Her mouth spread wide, showing teeth. The pair made little coughing sounds.

We rose into the cool night, both of us struggling with the effort, and flew circles over the estate, croaking and watching the humans wave at us until the light failed.

"I knew she would want it back," my mate said.

"You always were a romantic," I replied, clacking my beak loudly at her.

We headed up canyon, black birds flying in a black night, and joined our aging brethren in the trees along the ridge road near the reservoir. We would share our stories with the others, let a young pair of ravens take over our nest, and wait until the time for our final flights.



2

The Roadside Tea Stall

NITA BAJORIA

“Shweta dear, can’t you please ask any of your friends to pick you? What will I do there..?” Adrit, a young entrepreneur in his thirties, made a yet another attempt to evade the boring job.

The sky was turning dark turquoise blue. It will definitely rain today, thought Adrit. A sudden cool breeze touched his forehead after so many days of scorching summer heat, as he pushed open the window of his office room slightly.

How can one let this awesome evening go away like this? His plans to spend the cool evening, chatting with his wife Shweta, with rounds of pakoris and masala tea were already ruined! Thanks to the dance practice sessions for her cousin’s sangeet ceremony! And now Shweta was hell bent on spoiling the remaining joy he can have spending the Saturday evening alone with his books.

“Arrey they would be so happy to have you after so many days! You can even have a hearty chat with Ranga kaku. He is so humorous and full of jokes. I am sure you will enjoy the evening very much!” She insisted excitedly.

Shweta’s tempting idea of spending the much awaited Saturday evening with his uncle’s so called jokes looked rather torturous to him! But Shweta won’t understand that. To her he was the most entertaining person on earth. So, this time he tried another logic.

“I know..., but dear, I have a very urgent work.”

“What work? Adda with your friends?” Shweta retorted as per her past know how.

“um... no no... Not adda? Serious work”

The silence that followed suggested that he was expected to detail the so-called “Serious Work.”

“Um...I... I need to... um go to the... um my lawyer. Yes lawyer..and it's been really difficult getting his appointment this time!” Giving kudos to his fast presence of mind he felt a both happy and proud .

But the celebration was quite short lived, as Shweta demanded the reason for his sudden lawyer visit.

“An old disputed case of a property you see! Some very urgent issues on that case need to be settled. I will tell you all once I come back”, He was sure he will cook up a great story given he has some time.

“That's Okay. But still you can drop me honey ...! What time is your appointment?”

“Seven?” he replied quickly, hoping now Shweta won't be able to fit in her plans.

“Great! We need to practice at least for three hours. And aunt wanted us to have dinner. So, you first drop me there by 6, leave for your work and then pick me up while returning. We can have dinner at aunts place. She will be obliged and I won't have to cook at home too!”, Shweta triumphantly detailed the final plan and poor Adrit had absolutely no choice than to say yes and fall into his self created trap!

The rain had stopped. But the fresh smell of wet mud always made Adrit nostalgic. Though born and brought up in city, Adrit had spent a good amount of time in his grandparent's village. Sliding down the window glass of his car, Adrit inhaled a heartfelt and gave Shweta a romantic look.

“Its such a romantic day ... ! We could have planned a date out!”

“Ok. And what about your urgent work?”

“Oh that... yes No issues ...better luck next time”, He smiled back at her and started the car.

Ranga Kaku’s house was a bit off city. The area was quite green. Though the roads were muddy with freshly created potholes, Adrit was enjoying the ride. After dropping her, he left for his phony job. The job, that saved him from spending his Saturday evening sitting at a drawing room and enacting fake smiles on some mind-numbing and uninteresting jokes! The job that gave him an opportunity to spend this evening the way he wanted to.

But then, where would he go? Undecidedly, he picked up his blackberry and looked up at his friends contact list to call some and plan. It was a narrow lane and a car from behind started honking. Placing the phone on the dashboard, he swiveled the car outside the lane and parked beside a thatched tea stall. Before he could again pick up his phone to dial, a tempting aroma of fresh tea passed his nostrils. It was quite dark and the yellow bulbs on the tea stall twinkled like stars. The tea stall was below a massive tree on the edge of the road. For shade, the tea stall has been covered with a standard tarpaulin tied to the tree. He decided to have a cup of hot tea.

A person in lungi approached the car and asked him if he would like his tea to be served inside the car or at the stall.

“Inside the stall. And I want it in those earthen pots and don’t forget to put ginger in it “, Adrit replied.

The place was quite deserted except a few locals, probably due to the weather.

Placing himself in one of the two tables placed there, he took out his blackberry again and started BBm ing his friends. But, after a while he slipped it back in his jacket. What a waste it would be to drown oneself in technology amidst such a pleasing location. The rain has stopped but the water drops from the tree was dripping on the tarpaulin making an

interesting note. He relaxed on the chair and looked around to soak in the countryside landscape.

Splash! Slosh!

Street children playing on a nearby puddle giggled and pushed each other on the wet mud .

Adrit was reminded of his school days.

It just had to rain, and he would run with his friends on the nearby park to have a muddy football game. A smile floated on his face as the images from his childhood floated in front of his eyes. He took out his mobile to click a picture.

The kids noticed him and made funny poses. He looked at the pics taken and started uploading them on facebook. At a roadside tea stall he typed in the comment with the picture.

"One coffee please.... ?", A man in Blue jacket ordered.

Adrit looked up. The man was facing away from him.

"No dada! We don't keep coffee. There is a rare demand for coffee here. Only tea.", the man in lungi replied pouring tea onto a mud cup.

"Oh! Ok. Then serve me a tea only." The man paid the stall owner in advance and turned around to look for a chair.

He looked somehow familiar to Adrit and it took him just few minutes to recall those big eyes and pointed nose. It was Shushanta for sure.

"Shushanta...!"

The man looked up and spotting Adrit came towards him.

"Oh My God! Adrit... Its you?"

"Yes buddy!" Adrit stood up and hugged him tightly.

"Hi! How have you been? Long time..."

"Yes... very long time. You have changed a lot!" Adrit was surprised to find Shushanta in such an attire.

"Yes may be.... But you haven't! You still look so young" Shushanta laughed out.

"Thanks! But, I must say you are looking very dashing! Never saw you in such clothes." Adrit couldn't help saying so.

An embroidered kurta paired up with faded denims was the basic signature style of creative Shushanta in his college! And presently in a formal crisp shirt, trouser and a tie, he looked quite different. A person's attire is a reflection of his personality. And this new personality of his, shocked Adrit.

He suddenly spotted the Honda City.

"Is that car yours?"

"Yes ! Finally!"

The single word "Finally" had quite a few sentences cramped up inside it . Finally, after riding your expensive cars.... I have my own! Finally... after striving for luxury so long.... I have managed to have one piece of luxury myself! Finally... I don't need to sheepishly ask wealthy friends to give me a ride on their latest sedan!

But oblivious of the hidden feelings, Adrit felt very happy for his friend!

"Great! It suits your current personality!"

But Shushanta suddenly turned pale and serious.

Adrit took his hands on his own and pressed them softly.

"Tell me friend, what's going on?"

"Alls well! What's up at your end?" Shushanta grinned.

Shushanta pulled the chair near to Adrit and both started chatting.

"I am right now running my dad's business. And what about you? Still playing Drum or some other musical instrument is your new love?" Adrit teased.

"If I would have continued music you would have known my band by now." Shushanta retorted with the same arrogance he had, while they were in college.

"Oh! Yeah! That's right! You were our college champion in music! But, then what happened?"

"After completing college, one of my father's friend offered me a job in his firm. Good salary, good post lured me away from the meagre income of a rock band artist. My parents too wanted me to join the job and take up household responsibilities."

"Oh ok!" Adrit went speechless. Shushanta was an ace drummer and everybody loved the way he played it right from his heart. His change in career was difficult for Adrit to take in. They had spend nights together planning and discussing his passion for music and how he wishes to have a rock band of himself one day!

A lump of guilt rose up his throat. Was he anyhow responsible for this? Is Shushanta still angry with him? Does he still blame him for all this?

Adrit and Shushanta's friendship was on the envy list of most of their college mates. They not only hung together but also shared anything and everything great friends of all times share. From Bunking classes to watching movies, playing pranks on friends, watching girls outside the girl's college they did all in duos.

But Shushanta, unlike Adrit, always carried a pang of jealousy. Coming from a middleclass family his father's regular income as an accountant was just enough for a decent living. But Adrit was a businessman's son. Money was no constraint to him. He wore latest fashion clothes, sported latest gadgets, watches and came in luxury car.

Explicitly, Shushanta admired all this, but seldom failed to taunt Adrit about his good luck and wealthy father in a way, which made Adrit feel guilty. Was it a sin to be born to a wealthy father? This would upset Adrit but he mostly ignored

such comments. He very well understood his friend's feelings and instead felt sorry for him.

Children were still playing in mud. They ordered a second round of tea and chit chatted their daily lives and exchanged each other's numbers too.

A small fight broke up amongst the children. Instead of playing happily they now started fighting, especially two of them. One was a stout boy and another was thin and tall! But grit wise both were equal. They started hitting each other. Everybody's attention went towards them. Someone from the shop intervened and separated them. They had to depart but a hatred on their face was visible. As if, if left even for a second they will finish the other one in no time.

Shushanta smiled at them and said "These kids..once they play like best friends and the next moment they are enemies for life!"

"And by the evening they will again forget all and look for each other" Adrit added looking intently towards his long lost friend.

"True!" Shushanta agreed with a sigh but looked away.

The College announced a scholarship. Shushanta needed the scholarship very much. He wanted to become a musician. Only if he got the scholarship, his parents will be able to afford his musical needs with the saved money.

Both, Adrit and Shushanta gave their names apart from many others. But Shushanta didn't like the idea of Adrit giving his name. Adrit was rich and didn't require the money, and moreover he was better in studies than Shushanta and hence had more chance of getting the scholarship. Only top five best students were entitled for the scholarship money.

Shushanta asked Adrit to step back.

Adrit agreed. It was not too essential for him as finance was not his issue! But his father had different idea. According to him, the test should be on fair basis. He wanted his son to

earn for his studies and not to depend on them. And if other students needed it, they should work hard for it. And in anyways there were many more students whom Shushanta will need to compete.

Adrit had no option but to succumb to his father's wishes.

Shushanta missed the scholarship ranking 8th, while Adrit ranked 3rd. There were four more who got the scholarship. But Shushanta felt its because of Adrit he missed it. And that was the end of such a beautiful and precious relationship.

"I must leave now Adrit. Have an important assignment to finish." Shushanta extended his hands towards Adrit getting up.

"Okay then! Hope will meet again." Adrit stood up too.

They started walking towards Sushanta's car in complete silence, engrossed in their own thoughts.

Suddenly, a cycle sped fast by their side towards the car. The road was slippery and full of potholes. As a result, the cycle tilted towards the car. In an effort to restore his balance, the boy riding it swivelled the cycle but not before scratching the left back gate of the car.

They both rushed to the car and in no time the boy's collar was in Shushanta's hand.

"Hey boy! What do you think you are doing? Is this a way to cycle on road?" he screamed.

Adrit later realized that the boy was the same tall boy who was fighting with the stout boy few minutes ago.

"Sorry sir! My cycle slipped"

"What sorry! Your sorry will not undo the scratch made on my car "with these wordsShushanta slapped the boy.

Many people from around gathered near the scene.

Adrit caught hold of Shushanta's hand and tried to push him away from the boy.

"Shushanta, no use of making a scene. The damage has been done. And probably the boy is right"

But red with anger Shushanta was in no mood to listen.

Suddenly the other stout boy appeared and pulling the boy in question faced Shushanta upfront.

"This is not fair sir! You can't hit him like that."

"Why not? Don't you see what he did to my car?"

"I can see that sir. But he said sorry for that! You can't raise hand on my friend" Pushing the tall boy behind he guarded him from Shushanta.

"Friend? What friend? Aren't you the boy who was fighting with him few minutes back? "

"Yes sir. But, he didn't do it purposefully. He slipped due to rainwater."

"Oh! So you are his lawyer! Great! But why are you supporting him? He was hitting you few minutes back?"

The two boys looked at each other.

"Yes sir! But that keeps happening amongst us. That doesn't means we are no more friends. And I will not allow anybody to hit my friend unnecessarily."

The sentence was uttered effortlessly and it hit Shushanta's mind with a similar effortlessness.

"But that keeps happening amongst us. That doesn't means we are no more friends."

Shushanta's raised hands stopped in midway and he started staring at the boys.

The stout boy was guarding the other one with a broad chest filled with courage and unlimited love for his friend, with whom he was fighting cats and dogs minutes before.

"Ok. Ok. Go away you urchins! It's your lucky day!" Adrit shoed them as fast he could.

Shushanta kept staring at the boys who were now going back together discussing the event..hand in hand. Soon, the

crowd dispersed and Shushanta turned towards the car to inspect the scratch.

“Thank GOD the scratch is not too deep! Repairable.” Shushanta told Adrit touching the scratched area and feeling its depth.

Adrit turned towards Shushanta and said “All scratches are repairable Shushanta...., deep or light, if one wishes to do so.”

This time Shushanta didn’t looked away. They both looked at each other for few seconds and then Shushanta gave Adrit a tight hug. Adrit returned the hug with a tighter one. They spoke nothing audible, but in those few moments they exchanged hundreds of emotions, that were locked inside each of them for years.

Unlocking each other they looked each other and smiled.

“So when are we meeting next?” Adrit enquired.

“Very soon. I have lots to share!” Shushanta replied quickly with a warm smile.

People on the tea stall kept talking about the incident as they saw the two cars that came separately, leaving together.

Today Adrit didn’t felt irritated by ranga kaku’s weird jokes served on the dining table .A constant soft smile kept floating on his face.

Back home, Shweta asked him “You look very happy today! I think the meeting was good. Did the issues get solved?”

Adrit took Shweta in his arms and planted a kiss on her cheeks “Yes my sweetheart, the meeting was great and a long unsolved issue got solved today! And I am very very happy.”

And with these words he gave a hearty laugh, pushed her gently to the bed and switched off the bed light!



3

Long Take

ROBIN WYATT DUNN

I dream of sand. I live in near desert, Los Angeles. We are a cruel city and a beautiful one.

She stands in the dune, carefully constructed over the last 24 hours and I photograph her. My *sh*tick* is I do not digitally manipulate my images; I have worked closely with the gaffer for hours and there are little rainbows of light creeping up her naked calves.

Click. Click.

And she, threatening, her eyes that is, is a desert of sand too. What once awakened, the hunger of discovery by American mouths, I am selecting her as a fine appetizer . . .

I stand close to her.

"Whisper evil things," I smile, and she does.

Directors know a thousand superstitions, no different from sailors, control as tight as you want but still you are only a cork atop a sea . . . her whispers do the trick. There will be no nightmare. But something is different. Her voice is growing louder.

"I wake from a dream of a drowned star city, millennium falcon ship no surprise for me, cheap snapshooter, Civil War deserter, my powder pan is full and all you can do is titillate my nipples on a score of Tally Isham axonographs . . ."

"Models do not act!" I shout at her, the gaffer is leaving; where did he go?

She is nude. The desert is blowing.

She is crying. "You are axonograph," she says, her lips carefully enunciating.

"What?" I say, helplessly, discarding my camera in a dune; she is still coming toward me.

"How does it feel?" she asks. "Won't you share it with me?"

"Terrible."

"Terrible how?"

"Like I'm dying. Dying underground . . ."

"I am only a woman but I know you are only these axons, you cheap little artmaker peeping Tom Hilfiger . . ."

"I need my Perrier!" I shout, but there is no world with France in it any longer. My carbon footprint is shrinking; she is in my arms.

"Am I too skinny?" she says.

"No, no."

"Hold me," she says.

There is a storm coming. Our storm. And when it arrives it will shake the face of Arrakis . . .

"Shhh, shhhh," she says. "How long do we have the studio until?"

"They kick us out at midnight," I say.

"Get me my robe," she says.

"Where is it?" I call, hunting.

"I left it on top of the microwave!"

It's a pretty little kimono. I drape it over her shoulder and resist the urge to stoop and taste her nipple.

"I want to taste your nipple," I blurt.

"You blurted," she says. "It's okay, I have that effect on men."

I am blushing. Am I twelve years old?

"What world is this, asked Millicent Idly," I find myself saying.

"It's called The Waste," she says, and her words are stones.

Oh, Los Angeles. What fatal nights of storms have tectons roamed beneath the mighty sea to find the curving lopes of celtic rings . . .

I maul her. And the set howls.

She is crying. She is moaning. The sand is surf.

"I could sue you, you know," she whispers.

"I know," I say. It's getting dark.

"Why don't you?" she says.

"Why don't I what?"

"Why don't you know what I am?"

"Don't be creepy," I say.

"I'm your agent. Give me orders."

I stroke her shoulder.

"They're going to kick us out," I say.

"Let me dress," she says.

I stand up. One of the lights has burned out; its heated fragments are smoking on the sand. I can't even find my camera. I grab my laptop and luckily the wireless was working; I've got about a gig of stills from today . . . I don't want to look at them yet, I feel nauseous.

"Do you want coffee?" I shout, but she is gone.

"Gail!" I shout. "Gail!" I hear the back door, slam, I sprint to it, slam through, she's already in her ride, a silver Volvo, tinted windows, off down the alley . . .

I go back inside and call Marcel, apologize for going late, promise not to do it again. I wire the money for the shoot and go home.

❖❖❖

I am thinking of taking up spoken word poetry. I'm not political enough for it, I don't think, but I have to say something...

But what could I say. The fatal gift, vision, must not be put into words in a union town, you keep your mouth shut. I am a good worker. I am a loyal steed, ride me, Los Angeles, I am fast and tame-wild, wild-tame, in just the right amounts, I carry the bourgeoisie to victory . . .



I am asleep. No, half-awake. What is it, 2 a.m. I've called her twice, her voice-mail is mysterious. Some soundtrack with moaning in the distance, then a click. I left my phone number twice, she does not call.

I pore over the images. The best work I've ever done, probably. But scary. Too arty. It's a goddamned fashion shoot, for god's sake, you can barely see the shoes . . .

Christ.

I fall asleep.



The nuclear blast of a late august morning in Silverlake is the best drug I could ever want. I want to die here. I want to die a slave here. I go to The Coffee Shoppe.

"Hey, Tom, the usual?" says the barista, and I nod, smiling, off my game. I almost forget to tip. I sit outside and smoke, another no-no. I do not care. French cigarettes keep me sane. Saint Gauloise, *mon frère* . . .

She is across the street. I resist the urge to shout. She looks at me, enters the café. My eyes are wide. I look a fool. I'm wearing black, is my hair okay? My glasses? I should shoot myself, make it public . . .

She comes back. She's wearing yellow. She looks older, wiser, in this light, crueler, and I expect that, but still, her eyes,

she's not on drugs, no, shit it's creepy again, just chill Tom, you have been sober for five fucking years, chill the fuck out.

"How are you?" she says coolly, sitting.

"Good, and you?" I am speaking. Voice normal. Check.

"I'm okay. You frightened me."

"I'm sorry."

"I haven't been doing this that long, you know. You must think I'm really easy."

"No, no I don't. I don't."

"There were only two guys before you."

"How long have you been in L.A.?" Has she been here long enough to undergo the change?

"Two years," she says. Right on the cusp.

"What do you think of Silverlake?" I ask her, and suddenly everyone is all ears, twenty yards around. She senses it too, of course.

"Let's go for a walk," she says, and we do, down the street, approaching Heliotrope, in late autumn, here under the veil of capitalism, I am mind, body, skill set and bank account, I am herr director, I am *Kamera*, Oh *Kamera* you evil bastard of my last nights . . .

"How are you really?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I don't."

"Do you want to get together?" she asks.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"What, do you have to call your agent or something?" she says.

"No, of course not. I just mean, what do you mean? People mean so many things."

She sighs. "Do you want to . . . be together?"

"Yes," I say. "Yes."

"I don't want to move in unless I marry the man," she says.

"Okay," I say.

"Okay what?"

"I understand," I say.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she says. "It's beautiful today."

"Yeah, it is. Listen, are you okay? Really? Did I hurt you, or . . ."

"No, I'm okay. I'll be okay. I'm a tough girl, you'll see."

There is something in her eyes.

"I fucked up," I found myself saying. "We have to go back."

"We don't have to if you don't want to," she says, lying.

I take her to my car.



I hate few things about L.A., actually, not even the driving, but this is the one part I hate, the one part I hate of driving, the bucket seat and what it does, it has invaded even classic cars, the awareness of the other body . . . here in this game of the kings and queens of the silver screen, the posture alone can kill you in its thousand degrees of erection.

"Here," she says. "Park here."

There is another shoot. Luckily Fernando is working the front desk, I ask politely and with a pretty girl with me he allows us past; we wait for a lull in the activity on set and slip in, standing on the sidelines, nod at those we know.

"What do we do now?" I whisper to Gail, but she says nothing.

It's an art shoot, *tableau vivante*, topless young women beautiful as hell, and some guy dressed like Jesus smoking an herbal cigarette.

"Just wait," she whispers and so we do, watching the shoot for the next hour, saying almost nothing. Sweep the sand on the ground . . .

I watch the deck crewman massage the sand into the proper shape, the broom smooth in his accomplished hands.

And I remember then. Did I forget? Desert.

"Desert," I say to her.

"Yeah, I know," she says.

"Are you religious?" I ask her.

"Spiritual," she says.

"Okay."

We go outside to smoke.

"We have to work here," she says, pacing, filled with narrow energy.

"At this set?"

"Yes. Can you buy it?"

"Buy it? Hell no . . ."

"Then we'll buy it together. There's something in there we need . . ."

❖❖❖

I stop working for a while. Then I work for eighteen months non-stop; Paris, London, Sydney, even Beirut. She follows, or we meet up in foreign cities jetlagged out of our minds.

Loneliness is strange when shared, you forget how to think, forget who you are, in a good way. I love her body, so much. Her nose, her lips, her voice. I am one of the lucky ones, but this kind of luck is spooky.

❖❖❖

We buy it. Cheaper than it ought to have been, a favor, I think. In this town, sometimes you can't be sure who from. From God, maybe.

We put the sand back. The sand.

"Desert," she says, and smiles. And I pour water over her naked body and chant my mantra.

"You're beautiful," she says to me and I want to hobble her.

And then the lights go out.

"Herr Direktor," she whispers. "Put your finger in my cunt."

I do. We listen to the dark of this strange little desert. Two self-involved Hollywood freaks, yes, I know, but . . .

"I am so many women now," she says.

"Can't you just be two or something?"

She laughs a little. "Not yet."

"Axonograph," she says.

"Yes," I say.

"Give me a little nerve spike."



Which Baal was yours, Jew of the old time, the second Zion, Hollywoodland cult Hebrew, the idol you learned and drew?

We keep the sand in the corner, like vampires keep their native earth, no matter the shoot. We fence it off with yellow tape; some assume it's a bizarre kitty little box.

I feel we're sinking into the religious brain of the nerves of cheap cinema, like into a bath of warm milk. New York has its shrinks; we have our mirrors, made, after all, from sand.

In a generation if not before I know Los Angeles will be a de facto city-state, inert and howling, new thallosocracy, and Gail and I will, as oligarchs, enforce our religious pluralism with the sweetest of blood rites.

"You want to go to the beach today, honey?" I ask her.

"It's a beautiful day to die," she says.



4

Copper Barons

JASON GRAFF

Even as sand and tiny stones became increasingly impacted under her fingernails, Jasonia managed to resist the urge to tell Rich she wanted to give up and go back to the motel. The layers of sand were growing heavier and blacker the deeper they dug; she wasn't just being a baby. For what seemed like hours, they'd been digging around without much idea of how to find or even, she felt, what they were looking for.

"What do you mean by getting closer, exactly?" she asked. "And just to remind me again, what is it we are supposed to be getting close to?"

"This is the one. This's what we've been looking for," he said, heaving a great load of wet sand behind him into the foaming teeth of the retreating sea. "I can feel the edges of it. Maybe an AC unit or a fridge."

"Again, have to say, I'm pretty sure this isn't legal."

"Do I have to explain that again?" he asked.

"No. I just wanted to say it."

"It definitely felt like something was covered up here when I banged the shovel on it." "Why don't you just use that thing for what it was made for?" she asked.

"We can't risk dinging one up. We could damage the coiling."

"Copper barons," Jasonia said and gave a tired chuckle that was mostly air. After wiping her hands on her already filthy jeans, she laid down in the sand, too grimy to care about getting any dirtier.

It was in about the same spot where Rich was now digging that Mr. Figgly had welcomed them to the community with a big, two-handed shake. He owned Bayside Appliance and managed to be both pushy and avuncular as he convinced them to buy the washer/dryer combo just slightly beyond their budget. By the time he was running their already stretched credit card and rambling on about the advantages of an extended warranty, Jasonia had convinced herself that this was exactly the life she'd always wanted. Coming back to that very spot to loot the devastation, reminded her of how suddenly that feeling of assurance had been pulled from beneath their feet.

The people she thought of as having real roots down there, whatever that meant in a community where almost everyone lived next door to a vacation home and often between two, scoffed at her worrying in the days leading up to Sandy's landfall. They'd all lived through storms before. A couple of days prior to it hitting, she struck up a conversation in the checkout line at the Pathmark with a woman whose high feathered hair looked as though it had been aerosoled into submission years before. In a smoker's cackle, the woman tried comfort Jasonia with the wisdom that category one hurricanes didn't count, category ones made news, not trouble.

Rich didn't see why they should evacuate, pointing out their home was nearly five hundred yards from the shoreline. Even after they were ordered to leave, he treated the whole thing as a minor inconvenience. He whistled an improvised tune while they packed the car like he did before vacations. "It's Only a Category One Song," he called it. Neither of them had any idea when they left that morning that it would be nearly a month before they'd be able to return. In the days and weeks that followed, they were repeatedly told that things weren't yet safe enough to return. A vast field of debris needed to be cleaned up before anyone would be allowed anywhere near that part of the shore.

When they were finally given the okay, Rich joked about bringing snorkel masks. Once off the highway, they sat in

traffic for hours, part of a long steel line crawling across the bridge. When they finally reached their street, Jasonia squinted her eyes shut and told Rich to let her know when they were there, when everything was okay.

“Well,” she’d said, when she felt the car stop, figuring they were in the driveway, “is it safe to look?”

“I’m not sure I can say that,” Rich said.

Their house was still standing but the one next door had been lifted off its foundation and pushed up against it. Both were covered from top to bottom in a thick layer of black sand. Getting out of the car, they found the ground swampy, their shoes sinking into the earth with a suckling sound. From inside the house came the sound of water swishing around, like it had been turned into a giant bathtub. Jasonia wanted to get in the car and drive and never come back but she knew they had to face it. She stayed right behind Rich as he opened the front door. A mini-flood of fetid seawater rushed out at them, soaking them up to the shins. They decided against going inside.

“Now we know,” Rich said on his way back to the car, head down, fists dug into his pockets.

“I need a drink,” Jasonia said, a need she had never felt before.

Mill’s Tavern’s parking lot wasn’t filled with the usual collection of motorcycles and refurbished muscle cars. Instead, there were station wagons, minivans and sensible family vehicles driven by sensible family people, all managing to carry on despite the wreckage nature had made of their lives. The silence inside was not typical, the jukebox idle for once. Families trying to measure their past against what remained of their communities, homes and lives crowded into booths surrounding a pool table with badly worn felt that was streaked white in some places. The TV was on but muted. Everyone knew the reporter standing at the water’s edge was talking about the missing part of the boardwalk that had been claimed by the sea, now floating its way to Spain.

"I don't even know why I wanted to live near the beach," Rich said after they had settled themselves on stools towards the back, near the bathrooms. "I hate the sand. It felt like I was forever sweeping it up. When I think about it now, it seems beautiful in comparison, all that dry sand."

"You yelled at me about that sand all the time," Jasonia said. "It didn't seem so beautiful then."

"Not all the time, just when you were tracking it all over the house. I thought maybe you were just worried about getting lost and had to leave a trail," Rich said and laughed almost silently to himself, his chest heaving slightly.

Jasonia missed Rich's typical laugh which always reminded her of her father's, worn but boisterous. Her old man had a habit of finding everything funny, especially the most terrible truths and laughed that laugh, often when she most wished he wouldn't. She used to worry that her husband wouldn't be able to get serious when something serious happened. For years, she'd dreaded the idea that like her father Rich would prove congenitally incapable of it, that she would have to fight with him over his desire to name a child something like Richelle simply because someone had dared him to. Jasonia now watched as Rich peeled the label from his beer bottle with a lost look in his eyes and felt she could trust him to be serious now that the time had come. Small solace, she realized, but then life has a habit of revealing things in just that way; assuring us of one thing just at the moment when we're in the midst of something worse.

"The insurance won't even cover...." he started to whisper before trailing off into silence.

It was a trait she noticed in a lot of people she talked to since the storm, the trailing off just before a thought reached its conclusion. There seemed to be a tacit agreement among those who'd lived in the storm's path and survived not to talk about what might come next, what the retreating sea had taken with it that they'd never get back. Now that Rich was doing it too, she wished even more for some of his old frivolity back.

They drank slowly, sitting in the silence of the tavern, not speaking again until they were back at the motel later that night. It was hard to relax there. Stacked up in a maze around the room was most of what remained of their possessions, leaving no space between the past and present, between what had happened and where they'd ended up.

She took a chair from a stack of mismatched ones they'd managed to fit in the back of the station wagon. It wobbled when she sat on it because one leg was shorter than the others, because her father was terrible at making things. It was the only thing he'd made for her that she'd held on to. As they were evacuating, she'd crawled under the house and found it lying on its side atop a spot of damp concrete. When she brought it to the car, she found he had rearranged their things so it could fit.

"Glad we didn't forget that," Rich had said sarcastically.

As he lay on the lumpy motel mattress, looking at her sitting unsteadily on that chair, a smile came over his face, the devilish one that pushed his cheeks up as his lips went tight. She thought it meant that Rich was glad to have it, glad to be reminded of his father-in-law's constant good humor even if it invariably became tiresome after a while. She almost allowed herself to begin thinking everything was going to be okay, that this would pass and eventually they'd get back to their life the way it had been.

"We're in trouble, Jay," Rich said, rolling over on his back so that he took up the whole bed, shaking it with a pained laugh. "We've got big problems."

"Once the assistance money comes...."

"We've got to take hold of this on our own," Rich said, his voice breaking a little. "We can't wait around, Jay. Our life isn't like that. We can't sit around. We have to do something."

"What?" Jasonia asked. "What can we do? There's no work. Ray's not going to call you for a job, probably not for awhile anyway, he's got enough to deal with and Debbie can't

reopen the shop just cause I...we need the money..." she felt close to crying but managed to contain it.

Rich rolled off the bed and approached the pile of things they'd taken out of the car, the things they didn't want to leave in it because there were reports of looting, of desperation, of break-ins and useless things taken, of people trying to turn their lives right side up any way they could. He struggled his way past the patio furniture and grill they hadn't used yet and angled his body into the back corner. There, he found the shovel that they'd purchased because it seemed like a thing you would need when you owned a home. It was a real deal shovel, the kind made to move the earth, to dig graves. It still had the warning sticker on its wooden shaft informing the user that the cutting edge of the blade was sharp and one should avoid slicing into one's foot with it.

"What are you going to do with that?" she asked. "Dig up some lost treasure?"

"In a way, yes."

"Be serious."

"I am, Jay. I am being very serious. I think I know what we can do to improve our situation without having to wait for government aid or any of that crap."

"How?"

"In a word, copper," Rich said.

"Copper?" Jasonia asked.

"Copper's a valuable commodity like gold or silver. I say we dig a bunch up and sell it."

"To who?" she asked.

"We'll find someone."

"Where will we find the copper, though? You know of some abandoned mine?"

"Matter of fact, I kinda do," Rich said and peeled the warning sticker from the shovel's wooden shaft. "The sand has

covered up who knows how many hundreds of dollars of it out where Figgly's used to be, all those refrigerators and air-conditioners and other stuff."

"Isn't that looting?"

"He's got insurance. He'll never miss it," Rich said and weaved his body through the pile of stuff again. "Probably'll pay someone else to clean it up anyway and then they'll be the ones getting rich off scrap copper." He found his winter gloves and stuffed them in his back pocket.

Not until they drove out to the newly formed beach, where Figgly's had been did she think he might be serious about his plan. Not until he slowed down when a police car approached did the reality of it completely sink in. The cop sounded a token croak from his siren and drove to the end of the road, the lights atop his patrol car looked like dark rubies under the recently repaired street lamp. They circled the block once and when he was sure the cop was gone, Rich pulled to a stop just down the street from Figgly's, in front of where a house she used to love had stood. A boxy structure painted red with white crossbeams, it had always reminded Jasonia of a barn. She remembered making some joke about it in relation to seahorses that Rich had found funny back when living down on the shore was still just a silly notion that they were kicking around.

She listened to the gentle lapping of the tide, the foam rinsing over itself on its way back to sea and thought of how innocent it all sounded, like the ocean was asking forgiveness for what it'd done. Rich walked ahead of her, his steps full of purpose. The shovel glinted in places with a silvery glow and the moonlight suddenly seemed the most serious thing Jasonia had ever seen.



5

Pieces

EDWARD PALUMBO

Dear Mr. Downe,

My name is Virginia Lowe and I am an artist. One may fairly say that my work is experimental, by nature, very experimental. My current project involves twenty-five, unrelated, pencil drawings, created by my hand, over the past three years. I have cut each drawing into four pieces, resulting in one hundred "sections", that I am mailing to parties here in Rhode Island and in nearby Massachusetts. The recipients have been chosen at random and, of course, include yourself. The first four persons who respond to this letter will be invited to come to my home with the pieces they have been sent. The four pieces will be assembled by me in the creation of my newest artwork. Each participant will be paid one thousand dollars in cash for his/her time and trouble. I anticipate that our time together will be no more than two hours. I have enclosed a business card with my email address and urge you to contact me immediately. As a reminder, only the first four respondents will be selected for this endeavor.

Kindest regards,

Virginia Lowe

Virginia Lowe resided in Warwick Neck, an opulent section of Warwick, Rhode Island. I arrived at her home at eight forty-five pm. At nine, I found myself seated at her dining room table. Mrs. Lowe was seated at the head of the table, three gentlemen, in addition to myself, rounded out the gathering. Mrs. Lowe was about forty-five years old to my best guess. She was very lovely in a Martha Stewart has just had her hair done and is fairly happy with the results, although it is not

her usual look, but, hey, you have to try new things, now and then, sort of way. The three gentlemen guests were between thirty-five and forty years old and, therefore, like myself.

The pieces from the pencil drawings were at the center of the table, where we, the guests, had placed them, but Mrs. Lowe paid them little mind. There were Manila folders in front of each of the guests, for whatever reason.

"Thank you for coming, gentlemen," began Mrs. Lowe, "be so kind as to introduce yourselves and tell us where you are from and, perhaps, what you do." She motioned to the gentleman to her right, that being me.

"I am Roger Downe," I said, "I live here in Warwick and I am a real estate consultant."

"Mitch Redmon, Coventry, and I sell tires."

"Hello, I am Carl Eichen. I live in Narragansett. I am a high school teacher.

"I'm Mike Pertinent, Swansea, Massachusetts, mall security and shell fisherman."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Lowe. "Tell me, are all of you gentleman married?"

We nodded or otherwise indicated that we were so joined.

"I, too, am married," said Mrs. Lowe, "have been for twenty-two years. He was fourteen years older than me when we met and that has not changed. But he has changed, he certainly has changed."

She rose, took the four paper sections from the table and tore them to into tiny pieces.

She tossed the bits into a nearby waste basket. More than one of the gentlemen gasped, but I made not a sound. I had suspected the whole matter was a scam of sorts. Mrs. Lowe was selling something, or so I believed, but what? Mrs. Lowe returned to her seat.

"Why are we here?" asked Mike Pertinent, a burly sort with a sunburned face. "I get the feeling you are not really an artist."

"An artist, I am," replied Mrs. Lowe, "but not tonight. Tonight, I am a bitter wife, a wife who has been betrayed by her husband."

"Divorce him," offered Carl Eichen, a slight, blonde, bespectacled man.

"Not so easy," answered Mrs. Lowe.

"Do we still get the money?" Mr. Redmon queried from under his Red Sox cap. He was a cherubic sort with an easy smile and uneven sideburns.

Mrs. Lowe nodded. "I have contracted you gentlemen to be here for two hours. At exactly eleven o'clock, a currier will arrive here with four envelopes containing one thousand dollars in each. Any of you that remain will be paid, any of your that leave will not be paid, period. Now, back to my husband, he, I am sad to say, has more than one extracurricular interest."

"You mean girlfriend," I presumed aloud.

"I mean girlfriend, Mr. Downe. He has four that I know of, perhaps more."

"Mrs. Lowe," Eichen interjected, "I left my wife and five year old son to come here. I want to know where this is going."

"My husband has four girlfriends," explained our hostess, "there are four of you. Do the math Mr. Eichen."

"I don't teach math," Eichen insisted.

"My husband", she continued, "is having an affair with each of your wives," our hostess informed us. "I have hired a private detective to follow his every move and the evidence is in the folders before you. There, you will find a list of the dates and times the related events took place in the last three months, though, I dare say, one or more of the trysts probably goes back in time much farther than that. Each of your folders

is prepared with notations as may regard your particular wives. I have photographic evidence as well, and I will present same to you, at the proper time."

We opened the folders and had a good look.

"These notes are pure fiction," Redmon insisted.

"They are exact and unfiltered," promised Mrs. Lowe. "You'll have to take my word for that."

"My wife," said Pertinent, as he closed the folder, "has two part time jobs and is a part time caregiver for an elderly aunt and does yoga. She doesn't have time to paint her toenails, let alone have an affair."

"Your wife's toenails are not the issue," insisted our hostess. "The issue here is infidelity and revenge."

"Revenge," I repeated, "revenge upon whom and by what means?"

"With your help," she replied, "all of your help, we will teach my husband and your dirty, cheating wives a lesson. We'll go over the details in good time. The one thousand dollars you will each receive this evening is just a small down payment, with respect to your future efforts on our behalf. Who is for a drink?"

We all nodded or otherwise indicated that we were interested.

"I have some wine in the kitchen. I don't keep any hard stuff in the house. My husband doesn't drink or smoke. He hardly has any bad habits, other than as discussed."

Mrs. Lowe left the room, she wasn't gone two minutes when we heard the crash. The four of us hurried to the kitchen, but found it empty.

"I am out of here," said Redmon, "this is nuts."

"Me too," added Pertinent, "it's all a sham."

A tall, portly, seasoned fellow in a white suit entered from the back hall before Redmon and pertinent could make their departures.

"Are you Mr. Lowe?" I asked the newcomer.

"No," said the huge fellow, "I am called Maxim, Thomas Maxim."

"Then you are not Mrs. Lowe's husband?" asked Eichen

"I am her father," the robust person answered. "She has no husband. He died four years ago – massive heart attack. The man smoked like The Devil."

II

I poured the wine and the five of us retired to the large living room and seated ourselves.

"When I was a boy," Maxim reminisced from the sofa, "things were so much easier. I ran with my dog Spitsy and played and laughed. Oh, how we laughed. Not that a dog laughs in the sense we know it, the muscles in their jaws are not equipped for it, but we laughed all the same and ran. As you mature, things change," he sipped his wine, "one gets married, grows a multi-million dollar, flavored coffee business – I made millions with the Wild Mountain Blueberry alone, even though only sixteen people ever even tried it – marries a Newport socialite and has two sets of identical twins, three boys and an other, just like everyone else. But then, life gets dull, gentlemen. You four will learn what I mean, and much too soon, I am afraid."

"What kind of wine is this?" asked Pertinent. "It tastes like shoe polish."

"All of the romance leaves your life after a time," warned Maxim, "and not just in the physical sense. You lose interest in everything, why I can't even enjoy a sunrise anymore, especially not in the early morning. Maturity be damned, to be young and free, that is to be truly rich. The rest is just an add on."

"Why did your daughter bring us here?" I asked.

"My daughter," Maxim replied, "is a fiction writer of some small success. Her work is good, quite good, but her

renown is limited. When she is short for material or faces writer's block, she creates fantastic situations and invites unwitting outsiders into her fantasies. You gentlemen are, more than likely, the characters of her next short story and your actions will make up the plot, or the meat of it, anyway. She has done this before.

She has plenty of money and plenty of time on her hands, thus, she can make an evening like this come together, most anytime she wants."

"Why did she leave?" asked Eichen.

"It's all part of the story line," figured Maxim. "She doesn't need to be here. She is probably recording everything we say. Later on, she will transcribe the whole matter."

"And if I leave?" Redmon interjected.

"It will just be a plot twist," Maxim replied.

"You won't get your money, Mr. Redmon," Eichen reminded. "Who's got the time?"

"Nine fifty," I told him and the doorbell rang.

Eichen rose and let someone in. The slender, young woman, who entered, was no more than twenty. She sat next to Maxim and kissed his cheek. "You have to come home now Grandpa," she said.

"Not yet, Julie, these men and I are having a nice chat."

"Now, Grandpa," she said firmly, "you cannot wander off like this. Mom and Dad will put you in one of those skilled nursing places, I'm the only one that is stopping them.

Come on, your show is on in a few minutes."

Maxim rose and the young lady took his arm.

"I am sorry about this," she said to us all, "he wanders a bit. I've asked Mrs. Lowe to keep her back door locked, but, well, sorry."

They departed.

"That fat guy is playing with a deck full of jokers," smiled Redmon.

"I am going to wait here until eleven and get my money," said Eichen, as he finished his wine, "and then I am going to find a pizza joint that stays open late, get a large supreme and then go home."

"You can get two pizzas, if you wish, with that money," I offered. "I am going to stay, as well. This evening should not be a total loss. Let Mrs. Lowe get her jollies, whatever she's up to."

"Do you think she'll come back?" asked Pertinent of me.

"Maybe," said I and as I did the television powered on.

Mrs. Lowe's face graced the screen. "I see you that gentlemen are enjoying the wine," she said. "There are mozzarella sticks in the freezer. Heat them at three hundred fifty degrees for eighteen minutes, if you are so inclined. There should be enough for everyone. If you have some left over, put them in foil, I am pretty sure I am out of plastic wrap. Oh, what a shopping I have to do Saturday. I need plastic wrap, English Muffins -remember not to leave until after eleven - and eggs. I need eggs. I have to write that down. Why do I never have eggs?"

The television powered off. The lights went next. We sat in the dark, perplexed and little inclined to move. We heard a low groan at one point. The lights came up after about three minutes, Eichen was gone.

"Eichen's gone said Pertinent, "See if his car is here," Redmon suggested.

"We would have heard him drive off," answered Pertinent.

I looked out the window, four cars were parked in front of the house, as there had been since we arrived, and I said so.

"His disappearance is just a plot twist," offered Redmon.

A little boy in pajamas and slippers padded down the stairs. He was about six years old. He carried a book, Curious

George Does Something or Another, I believe was the title. "I can't sleep," the boy said to all of us. "Who is going to read to me?"

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Somebody has to read to me," he said firmly. He held forth the book. "Can any of you read? You don't look like the brightest bunch."

"You want to take this Mike?" asked Redmon.

Pertinent nodded and he and the boy sat on the couch and began the tale.

Redmon and I decided to go to the kitchen for more wine.

"You want any wine?" Redmon asked Pertinent.

Mike Pertinent shook his head.

"I'll take some," said the boy.

"Just a small one for you," I answered.

III

"What time you got?" asked Redmon as he poured the Cabernet Sauvignon.

"Sixteen after ten, forty-four minutes to go."

"We'll make it."

We made out way into the living room, Pertinent and the boy were gone. Curious George lay on the end table, that is to say, the book, but if the monkey himself were there, he would hardly have been out of place.

"Time to pee," said Redmon.

"You're not leaving me," I told him, "you're all I've got left."

"Time to pee."

"I'll go with you."

"I've been doing it alone for a while now."

"I will stand outside the door, you have to hum all the time you are in there."

"You have a selections in mind?"

"No show tunes."

Redmon finished and came out and that was a relief, if you will. I stumbled twice as we followed the hall toward the living room.

"Are you okay?" he asked me.

"I feel lightheaded."

"Could have been the wine." Redmon took my arm. "I'll get you to the couch."

I awoke at midnight. The house was empty. I made my way to my car, the last vehicle that remained in front of the Lowe residence. As I adjusted my seat belt, I felt something in the pocket of my jacket. I pulled out an envelope containing one thousand dollars, crisp fifties, just the way I like them. I drove home.

I told Karen, my wife of six years, the entire story after I eased into my pajamas. She laughed and laughed and teased, but offered to help me spend the money. I said I was fine. She promised me that she was *not* having an affair, but was certainly keeping an eye open, in the event that I didn't work out. I thanked her for her support.

In the days that followed, I pondered more than once on the idea of revisiting Mrs. Lowe to garner a complete explanation as to the madness I had experienced in her home.

But, "No", I told myself, she had paid me and had, therefore, held up her end of the bargain and I let the matter die. Exactly one month after the meeting, I received an envelope from U.P.S.. I found an unsigned pencil drawing inside. The drawing depicted me sitting on Mrs. Lowe's couch holding a live monkey in my lap. I believe I will have it framed.



6

Beyond the Zenana

EVA BELL

Anna Hopkins pulled on a clean white coat over her dark brown dress. She was a physician from Britain sent to India in 1900, under the aegis of the Christian Missionary Society. She worked out of a small dispensary called the Inn of Healing, in a village close to Dhrangada. The locals had gradually shed their apprehensions about western medicine and came to her clinic for an assortment of medical complaints. Sometimes they just came to talk about their problems. As Anna had studied the local language for three months, she could carry on a simple conversation with her patients.

She had just settled down in her chair when there was a hard knock on the door and a man walked in. From his mannerisms she could tell he was a eunuch.

“Good Lord! Why is he here?” she wondered, the hair on her arms bristling into goose pimples.

“Madam, don’t be afraid. I’ve come to ask you for a favour.”

He was one of the two eunuchs who guarded the harem or zenana of a rich nobleman Rana Pradeep.

“The little lady – Choti Memsahib is very ill. She has been in bed for several days and refuses food. I have been asked to bring you to the zenana.

Now Anna’s forehead crinkled with worry. She had heard about these secluded quarters in rich or royal homes where wives, concubines, female relatives and slaves were sequestered behind protective walls.

"Will they let me in? I'm a foreigner and a Christian doctor. Are they open to western medicine?"

The eunuch was a strapping young fellow.

"He can lift me up and carry me off if I refuse," she thought.

But there was nothing threatening in his demeanour. She noticed that his eyes were kind.

"Doctor Ma Saab, I promise to bring you back safely. Please do come. Choti Memsahib is very ill and needs your help."

A rickshaw was waiting outside. Even before she could settle down in her seat a canvas curtain came down to hide her from view. The eunuch trudged alongside for a quite a distance until they arrived at a small gate. He unlocked it and let her in. Anna walked across a spacious courtyard to the private quarters of the ladies. It was a palatial construction at the rear of the main building. A maid approached and led her into the bedroom of Choti Memsahib. The room was large and airy. White walls and cream curtains created an illusion of space. Anna's gaze fell on the portrait of a young girl dressed in rich bridal finery, her head draped over with a diaphanous veil.

"Oh my God! She's just a child," Anna thought, as she walked towards the girl's bed.

Light filtering in through lacy curtains illuminated the face on the pillow. Her eyes were closed, her long curly eyelashes hiding the secrets of the zenana.

The maid called softly. "Choti Memsahib, the doctor is here to examine you. Will you speak to her?"

The girl gradually opened her eyes and the maid silently withdrew. Anna noticed the fear and pain mirrored in the depths of those dark eyes.

"Madam, tell me what's bothering you. Are you in pain? Let me do a thorough examination and see if I can help you."

"Call me Maya, not Madam," she whispered, "I'm beginning to forget who I am."

She did not resist when Anna pulled down the heavy silken coverlet. As Anna undid the buttons of Maya's gown, she drew in her breath at the sight of the large purplish bruises on the girl's left breast. There were larger black patches on the abdomen and extremities. She winced as Anna examined her. Her voice was barely audible.

"Now you know what's wrong with me. My body feels as if it has been run over by a bus. Please help me escape."

"Who did this to you?"

Maya's eyes moved to another portrait on the wall.

For a moment Anna stood entranced as she looked in that direction. It was the captivating portrait of a handsome man of regal bearing. His head was encased in a large turban encrusted with precious stones. It enhanced his personality. Dark penetrating eyes, an aquiline nose and a moustache twirled up at the ends over a sensuous smiling mouth, held Anna transfixed. Several heavy chains dangled from his neck and there were rings on almost every finger.

"Your husband?"

Maya nodded

They both heard the rustle of skirts and tinkling of anklets as the senior wife – Badi Memsahib entered. Maya promptly closed her eyes. Anna turned towards the lady and with folded hands bowed in greeting.

"Have you found out what's wrong with this silly girl?" the Badi Memsahib asked. "We have given her all kinds of herbal medicines and oil massages. But she refuses to eat or speak or get out of bed. Do you think you can cure her? Can the western medicine work magic?"

Anna couldn't meet those venomous eyes. Keeping her head bowed down she said,

"I will do my best, Memsahib. She will require medicines and rest for a few days. I'll come again tomorrow."

Anna prescribed pills for her pain and emollients for her bruises.

"Please take the medicines I have given you. Do try to eat some food and drink plenty of water."

"Help me," Maya said again, "And do keep coming to see me."

The same eunuch Danu escorted Anna back to the clinic. She wondered if it would be wise to get more information from the man. Could she trust him? But when she saw he was reluctant to leave, she became bolder.

"If I must help your Choti Memsahib I must know the truth. Tell me all that you know."

Danu squatted on the floor

"No need for that. Just sit comfortably on the chair and speak."

Dhrangada was the seat of the Jhale Rajputs and Rana Pradeep was a cousin of the Maharaja. Tall, broad shouldered and handsome, he was irresistible. He held an important post at the palace and wielded power over the rest of the staff. But he was not a nice man to know when it came to women. His sexual appetite was insatiable. Apart from his legal wife, he had several concubines to meet his needs. They were young, pretty and ready to please, and lived in one part of the zenana. His wife had no other option but to tolerate them.

However, when Rana brought in Maya as his second wife, a girl young enough to be his daughter, the Badi Memsahib could neither control her anger nor her jealousy.

"She's just a child," Anna interrupted.

"The zenana is not always a peaceful place. The concubines concoct many plots to seek favour with Rana. Intrigues can be dangerous. I fear that something bad is happening to the child. It could be the Badi memsahib or the

concubines who are hurting her. Ever since Choti memsahib arrived at the zenana, the concubines have been ignored by the Rana. I beg you Doctor Ma Saheeb, please help the girl. I want to see her happy and well again."

"I'll do my best."

She dared not breathe a word to the eunuch about the real cause of Maya's distress.

Anna's forays into the zenana continued for several days. Maya looked forward to her visits.

"I'm happy that I can share my thoughts and fears with you," she said.

Maya was only fourteen when the Rana insisted on having her as his wife. He had observed her peeping at him through the hedges bordering her compound, every time he rode by on his horse. She was at an impressionable age and imagined that the handsome Rana was her Prince Charming. He occupied her thoughts by day and her dreams by night. Rana was excited by her interest in him. She was young, pretty as a picture and light on her feet like a young gazelle. His first wife had grown plump and ugly over the years. She neglected her appearance and had lost her capacity to satisfy him in bed.

"As cold as a statue! The bedroom encounters with her have become distasteful. Even the concubines provide me with more pleasure than my wife. I haven't summoned her to my room for months. But this young girl is like a rosebud, waiting to bloom in my arms. I will marry her."

"I was so happy," Maya confided in Anna, "All that pomp and ceremony went to my head. My Prince Charming had become my husband. I expected life to be sheer heaven."

But no one had told Maya how to participate effectively in bedroom intimacies. The Rana's erotic explosions were a frightful experience and not mutually exciting. The more she hollered, the more sadistic he became.

"Why did you think I married you, you foolish girl? You are to be available when I need you and must respond with passion. Or learn from the concubines how to please a man."

Tears glistened in her eyes.

"I'm always in pain. Not a word of sympathy from anyone here. One day I'm going to die if he continues to hurt me. Please get me out of here."

"I'll try. But I can't do anything overnight. You must be patient," Anna consoled.

"But you will help me, won't you?"

That evening, Anna travelled to the city to meet the representative of her Home Board. She related Maya's story to him.

"Can we get her out of the zenana?"

"You are in no position to help. We missionaries are here on sufferance. The local people are always suspicious of our activities. If we interfere in their affairs, our entire Mission work will be hampered and we'll all be sent packing home."

"I can't let that girl suffer," Anna said, "I must get her out of that prison."

"Then you must distance yourself from the Mission. What you do as a private person is your business."

"But you will help me, won't you?"

After a long discussion, they hatched a plan. Anna would diagnose Maya's illness as a case of Tuberculosis.

"I'll insist that she needs to be hospitalized as the disease is contagious. If the Rana agrees, she can be admitted to our Mission hospital in this city."

"Okay. You do that and I'll make arrangements for both of you to leave the country when the situation is safe. But remember, you are not to involve the Mission in your escapade."

When Rana heard that TB was contagious, he couldn't wait to send Maya off to the hospital. The occupants of the zenana also breathed a sigh of relief. If the disease spread, they would all be sent away.

However, Danu the eunuch visited Maya twice at the hospital. She had a room to herself and looked anything but ill. The colour had come back to her cheeks and she had regained some of her old spirit.

"When are you coming back to the zenana, Choti memsahib?" he asked.

"Can't you see that I'm not well? The doctor says I should rest here for some time."

But when Danu went to visit her after a fortnight, her bed was empty. She had vanished without a trace.

"Is she dead?" the worried eunuch asked.

"Not at all. But we don't know where she is," the staff said, "A male relative came and took her away."

"Oh my God!" Danu cried, wringing his hands in desperation, "What shall I do? If I tell Rana I have been visiting her without his permission, he will be very angry. On the other hand, Choti memsahib may be in danger. Who was the stranger who took her away? Could someone have kidnapped her?"

He mulled over what he should do for a couple of days. Then he told the Rana of Maya's disappearance. Several teams were sent out to scour the city. When her father was informed, he bawled like a baby.

"Ah my poor girl! She might have been killed in the zenana. There have been cases of poisoning or assassination behind those walls."

Danu knew he must talk to Anna and get to the bottom of his mistress' disappearance.

"If she is to blame, I will kill her myself," he decided.

But by then, Anna and Maya were on the high seas, homeward bound. They were way out of the Rana's jurisdiction or influence. Though his ego took a bashing, he was inwardly relieved. He could always look for another cooperative wife. However, he vented his anger on the poor eunuch who had brought him the news and threw him in prison.

It was All Soul's Day in 1965. A thin old lady moved among the people who had come to offer prayers at the graves of their loved ones in Richmond Cemetery. She was now Chantal Hopkins the famous author. She knelt at the grave of her friend and mentor Anna Hopkins who had died five years earlier. She read out a verse from her best seller "Beyond the Zenana."

"I will not fear the dark shadows,
Nor feel the winter's chill;
You scattered love around me,
And courage to march on,
Forever "Beyond the Zenana."



7

The Interlude

GEETASHREE CHATTERJEE

The glazed look was the only give-away. Otherwise it was difficult to make out that Probir was drunk. His typing was flawless, dress meticulous and etiquettes always proper. It was the beetle-leaf that he continuously chewed helped camouflage, at least to some extent, the pungent odour of the cheap desis that he guzzled in lowly company. The occasional disappearances from Office fueled rumours amongst the staff. It was at times difficult to shut up the gossip mongers. However, Moitra Babu, the aged and experienced Section Officer, did try his best to make light of the matter and was resultantly accused of nurturing a definite weakness for the boy, having known to have shielded him more than once from the wrath of the Superiors.

Moitra Babu, in his late forties had seen the world. He felt sorry for Probir and often had a quiet thought on how his son would have reacted had he been in Probir's shoes. An ailing mother, an unwed sister in her mid-twenties and a ruinous past – Moitra Babu knew Probir too well. And that kept him from tampering his Yearly Appraisal though he counseled him often, i.e., when the truant was in a receptive mood.

Moitra Babu sighed and closed the dog-eared Attendance Register. Probir had not marked his presence till now. It was 11.30 in the morning. The Office Timings were 09.30 AM to 05.30 PM with half an hour lunch break at 01.00PM.

It was Monday and Moitra Babu wondered where Probir was. Perhaps he knew...



It was a neat row of Pansies – a riot of colours – by the left side of a well-kept garden. She spent an hour each in the morning and evening so that the garden remained well-tended and orderly. She liked things to be in order, in perfect symmetry and minimal change. Changes disturbed her.

Bashobi hummed a tune watering the plants. The sun played a peek-a-boo with the cottony clouds. She felt nice and light and happy today. Yes, there were a few dull patches on the fabric of her life, a vacuum which made her sad and wistful most of the times. But the emptiness was in its own place and her mundane happiness had a place of its own. As long as her sorrows and smiles were in their definite compartments she was free of worries. She cherished them both equally.

But today was different. Today was not the day to think about such intricate thoughts. Today Pranjal, her husband, was bringing Probir, his new assistant, home for dinner.



Malihaganj was not easily locatable on the map of the Indian sub-continent – a small town somewhere between Bengal and Bihar border. Remote yet fascinatingly picturesque, untouched by global intrusions and urban offensives, it had a disarming quietude which was almost primordial in its essence yet at the same time romanced well with peace lovers and the poetically inclined.

It was Probir's maiden migration outside his birthplace – Kolkata. Though Maa had tearfully enunciated a whole lot of reasons why he should not be venturing out of the city to earn a livelihood, it was the mortgage on the ancestral property and the prolonged spinsterhood of his younger sister, Neeru, which had ultimately applied a smooth break on all motherly apprehensions and protests. Paresh Babu, Probir's fatherly neighbor, was the one who helped assuage doubts and convince Maa that this was the long-awaited golden break for Probir.

Paresh Babu raked out a distant connection with Pranjal, Probir's would-be-boss and pronounced him to be a *bhadrolok* with a definite affinity towards his native brothers.

A week later Probir took the train to Malihaganj.



It was something more than community bonding that sparked off the instant rapport between Probir and Pranjal. The perfectionist in Pranjal liked what he saw in Probir – an earthy innocence coupled with an intense urge to learn, retain and polish.

The invitation home for a quick grub of *maachher-jhol-bhaat* followed pretty soon.



Pranjal was one of those early settlers of Malihaganj who had at first reluctantly accepted the town as his workplace with a back-up plan of returning home as soon as better prospects came his way. However, the serenity of Malihaganj had a tendency to grow on its residents. Soon Pranjal acquired a neat little bungalow of his own in one of the prime locations. Dharma & Sons were generous employers, appreciating and rewarding industriousness well. In due course, the trips to home town lessened in frequency and the irresistible magnetism of the metropolis, to which he once took pride in belonging, diffused considerably.

The populace of Malihaganj was divided into two sets – locals and recruits/transferees with a perpetual longing for a return home as soon as permitted. A few did settle down permanently but those were exceptions. Thus, mostly the dwellers were either in the process of getting accustomed to the township or in a hurry to shift back home. Consequently, socialization was sparse and spasmodic and even the locals preferred to keep to themselves.



Bashobi did not know whether she liked Malihaganj. She just followed Pranjal's wish. It was not that she did not have a mind of her own but she had tutored herself to suppress those intense feelings and desires which had caused her immense pain, a long, long time back since her budding romance with Abhik, the boy next door, had fizzled into a fiasco. Before the scandal could rock the family's comfort zone, father had hurriedly arranged her marriage with Pranjal and she had been whisked off to Malihaganj overnight with bag and baggage. Post something between a honeymoon-cum-induction-into-marital-bliss Bashobi was irrevocably ensconced in Pranjal's newly purchased bungalow with a garden to tend day and night.

It was the neat rows of blossoms which kept her going.



Unlike Pranjal, Bashobi saw something more in Probir – a sincere, solemn demeanour with soulful, olive eyes full of child-like amazement and a spritely, ever-ready-to-help nature – he was that sudden swish of breeze which effortlessly blew over the bed of pansies swaying them in good humour and playful, merry mood.

He was an enchanting deviation in her mundane monotony.



That night after dinner Pranjal casually asked Bashobi how she found Probir. She nodded her head in acquiescence and replied, "Bhalo." "Then that settles it", Pranjal rubbed his hands enthusiastically as though getting ready to embark on a new project. Bashobi looked into his eyes for a few seconds and knew exactly what was going on behind that bespectacled façade of intellectual brooding.

As Pranjal snored contentedly Bashobi lay wide awake, tossing and turning in bed. For the first time in her marital state she felt uncomfortable. Should she adhere to his unspoken wish?



Pranjal got Probir a one room flat close to their bungalow. The hesitation of the landlord to let out rooms to a bachelor was put to rest when Pranjal introduced Probir as his distant cousin.

The accommodation, in due course, came to be retained for overnight transit, as Probir was found spending most of his time, outside office, in Pranjal and Bashobi's doting company.

Bapi, Probir's pet name, slipped into Pranjal's lips as an easier address while the big boss assumed the role of an elder-brother-cum-guardian in no time.

It was difficult to make out who adopted whom first. Spontaneity overtook premeditation and the mutuality of reciprocation left not a single speck of doubt that it was an arrangement of the heart.



Pranjal was nine years older to Bashobi. The age-gap facilitated a creaseless co-existence of symbiotic reverence. However, there were those envelopes of pregnant silences which led to overcast days and nights – claustrophobic alas incommunicable.

Probir unconsciously positioned himself as the missing link between the two. The diary carelessly left open on the bedside table disclosing the closet-poet in him was quite a sudden revelation to Bashobi. Thereafter followed series of quiet afternoons by the Jhilmil Lake where Probir constructed and de-constructed thoughts in cadence and Bashobi listened with eager expectance.

Pranjal refused to be a part of these soirees. He had work to finish in office.



It did not take much time for Probir to master the nitty-gritties of the Accounts Section. D&S put premium on hard work

rather than specialization. Soon, Probir was asked to look into Sales & Marketing as well, under the able guidance of his mentor.

One fine morning Pranjal shoved a sheaf of papers into Probir's hands and said, "Are you going to spend the rest of your life in D&S? Here's the MBA entrance exam form. Fill it up and start preparing for the same." He promised Probir special study leave and an out-of-turn increment, additionally, provided Probir passed the finals with flying colours.

These were the little encouragements which overwhelmed Probir. He couldn't stop thanking his stars for such wondrous strokes of love and luck enlivening his mediocre existence till now.



At first Probir would shuttle back and forth Kolkata fortnightly then monthly and subsequently bi-monthly. Maa complained. Neeru pouted, "Dada! Why don't you take a transfer back home?" Probir dodged the nags efficiently...lack of vacancy, unwilling Management, unreceptive boss... glib excuses!

The truth was something which escaped him rather by denial than intention. Malihaganj was fast proving to be a blissful respite from domestic responsibilities and constraints – an interesting interlude – novel, precious and immensely enjoyable.



Dr. Sharma smiled at Bashobi. The pathological reports from Kolkata were harbingers of good news. "Bashobi, you are clean. But I would like to do a few tests on your husband as well."

Bashobi looked alarmed. She had, on Dr. Sharma's insistence, once broached the subject to her husband and hated the silence that descended on the dinner table like a quiet

reproach. And the noiselessness of the argument was deafening.

❖❖❖

"G\ Morning Boudi! Where's Dada? Is it too early to resume last evening's game? It was a puzzle, you see. How could Pranjalda checkmate me when everything was in my favour?"

"Your Dada's off to Kolkata. My mother-in-law has been taken ill quite suddenly."

"Oh, why did he not call me? I could have accompanied him."

"Then who would have taken care of me here in this godforsaken land?"

Probir grinned. The idea of fussing over Bashobi made him unnecessarily happy.

❖❖❖

Upon Pranjal's return from Kolkata, "Dr. Sharma wants you to undergo certain tests..." Bashobi mustered her brittle courage.

"Yes. We'll get over with those tomorrow" Pranjal was unusually agreeable.

If Bashobi was surprised she did not show it.

❖❖❖

Pranjal was out on a month's training programme leaving behind stern instructions for Probir to look after Bashobi in his absence.

❖❖❖

Late in the evening Pranjal rung up to find out how she was. Bashobi told him the reports had arrived. But he seemed to be least interested.

Bashobi lay restless on bed. Lonely, sleepless nights incited bizarre thoughts. Was he not interested to sire a family? Or did he have inkling that he could not?



A light touch on his arms startled him awake.

"Where do you think you are living? In Raja Bikramaditya's kingdom? You left the main door ajar throughout the night?" Bashobi stood at the bedside.

Fresh fragrance of Jasmine filled the room. Her back was wet from the head wash she pampered herself with early morning – swathed in a simple cotton saree and waist length, dripping tresses let loose.

"Oh!" Probir gasped.

"C'mmon what are you staring at? Let's go for a walk. It's Sunday."

"Yeah! I came upon this beautiful stretch of green by the hills. Let's explore it more. Where's Dada?" Probir's excitement was child-like.

"Deep in sleep. Headache. Told me not to disturb."

"Okay! We'll surprise him later with our find."

And off went two children at play.



Malihaganj was growing – the unused lands in and around attracting industrialists and factory owners. With every upcoming unit competition escalated. Pranjali worked extended hours in office with Probir in tow.

But at times, he would push Probir off home early, "Don't forget you've dual charge – one in office and the other at home. Bashobi should not feel left out."

Probir would jig back home at that.



Continued the soirees long into the night...

Of cadence and music and throbbing heart – two young hearts attuned to each other's spoken and unspoken thoughts. Sometimes they would read out in silence and at times aloud. Each word of passion that he penned found an echo in her eyes. "How's it?" He'd whisper to her and she would trace his face with a long finger and coo, "Beautiful."

While the moonbeam danced on their intent faces the stars drew a mesh of shadows on two entwined figures locked in each other's arms.



Dr. Sharma was discretion personified. If she had doubts she did not voice them. If she harboured disapproval she maintained her peace. She confirmed the joyous news with enviable equanimity and that required measure of delight.

"Yes, you are going to be a father soon Mr. Sen."

Pranjal buffeted with uncontained pride.

Probir was in seventh heaven.



Bashobi's mother was to take charge of her daughter and the household during the crucial months of pregnancy. But her father met with an accident and she had to stay put.

With D&S gearing up for bifurcations in their business Pranjal's workload skyrocketed. He spent lesser time home and more in office or at the sites. As a result, Probir's duties doubled.

A scandalized Malihaganj saw Probir accompanying Bashobi to Dr. Sharma's clinic for regular check-ups.

In her eighth month, after one such visit, an anxiously awaiting Probir asked, "How's the baby?"

“Strong, healthy and kicking” Bashobi’s cheeks dimpled into a smile.

Probir involuntarily took a step closer and kissed her on the forehead ignoring the receptionist trying her level best at composure.



Gublu was born on a sunny afternoon. Bashobi labored hard. Pranjal paced the corridors. Probir sat still in prayer.

A whoop of joy from Pranjal on hearing the baby’s first lung-tearing howl! A deep exhalation of relief from Probir – a teardrop hurriedly wiped off!

The long curling lashes fringing a pair of olive eyes confirmed what Dr. Sharma had suspected all along.

But Pranjal appeared not to have noticed it.

And Probir’s heart melted as he took the baby in his arms.



“I hope you are studying well,” reminded Pranjal, “Exams are just round the bend.”

Probir shuffled uneasily, “I was told Gublu has a slight fever and not slept a wink last night.”

“Don’t worry I have consulted the Pediatrician. Medicines have been administered. He’ll be okay.”

For the first time in two years Probir left office early without taking his boss’ permission.



“You are going for a month’s training to Kolkata. I hope you are happy.” Pranjal looked askance.

Probir’s dismay was ill-disguised, “One month without Gublu would be killing.”

"Its high time you concentrated on your career, man." Pranjali was unmoved.

Probir caved in with a heavy sigh.

❖❖❖

"Maa Gublu has started crawling and everything's okay here," chirped Bashobi, "Don't worry."

She put down the receiver. The phone rang again. It was Probir on the line.

"Bashobi how's Gublu?"

"What's happened to him? He's fine."

"Remember you said he had loose motions the other day."

"But he is fine now," an impatient Bashobi, "I think you should concentrate on your training Probir."

The line went dead.

❖❖❖

A month later Probir was back in office. He could not wait to see Gublu.

"I have a pleasant surprise for you," announced Pranjali, "This is the best that I could do for you – a transfer back to Kolkata. You would be heading the Finance Department at the Head Office although you are yet to complete your MBA." Pranjali did not seem to wait for a reaction.

"But...this is a bolt out of the blue," stammered Probir

"I thought you always wanted this and I went all out of my way to convince the Management." Pranjali sounded offended.

"But..Gublu..."

"We are there for him. You can always come and see him whenever you want. But for a young lad like you career should come first."

Probir's hands shook visibly as he clutched the promotion letter.



The door-bell rang incessantly.

Bashobi hurried to open fearing the noise might wake up Gublu.

"You..." Bashobi was surprised to see Probir at the door.

The troubled face instantly directed her worries towards Pranjali.

Her tensions eased as Probir blurted, "Your husband is intentionally drawing us apart. I have been transferred to Kolkata. How can I stay without Gublu?"

He choked.

He expected her to be devastated by the news. Instead she rebuked, "Be quiet."

"But it's so unfair!" He sobbed.

"Ungrateful," she hissed, "You forget what all he has done and is still trying to do for you."

Probir was taken aback. This was a different Bashobi he hardly knew.

"Bashobi!"

"Boudi..", she thundered before slamming the door on his face.

The bang reverberated in air.



Probir bade adieu to Malihaganj for good.

Two days later Bashobi got an unsigned note by post which simply said: "Bhalo theko."



Probir hated Head Office, Pranjal's sporadic visits and his effusive appreciation of his work.

He resigned.

Stenography picked up during his graduation days came in handy.

He was over-qualified for a typist.

Yet it was a Government job – safe, secure, unassuming.

He opted for it – better than being a jobless wanderer.



The invitation was addressed to Probir Mama.

It was his first birthday.

They had named him Ekalavya.

Probir celebrated drinking long into the night – alone.



Moitra Babu took a round of the department at 03.00 pm. He found Probir typing attentively. Moitra Babu's nose cringed automatically as he passed by Probir's desk.

Probir looked up. His lips stretched in a sheepish grin. The paan-stains down the corners of his mouth were red and deep.

Notes

Bhadrolak – Gentleman

Dada – Elder Brother

Boudi – Respectful address for elder brother's wife

Bhalo theko – Be good

Mama – Maternal uncle; Mother's brother



8

Epiphany Playground

ANNA LOIE MERRITT

The yellow scarf is falling now. Silk sliding down goose bumped shoulders. Small streams of sweat, too, playing pinball with the salty valleys and raised peaks of both arms, now covered in ash. Dripping down elbows, collecting on scraped knees. He kisses every edge and corner. Embers keep flying though the fire is losing its flame; we have nothing left to burn. We are remnants now, pushed into root knotted pavement with the broken mirrors and bill collectors. Bare feet and east wind. Light bulbs explode in thunderheads over the dim skyline. He says there will be a storm tonight. We have done all that we came to do.

Most noises are common here. New sounds can catch you like a dog bite, but disappear quick into the soundtrack of this flat and wasted city. The noise stopped being exciting by my third broke year, living in a basement, next to the Cat House, across from the Vanguard's after hours swing. Gimme shelter.

The beats started in the steam of midday August, from Greene Street or maybe south of that. They aren't stopping now as the pigeons nestle amidst the broken window slits of our humble building. I'm watching the reflection of dusk in the shards. I say to no one: this won't work come hurricane season. The beats don't stop. Every kind of drum now slamming and bum bum bumming closer. Closer, pounding into my temples through the eyes of my studio. Calling me out. No work done since Sunday and out of Parliaments. I gotta get out of here.

Stepping onto the street, new rhythms ring everywhere. Buzzing feet are fast stomping down Kent. The beat now in

the palm of my hand. Here they come, down sidewalks and plowing through traffic lights. All gone red. There are hundreds, thousands of exposed toes slamming into each other. Nearly naked women hop along, holding hands and chanting to a song I've never heard. Kickin basketballs and boom boxes held high. Swaying and rocking. Vibrating with hum, coming to life after a hot and too hardworking day. Slinging anger to stampeding crowds to my left and right. The drums follow Sirens, the Sirens follow their sons. Into the parade I fall.

Following only the wet and liquored, I stumble in their wake. Hydrants are unleashed down the new one way. Glazed eyes and face paint. Tarred teeth. Pipe smoke songs alive in my new ears. Blind eyes fit right in, dark stains on the fleshy rounds beneath them. Smudged eyeliner and sticky tie-dyed boas. Feathered skirts and torn jeans. We lay back and forth into each other, each loving the other. Cracked Mardi Gras beads and sweet cigarette breath. Skin on skin pushing down the new one-way. Neon now but fading, the sun setting above subtitles: FOR LEASE and SLANG LANGUAGE sprayed on the old Domino Sugar factory. The sleepy day is saying goodnight. Drums still rocking to the East River tide. I don't hear one horn, but then the cars are all gone too. Dirty and degenerate, we push towards the park. Up six blocks: where the gates are still locked. Where everything will go down.

We're not alone, he says. The half cast moon, waxing and sure, is in position. Star-gazing in fortune's paradise, veneered with streetlights. We search the sky for something. Tell us now. It's already too late. The clouds pass and loop back around, as if to join in. I hold his hand without asking. All together now. We seek out the milky line and the constellations we've renamed after dreams lost and failures we wish to forget. I pull him forward. It's our turn to feed the fire.

It's six o'clock but I don't know it. I've never owned a watch. There seems no need now. A blur, Corona blue and yellow, falls from the third window from the left on the third

floor of Building Three. It fractures in front of me, scraping my knees with splintered glass. We're almost there, three blocks away and the coincidence is not lost on me. I skip one breath anyway. In one beat, a man catches my fall from behind. Take a good look at my face. He is leathered and unnerving. His blue eyes haunt through gray eyelashes. A stained smile and an arm tattoo written in Sanskrit. His voice is rusty. Smoky Robinson with a charcoal tone. He smells like sand and his name sounds French. His hands tight around my shrinking waist. On course now, we turn right and he tells his story:

Quarante-deux dans my pocket, J'ai quitté Paris dans 1963. That's \$42.00 francs, mon petite chou. N'est pas translate to dollars Americain today. I very, very nearly escaped with my clothing and mon chérie. Hunted by those officials of the police. I know, moi? Oui, c'est vrai. For just, just un seul acte of violent intention, un peu. Un peu. His name was Dom, my darling. Dom, le fou. He offered to pay for everything at the bar. Tous tous tous. But only if he could spend the night, tout la nuit, avec mon chérie. My love, my lady, my light. He wanted to do très très mauvais, mauvais things to my woman. Things that will make you blush, petite chou. Her name was Fanny, love, she came to me in 1962. To Paris, to see snow for the first time. She never left my bed, non non. Nous sommes des alliés dans la plupart des choses. Our bond is unmatched. So, when Dom, le fou, rubbed his calleuses, his ugly hands along her silk scarf. Le foulard de soie that I gave her! That rested so perfectly along her breasts. Ces seins! What could be done? I took a wine bottle from the top shelf and magnificently inserted it into l'imbécile's asshole before he had un chance to realize his pants were down. Alas, c'est tout.

He says all of this to me as we stomp down the dotted middle line. The fool's father was once deeply associated with a police commissioner of voter-rigged importance. Fanny took thirty-three francs from the fallen wallet of the fool and paid for everyone's drinks. They left the city that very night. Soon after, Fanny left our hero for the owner of a barbershop in the

Heights, which she still runs today. Sometimes, he claims, the two still join bodies. On a full moon or a holiday.

Ah oui, perhaps comme ce soir.

His shoes are too big, but he has an excellent bounce in his knees. He smiles a bit wider and a bit longer, taking a yellow scarf from around his neck and wrapping it too tight around my own. I choke out *bonne nuit* and step on through the crowd. He calls after:

Burn through all of your money, my darling. Make love beneath a full moon. Tonight we shine bright. Bon chance. Je t'aime toujours.

I bounce too. When a man loves a woman. A celebration that's been boiling over all day. I walk alone amidst everyone and pass by many children dressed as pirates and screaming. High octave. Red feathers pluming from a dozen little tri-pointed hats. A grown vampire breathes fire through canine teeth. On the next corner, too many revelers to count. Many cameras, exposed and flashing. Our eyes dilate in synchrony. I've lost my latitude. The body swoons, fishing in my pockets for the memory of money. The money I should have. Stumble. Stand. Push and am pushed.

A small pirate has clamped onto my moving legs. I stumble again but block her scraped knees from skidding pavement. Her high tops steady us and I stop. Give us a chance to catch our breath. Her and I. We have the same colored eyes. What's your name? She smiles quickly when I yell. I just need some place where I can lay my head. I drag her to the curb and we sit together in bus soot and dirty gum. She says:

Tonight, I am Captain Jack! Do you like my beads? We made them just, just for tonight. My Grandma, her name is Ms. Moses, she says it's a special, special night.

She dances on the block, now being abandoned by the crowd, just for the sake of dancing. Twisting the tassels of her tiny vest, between her finger and thumb. She tells me about her mother:

My mom is always havin babies, like always. I'm in just the perfect middle so I think that makes me the best. For sure. You know? Mom drives trains, big trains that take people to work and back and forth and back. She goes rollin up and down, that's on the A. The C. And the E. But cause of last year's big storm they can't go to that rocky beach anymore. At least not right now. So, yea, so she lost all the help we were getting cause she got this new job on the subway. Ms. Moses told me it was just forty-two bucks over the roof, the limit see, but jeez Louise, they took that sh—. Stuff. Before that she worked at the bodega over on Division, which was actually way better because I got to get all the Swedish Fish I could ever want. Ever. Ms. Moses takes care of us and I know we're a handful but she still turned us into pirates with magic and I have some money but not a lot for the playground. And I'm really really excited. I miss my mom though. She smiles all fake sometimes and sometimes she goes upstairs to ask Mr. James a question and comes back tasting like salt. Ms. Moses says there is no peace in having just enough. That's why we're allowed to stay out tonight. Ms. Moses says we are bandit revo-revolutionaries. Gonna change the world. Thanks for listening, ma'am. Thanks for catching me. I will never never never forget you. Ms. Moses says maybe there are gods up there. Gods who gave us the choice. Be free or not but choose either way, even if you're a kid. You get to choose. We have lots and lots and lots of power that we didn't know we had until right now. I dunno what's gonna happen but I'm gonna let it burn. I live in Building Three. Let's have a picnic very soon!

We had long lost the parade and I thought that tonight, I might realize a thing or two about love. The weight of the air is changing.

Overtaxed cigarette smoke and stale weed settling now. The thick exhaling makes it difficult to stand. Captain Jack has already disappeared between curbs and legs. Let's not forget each other, I said to her. Her skinny arms cinching my waist as I kneeled, glass-stained knees on gravel. She bounces away

on the tips of all ten toes. I am seeing double and blinking quickly. Scared now, at the back of the pack and smelling ruin. This is just one night with a fast pacing, sliced moon, lighting miserable streets. Putting dreams of fire behind our eyelids. What matters now when the match is lit isn't what we will surely lose but what we are standing to gain. Our own choice?

The uniform reaches into his pocket and my pocket at the same time pulling out small bills, all that we have left. He offers his to me and I offer everything I have. Smoke migrates and I've lost that strange fear. He shoves my money into his mouth and sucks his cheeks in for a while, the ridiculous pucker fish. We're all out of the water. His eyes wide and black. Turning to the flames, he hawks the wad into an inferno. Black eyes wide and spit sizzling on hot pavement. I let the bills slip between my finger and thumb, until the paper catches at the corners. Ashes are swept away by shuffling feet. Take a load off.

By losing everything they say is important, I wonder what we might win. Alone again, no one is answering questions. They slip out and trample down. Hitting drums, these are meaningless words. Meaningless really. Debates are cowering in the corner and there's only one thing left to say. My mouth moves, all that really comes out is a long cry, calling upwards. My arms reach, pounding the fat of the sky above my head. I shake it all out, quickly moving to rejoin them all. An eastern wind has picked up, carrying with it sour smoke, acrid and yellow. Not yellow like my scarf, a suffering yellow, still alive but barely living. But then that sweet finish feeds the back of my tongue. I can see the tops of the cherry trees now, wilting and falling like rain. Just getting started but already reaching over the broken-in fence. Sheltering me from the fear. Safely insulating the final act. Our park. Our playground, if just for tonight. The closer we come, the tighter the group gets. Shuffling now, muscles cramping in the night heat. Weary of what is now too late to stop. Surprised even of what has been allowed to happen.

Yes, I hesitate. I've been handcuffed before and how will we survive now? If they are here, they've made themselves silent. Those people who would be the ones to stop the mob. A family really, if just for tonight. But then, one lonely uniform. Starched. Young men bracing themselves around it. Howling, embracing too, at each other as if the game was already won. The uniform, I know. A boy really, who I've watched grow tall, one floor above me.

Surviving his parent's split, he became an officer of the city's law. He stands with his weight on the right leg, left knee bent toward his buddies. And clean. Cleaner than me. I approach, pushed by the weight of the crowd, then break off towards him. I see. Passive resistance in slim lines of a forehead and in the creases of a calm smile. Really not much different from mine. We catch at each other and his shoulders shrug up to his ears. Arms extending through the triangles of my own. Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name. And we're still holding each other up until we all reach to the sky together. Supportive screams and thousands of dissenting hands. Defiant fingers that smell of sulfur, writhing at the sky. Crying: woo woo, woo woo, woo woo.

There's not much of his story that I don't already know. His father has a limp and burn scars stained on his face. His father was teaching him how to be a handy man, before he left for the academy outside the city, following a metro bus banner. He says:

When that bus whizzed by me, I was so late and mad. So, I said goodbye to clogged drains and empty freezers. Peace. I watched my future stop two blocks ahead, at Marcy. It was long time to go. I just listened.

His mother is a generous alcoholic, selling weed to occupants of our building. She thinks it's on the sly, but it's always cheap and word gets around. Affairs with delivery boys and the occasional black eye. Something was always crashing apart in the rooms that belonged to them. He would leave or she would leave. Dissatisfied destruction bred from frustration and an incidental falling out of love:

They didn't know how to stop fighting. How to quit the conflict. They made their own, you know. I know you know.

His mother moved to the 11th floor. His father to the 6th and their son got stuck in the elevator two dozen times travelling with back and forth messages. Until the academy, leaving no message at all. Now he lives in one of these numbered buildings. The Wythe complex with a couple of guys. He is speaking and I stare back. My pride is showing. I am watching his chest expand and my arm around his back can feel a meaty thickness, stronger with every inhale. Strength like a stack of dictionaries. Words we all need to hear.

I stay with these guys, loudly meditating on the reasons, the ignorance. The unstoppable recourse. When ashes begin to fall from above. We know it's time to get to where we're going. A wide dome of sky, behind cherry blossoms, is glowing. Bouncing shadows haunt thinning tree trunks and statues of squirrels and men. His hand at the crest of my back and low-slung cut offs. His left arm sweeping ahead, making room in madness for our bodies to move. Together. The drums so thick now, my ears popping. No sympathy for tonight. No room for the devil. I nod and wink at strange faces. A wholeness is out here now, beating fists, stretched knuckles against their own limitations. No oxygen left, really, pushed out by the pressure of our bodies below sea level. Sucked in by the fire. The monkey bars are burning; glowing red-orange and silk-scarf yellow and the pirates are all here daring each other to touch.

The mound is already quite high. Bills burn fast and the feeding frenzy has already begun. It can't last long, not here. But that's the whole point. People filling the park now, passing stiff wads of cash. Fresh, flat sheets from ATMs with fees. Stacked tight and thick. They fly up faster and burn slower now and then. That sweet smell stronger now, denying power. Letting it all burn down. Each of us melting our chains together, a new beginning.

He is twirling the sweat sliding down my back around his finger and we circle the flames. Eyelashes singeing. Through the shimmering heat now, I can see the Frenchman. He is sucking on the neck of a tan woman with turquoise earrings, who I know to be Fanny. And Captain Jack is on a wooden bench, sucking her thumb, twirling her grandmother's hair.

I collapse on the swing set for a while, we watch and wait. Then I'm lifted and escorted to the silent lilac bush in the back. Then stretched out along the fence between our void and St. Anthony's plot. The iron protects us. Moist and fertilized soil cradles us both. He takes his hands behind my back, pushing me up again. Still a part of, still waiting to save ourselves. Burning the savings we all lost faith in a long time ago. I am dragged into darkness. Sweat chills on naked skin and I hear, from somewhere, the Frenchman:

Look up now! Our fire has changed the moon and shadows that trace our futures beneath it. Full moon holiday. Je t'aime toujours! Toujours. Toujours.

There, clearly between the stone church and our happy little playground, the moon has grown, pregnant with our smoke and light. The Father watches from his basement window. The Father takes off his half-moon glasses. Falling slowly back again between sharp branches and fragrant leftovers of lilac petals. Pale purples sink into the backs of my thighs. He tastes of pressed cotton. Yellow silk sliding down the edges of an ending. We are ground into dust.



9

Habitat

LOIE MERRITT

I live with a wolf and a bear. One wears star spangled underpants and the other hibernates in his luck and gifts and joy and contentment. Suppose I were a crooked combination, the wolverine. An audience might wonder where does this story live? What right does the wolverine have to be there? Just a discontented taker, upset because she cannot give enough. And important to note: there is often *clawing and snarling*. A general mistrust, manifest in noise, but actually stinks of pure love. Why do we torture each other with half reasonings and three quarter truths? The wolverine: just wanting to be touched on her tender under belly, allowed the bear to forget his chivalry and the wolf slept beside.

Hunger does not go away. When skin leaves skin. Fur unclean. When one thing pulls apart into two. The hunger is an acceptable addiction. A single focus in this physical form should be balanced with a certain amount of celibate reasoning and patient sleep functions, in tune with the moon. The inflated currency of this habitat is *insecurity* and *jealousy*. This dwelling, now often is in dis-ease. It's still the easiest place to breathe. She should come out with the rightly chosen words, if only it weren't so hard on the body. The wolverine smiles because things could be much worse. Alone, a kaleidoscope perspective slowly comes into focus. Yes, things could be better too. More patient and calm. Unknowable words dipped in honey and left unsaid. She remembers the alternatives.

What we see in each other, we can't recognize in ourselves. What we wish to forget, we sling back and forth with very little pity.

If this is what you want and it surely is, than practice being your best. Stop rummaging through the trash. Understand the flux and flow. Let it rush right over you. Otherwise, devastation. Otherwise, ravaging winter cold. Then again, it doesn't have to be *entirely* just one thing, one animal. This is an option worth considering, if things aren't exactly as you want.

She sits in the sun, unnecessarily tired, unmotivated and breathing quite slow. The wolf, perhaps just as hungry, is waiting for the next trip out of doors where it is fiercely windy *but at least the sun is still out*. The hour is early yet and she is thankful to be without an alcoholic headache or steely patches beneath her eyes. Still, she contemplates a glass of wine and a nap. Not unlike her friend here. The captured wolf, limply gazing out of broad windows to a glass-strewn playground, three stories below. She's daydreaming now of real grass and candlelit porch dinners. Domestic wanderings of a distrustful daughter, escaping into the wilderness to play house.

To think! Letting innate disdain, oversexed impatience, and drugged cynicism fade with the rustlings of rabid raccoons, bicycles, children on rope swings, and a napping wolf curled up in the backyard. What sober misfortune will she come upon amidst a great and towering sky? That blueness. Flat and heavy. What shadows arise at the foothills of mountains that cut through bone?

There's dirt. Real dirt. You can eat it! And let it live in the cracks of your chapped feet, underneath fingernails forever. Early mornings and tireless evenings are waiting. She will soon taste the dry sweetness of day old breakfast bread, smothered in butter.



10

A Quaint Quagmire

MERLAINE HEMSTRAAT

Any resemblance to a real person or persons is purely coincidental.

We weren't sure when they moved into the area. From the exterior and to all intents and purposes the establishment seemed innocent enough. It wasn't until we ventured nearer to the precipice that we fully began to understand but half of what lay beneath the surface.

"Rose Trellis Rest Home," my husband read as we passed the driveway of the newly constructed facility.

The early fall day was fine with a gentle southeasterly breeze blowing, sending the cumulus clouds chasing each other.

Passing the property, we instinctively turned to look back. It was as if something beckoned to us. Was it the tranquility of the name of the rest home or something else?

"I wonder who they admit to the rest home." I stated as we continued to look back at the new property.

Shrugging his broad shoulders Jordan began to turn around as he faced me. "It's hard to say. Shall we go inside and ask? They probably have some brochures they could give us."

"Oh I don't know it's probably all wet paint and drop sheets. Perhaps next time," I suggested wondering at the source of my hesitation.

After a few moments we proceeded down the street towards one of the busiest roads in the west end of Toronto. Unable to shake my first impressions about Rose Trellis Rest

Home, I continued to puzzle about the place as we went about our business.

Later that evening, we had cause to pass by the newly constructed rest home again. We could have entered our street from the opposite direction but our feet seemed to have a will all their own. Not seeing anyone coming or leaving the establishment we continued to wonder about it. From the exterior the reddish colored bricks and the manicured lawns complete with a couple of beige wooden rose trellis' appeared to be unassuming enough.

"You know my dear, it's rather strange that we haven't seen anyone entering or leaving that new rest home since its construction. I wonder if it's open for business yet?" speculated my husband Jordan as he held our grocery bags.

"It must be open for business as the signage out front advertises their services. Why place a sign if they aren't ready for clients or patients?" I stated evenly.

Nodding his head, my husband continued on next to me. "I suppose so. What is it about this place that has us so fascinated?"

Chuckling, I had to admit that Rose Trellis Rest Home had taken up a lot of our time that day as we speculated on the nuances of the new establishment. My husband had a point. There was some reason we were drawn to the new rest home.

"Maybe we just need some rest and relaxation ourselves? I think the name suggests something tranquil, endearing and cozy like an old porch with a couple of wicker chairs and patchwork quilts thrown over them for good measure," I stated, while I entertained visions of an older lady sitting on that porch with dimples and rosy cheeks.

"Aw well, we'll probably see ten people coming and going the next time we pass this place," my husband Jordan predicted as we turned into our driveway.

"It's funny though. We live just around the corner from this place and we never saw them building it. How could we

have missed that?" I asked my husband as we walked towards our front door.

"Liona, we must have heard the construction sounds while they were building that rest home. We couldn't have missed them. We likely just ignored them or thought they were coming from another direction. Remember the end of our street was closed off to traffic for a while with only one exit and entrance," my husband reminded me as we entered our home.

Pulling our door closed behind us I stood studying my husband. "Honey, I do recall that the one end of our street was temporarily closed off to traffic for a while but surely we couldn't have just ignored all that noise?"

Smiling warmly at me Jordan began to put our groceries away. "Does it really matter my dear? We've had a busy summer and spring and we could have just closed our ears and filtered out the construction sounds."

Sighing lightly, I agreed. "I suppose you are right Jordan." Having an inspirational thought I decided to voice it to my husband. "Honey, why don't we drop by there tomorrow and see how long they have been open? We could go inside under the pretense of wanting a brochure to give to a family member."

Jordan grinned as he closed the cupboard doors. "Great idea my dear. Okay, let's drop by there tomorrow."

After breakfast the next morning, my husband and I put on our walking shoes and headed outside to enjoy yet another breathtaking 'Indian summer' day.

"Liona, I've been trying to wrack my brain as to why we didn't see that new rest home being constructed," my husband Jordan began as we cleared our driveway heading towards the mouth of our street.

"And what did you come up with?" I asked Jordan with great interest.

Grinning widely, my husband continued. "The fact is we *did* see that new establishment being constructed but we didn't

know it at the time. While I was shaving this morning I remembered that the property where the new rest home stands had high boards erected around it so that no one could see what was happening inside. The high boards may have muffled some of the sounds from the construction workers too."

Halting our progress I stood studying my husband's handsome face. "Oh that's really sneaky! You mean to tell me they did *that*? No wonder we find that place so intriguing. It just goes to show all of the clandestine happenings that went on inside while it was being constructed."

Chuckling lightly, my husband couldn't keep his expression serious. "Oh Liona now really, you do have quite an imagination. Why the Sam hill would they want to do clandestine things behind the tall boards erected around their property? My dear it is for noise that they did it. They didn't want the construction sounds to be too loud; there are noise bylaws or ordinances about those types of things."

"Jordan, you have to admit that the place has a creepy melancholic atmosphere?" I replied, defending my position as we began walking again.

"My dear I just couldn't resist how adorable your imagination is. Liona, we'll settle this today when we go inside and then we ask them all about their services and get some insight about their history," Jordan offered as he held my hand.

Smiling at him I agreed. "Okay, you're right and I admit I do have a very vivid imagination."

"I love your imagination my dear and never change it or you," Jordan said as he massaged my shoulders while we walked along finally reaching the end of our street.

Presenting ourselves at the front door to Rose Trellis Rest Home we looked for the buzzer or door-bell. Not finding one, we opened the outer screen door and knocked.

"I see a place for the door-bell but it probably isn't hooked up yet," my husband Jordan remarked as we waited.

Nodding at him, we returned our attention to the closed door in front of us. Straining, we heard no sounds from within.

"Maybe we should walk around and see if there are any signs of anyone being at work today?" I suggested as my husband continued to look at the windows and façade of the building. Starting for a moment, he turned towards me.

"I could swear I saw some movement behind one of those windows. It's hard to tell but I am sure that I saw someone pressing their face close to the window to look out at us," Jordan stated with surprise still registering on his face.

Shaking my head I marvelled at such a thing. *What kind of a rest home is this? Why don't they just open the door like most people? What's really going inside that place?*

Heading slowly around the side of the building, we were met with a beige wooden gate which was painted the same color as the rose trellis. Still searching the windows we watched carefully for signs of movement within.

"This place gives me the creeps," I announced as we attempted to open the gate.

Finding it unlatched we hesitated.

"Should we go inside? Would this be considered trespassing?" my husband Jordan wondered as he stood with his hand on the latch.

Sighing loudly, I began. "Jordan, we better not go beyond this gate. Who knows what kinds of people work here and if we just waltz in here they might phone the police. Let's try the front door again. I also noticed a phone number on the signage out front. We could try calling them and see what that reveals for us."

"Liona, you're right. I agree and I like the idea of trying to phone them. I'll admit this place is starting to resemble something out of a horror novel or a mystery novel in the least," Jordan replied as he began to head back towards the front of the building.

Presenting ourselves once again at the front door to Rose Trellis Rest Home we knocked harder this time. After about five minutes sounds were heard from within.

Exchanging glances with each other, my husband and I waited with excitement and uncertainty punctuating our thoughts.

The interior wooden door opened slightly then wider as a short older man stood holding the door in his left hand. His facial expression was a mix of shrewdness as well as wariness.

"We aren't quite open for business yet but do come in," the older man gestured as he stepped back from the doorway.

Hesitating we paused as my husband began. "I beg your pardon but if you aren't open for business we'll come back another time."

"No indeed you are here now. Please do come on inside. I am the director of this fine rest home, my name is Harold Merriweather," he said as he held out his hand to shake ours. "My assistant Ms. Prettyfellow is not in today and I daresay I am at a loss without her."

Smiling at the older man we stepped inside where introductions were made.

"Now then Mr. and Mrs. Sabner I expect you'll want a tour and a little information about us. If you'll return later next week, Ms. Prettyfellow will be happy to take you on the grand tour. Some of our rooms are still in their raw condition. Everything should be finished by about midweek," Mr. Merriweather explained as he glanced at us. "However I was about take my tea so if you would like to join me I would be grateful for the company."

Once again exchanging glances we followed Mr. Merriweather further into the dimly lit hallway. Evidence of newly constructed rooms was everywhere. The entire facility smelled of freshly cut wood, paint and newly laid carpets.

Although the color scheme was meant to be neutral and very comforting, there was an unmistakeable air of uncertainty hanging like a large frond of a coniferous tree throughout the rest home. Nevertheless we forged on behind Mr. Merriweather.

Immediately to the left of the main hallway by a large picture window was Mr. Merriweather's office. Seating ourselves in front of him, we waited while he poured tea into two extra cups.

"Please have some cookies. They're imported from England and quite excellent. Now then, I should tell you a little about us at Rose Trellis Rest Home," Mr. Merriweather began as he settled himself on one of the comfortable chairs in front of us.

"Rose Trellis Rest Home's mandate is to provide convalescence of a nature unlike most rest homes. Our guests, which we refer to as our voyagers may vary in age and can be anything from eighteen to eighty years of age," Mr. Merriweather explained as he took a sip of his tea.

"Now then, you might wonder at the name, voyagers. We refer to our guests as such because we provide treatments of a meta-physical nature at this fine facility. We are privately run and our guests or voyagers pay for the treatments directly. We offer hypnotism by licenced and trained hypnotists; we offer various forms of alternative healing all by licenced and trained individuals. We also offer a basic wellness package and in addition we offer something many others don't."

"What is that?" my husband Jordan asked as his hand held a delicious English shortbread cookie.

Our eyes were upon Mr. Merriweather as he also took one of his famed cookies.

"It's quite simple; we offer our guests the opportunity to experience a cup from the beverage of immortality. Based on ancient healing practices, we have developed what some might regard as a modern day philosopher's stone. These beverages are all plant based compounds and they bring the consumer longevity and total wellness," Mr. Merriweather explained proudly.

With shocked expressions my husband and I hardly knew how to react to such a statement. Jordan being the thoughtful, rational intellect in our marriage immediately began to challenge Mr. Merriweather.

"I don't mean any disrespect but this is quite a wild claim. After all, if that were true, you'd be able to bottle this beverage and be the richest man in the universe," Jordan stated the obvious.

Bridging his fingers in front of his nose, Mr. Merriweather smiled. "You are welcome to your own opinion and I can understand that however how would you like to try a drink from that beverage?"

Curiosity filling us both with intrigue, we once again exchanged glances. *What if Mr. Merriweather had already given us a drink of the beverage of immortality?*

Straightening up in my seat I levelled my gaze with Mr. Merriweather's. "We think you've already given us some of that elixir of life beverage. That tea you served us contained it didn't it?"

A shrewd expression filled Mr. Merriweather's face. "In modern medicine one often believes they are cured or healed by the placebo effect. Wouldn't you agree?" Shifting in his seat he continued. "On the other hand the wisdom of the ancients taught us that if we focus the power of our subconscious mind it can and does affect matter."

Reaching over to his console next to his desk Mr. Merriweather unlocked the door. From within he extracted a highly decorated flask. Lifting it up to us he cocked his head to one side.

Exchanging glances once again we hesitated.

The alchemists of the ancients would have been proud of us. The lure was too great. Slowly we reached out for a taste of immortality. *Would we live to see another day or would we live beyond our expectations? It was a very quaint quagmire we found ourselves in.*



11

Whining for Justice

ASHOK PATWARI

When Malti stepped out of the bullet proof police van, she was shocked to confront hundreds of people waiting for her trying to have an eye contact with her as soon as they spotted her. She couldn't read what was written on the placards but was intelligent enough to guess that the crowd peering and coming closer to her was probably a group of media people and the group of women shouting slogans with placards represented some women group. There were many other groups in the open space outside the court who were also waiting for her. Two policewomen escorted Malti to the courtroom with Birju following her mechanically like a bogie connected to a railway engine. Passing through the glare and the flashes of cameras and incessant slogans and shouting both of them were lodged inside a small room in the vicinity of the court room.

Malti wiped drops of sweat trickling down her forehead with her sari and tried to wet her dry throat with a mouthful of saliva. The room was not too hot, at least it was cooler than her own *jhuggi*, because this room had a ceiling fan. Malti physically felt comfortable under the fan but her heart was beating fast. Unknown fear and apprehension overwhelmed her and in that state of panic she looked at Birju who was sitting by her side like a robot without any expression on his face. Malti pulled her legs up on the wooden bench she was sitting on, immersed her head inside her knees and supported her head with her hands. For a moment she closed her eyes to relieve herself of the turmoil battering her head. Like a series of kaleidoscopic pictures the events of last one week glimpsed before her eyes, one by one, each racing her heart beat and a lump choking her breathing.

It was past midnight. Birju was still out with his rickshaw. Malti's three daughters were sleeping with her on the floor inside the *jhuggi*. It was that strong smell of alcohol which woke her up. In the moonlight coming inside the *jhuggi* through the torn curtain which served as a 'door' to preserve their privacy, she saw a shadow entering their *jhuggi*. The shadow, a tall huge man, stopped near her eldest daughter, 8 year old Komal, who was deep asleep. He suddenly pounced on Komal, covered her mouth with his hands and next moment he took her away. Everything happened so quickly that Malti could neither scream nor stop him. She frantically ran after the abductor to stop him only to find some more persons waiting for him in a jeep a short distance away. Before she could shout for help the abductor hit her on her forehead but before she fell down she did see his face, a face she could never forget all her life. Over next two days her distress and grief of Komal's abduction transformed in to a life time tragedy when Komal's mutilated body was found in a nearby gutter. The police reported homicide after gangrape.

Malti quivered at the thought of that gruesome scene when she had to identify Komal's remains. She gulped another mouthful of saliva to soothen her parched throat and preferred to keep her eyes open to escape from the nightmare which tormented her with eyes closed. She could see through the window a huge crowd standing outside the court room. "*Justice for Komal*", "*Death to rapists*" echoed from every where. She saw the flashes of cameras in the corridor leading to the small room where she and Birju were sitting. The middle aged woman who was addressing a large gathering of women volunteers outside the court looked familiar. Malti remembered what that lady told her last night, "*You don't have to be scared Malti, nobody can dare touch you. You are the lone eyewitness and your statement can take these culprits to gallows. You have to be courageous Malti, it is your duty to get justice for Komal. Everybody here is with you...you are not alone...the whole nation is with you....*"

Even with her eyes open Malti's mind again started racing back with flashes of events which happened during the previous days and she drowned again in the whirlpool of thoughts. She remembered the faces of all those who approached her, some with kindness and others with threats, the face of one of the culprits wife with her 6 months old baby in her arm pleading to her for mercy, her *jhuggi* owner bullying her on behalf of somebody who didn't want her to tell the truth before the judge, a gentleman looking person with a brief case full of currency notes, and two criminal looking men who actually threatened her with dire consequences, and so many others... social workers.... advocates of human rights... and scores of people who kept on trickling in their *jhuggi* as soon as the news about Komal appeared in the media.

Malti was immersed deeply in her thoughts when a familiar irritating cough broke her thinking process. It was Birju, her husband, who was tongue tied since the moment he learnt about Komal's abduction. He was an asthmatic and did cough violently sometimes . After his bout of cough settled down, he changed his posture on the wooden bench and again started looking in to the floor as if trying to seek justice deeper below the floor of the room. Birju by nature was soft spoken, an attribute unusual for a rickshaw puller who spent most of his time wheeling the paddles of his cycle rickshaw and arguing with his customers for paying him less. Not only he was soft spoken but he spoke little, as if to conserve his breath and energy to pull his rickshaw up the bridge over the railway line. It had become increasingly difficult for him to pull the rickshaw up on the bridge particularly if his passengers were a family with some baggage. He invariably had to get down and physically pull the rickshaw up the slope, pant and stop, and then again pull, pant and stop and again pull till his rickshaw reached the top.

Birju coughed again and looked in to Malti's eyes. Malti remembered everything which happened the previous night, the longest and the most painful night for them. After the last visitor left their *jhuggi* she noticed Birju sitting in a corner with

his head down sobbing and muttering, *"Forgive me Komal, I failed as a father.... I could not protect you... I am sorry... forgive me"* tears streamed down his cheek. Malti firmly held his hands and sobbed. Birju finally broke down after remaining unmoved like a statue for so many days after the tragedy. All along, with his expressionless eyes he appeared like a deaf mute watching all the commotion created by the police, the media and the social activists who hovered around their *jhuggi* from dawn to dusk as if they had discovered a new temple for worship. He also remained a silent spectator when people coaxed, persuaded, pleaded and threatened his wife. But just a few hours before dawn Birju opened his mouth.

Birju suddenly lifted his chin up and looked straight in to Malti's eyes. Malti was surprised to look at his facial expression. Never before she had seen such a mixed expression of anger, hatred, helplessness and rebellion on his face. Birju paused for a while and then said with a flat expression, *"Komal is gone... she will not come back to us."* He wiped his tears and continued, *"But Malti ! we have two more daughters who are not dead as yet, they are still alive..."* Birju paused again and looked at two of them innocently sleeping over the floor.

"How can I protect them from evil eyes of that truck driver who brings the municipal water tanker everyday and openly displays his lust for young girls and tries to lure them ? Who can stop that chai wala making vulgar gestures at women and girls who pass in front of his shop everyday when they pass through his shop ? Who will save my daughters from the drug addicts and ruffians around our own jhuggi and who will protect them at night? We don't even have a door for safety in our jhuggi. I could do nothing to save Komal when I am still alive. What will happen when I am dead...." Birju had another prolonged bout of cough.

After gulping a few sips of water, Birju looked at Malti and began to explain, *"On the other side of nallah there is a colony of workers working in the cement factory. There is municipal water tap inside the compound. Each shelter is made of bricks with a pucca roof. There is a door which can be bolted from inside."* Malti was

surprised to see Birju talking uninterrupted long sentences for the first time in her life. Though he talked like a robot speaking with a tape recorded voice from somebody else, his eyes did express something which Malti had never seen before. But she was unable to understand what Birju was trying to tell her.

"That man who was the last person to see us, the one who was wearing dhoti and kurta. He spoke to me. I know him. I have taken him on my rickshaw to his home from railway station on many occasions. He never tried to pay me less. Seems to be a good man. He was saying that he can get us a shelter there..."

Malti suspiciously looked in to Birju's eyes.

"If you do not identify that person in the court, we can get that shelter ..." Birju was hesitant but spoke in one go as if swallowing a bitter pill.

"You mean to say that we should sell our honour and don't get justice for Komal" Malti sounded furious.

"No, I am begging you to buy security of our daughters. We will be doing justice to these two innocent girls whom we have brought to this world but are unable to protect them...." Birju quickly said what he had to say. *"That man promised to get that shelter for us and I can trust him .."*

Before Malti could say anything Birju told her to think about it and then went back in to a state of complete silence.



When Malti was escorted inside the courtroom to depose before the judge her legs felt too weak to carry her. But the lady constable was strong enough to gradually carry her frail body towards the witness box. She looked at the judge with reverence but was not sure what justice means to her family, punishment to killers of Komal or ensuring security for her other two daughters?



12

Mystery of Communion

N.C. RAMANUJACHARY "SRIVIRINCHI"

'You must take me to him today,'" said Jayadev still on his feet entering into my room.

I have not yet finished my day's newspaper reading, a daily ritual which I did meticulously and religiously. Having completed the 'editorial notes' I was looking at the moment into the 'thought for the day' at the top of the page.

I did not reply to his hurried remark. His request was not new for me today, and that was not of much importance in my view. There is no need to occupy the mind with such matters.

'Why don't you speak up?' asked the person settling in his habitual visitor's chair.

'First finish your cup of coffee,'" I said in a casual tone.

'Coffees and toffees come on their own, we need not ask for them. That ritual is imperative. The Sufi saint says – we must do a new thing every day.'

His voice choked, filled with anxiety and deep concern. Time is running out – was all his worry.

'What is the dire need for that today?' I never do anything unless a dagger is around the neck as I do not have illusions about time and duration.

'You always say the same dialogue. Years are rolling on. I can no longer wait. My heart is burning, boiling and it might burst any moment. I cannot wait for long.'

'Why so much despair?'

Sukhadev's face reddened. I was damn serious, and this gentleman never cares – this feeling was visible.

'It was only a day before that you saw him,' said I to soothe him.

'That was not a "seeing" at all. Among thousands I was only one, a tiny drop in the great ocean to see and hear him; his voice is still resonating in my brain. What I am looking for is an exclusive meet, one to one and face to face, to receive his blessings for my pursuit.'

Tea and biscuits came in a full tray. Sukhadev handed a cup to me and took the other into his hands. Dripping in the biscuits we enjoyed the coffee. Sukhadev continued to talk to keep alive his aspiration.

'Reiterating my point, I would not allow you to postpone the event as you did all these four years. I make my point clear to you now.'

'What do you want me to do?' I asked bringing the point to the beginning again.

'A thousand times I must have told you. You make me repeat again and again only to make a fool of me? You do not give the minimum consideration to my earnest request. It's a pity.'

'You prepared these dialogues well at home, mulled them over and spelling out now. But you know my response as well.'

'Your responses do not quench my thirst. I am tired of hearing them. I am dying to see him,' said he, taking in the last biscuit and replacing the empty cup on to the tray. His anger, coupled by the anxiety, is clearly visible now. 'This day I am prepared to do the Satyagrah, you must take me seriously.'

I wanted to laugh at his child-like plea, but restrained myself. His plea and my pain are equally strong.

'Today, I hope, you will not go to the office.'

'Can't say. If the car arrives I must. Going or not going does not depend upon my wish, you know that.'

'Yes, I know. You are still in your newspaper reading. That made me ask.'

I smiled at the suggestion.

He did not spare my smile. 'That is your way of paring away the problem. I am repeating, you cannot avoid my insistence today. Do or die is my determined action.'

'But you have not answered my question. You conveniently forget that.'

Sukhadev stirred up. 'What is that question? "Why are you in a great hurry?" Is it not what you asked me every time? What is the answer I can afford? This desire is haunting me all the time. Before I die down and vanish from the world, please allow me the concession.'

'So you are burning of this desire from the morning!'

'Last night I did not sleep. Nothing comes up the mind except this desire. I am helpless and am hopelessly bad. I did not have such strong pull till now all in my life, thank you.'

'Please tell me the agonies you had.'

'You mean, yesterday or through all the life?'

'Both, if you may.'

'My boy's education, getting him into a decent job, the daughter's marriage, obtaining a son-in-law who is accommodative. The life rolled on for sixty years with these errands. If it comes to yesterday, listening to the lecture again, ruminating on the contents and containers. Sir, don't attempt to put off all these things and avoid meeting him today. This day, you must take me on. I shall leave you only after you fulfill the task and make me fully satisfied.'

'I always ask you: What is the special hurry for that? Is it a life-saving device?'

'Sir, he will be here only for ten weeks. Four weeks have already passed. He may leave for some other town, according to what you tell me. Why do you keep me waiting? Make me sit before him for few minutes. That will solve my agony.'

I have nothing to do in the matter. I fail to understand why Sukhadev pesters me, as though it is all in my control. He does not care to what I say, how best can I convince him?

He may be determined, at all costs, see him and sit with him. But how am I concerned about all that!

‘Try to understand, Sukhdev, you have been listening to all his lectures. You were also attending the discussion meetings where only select persons gather. You are free to ask him any number of questions thereat. But I never saw you participating in those dialogues. You remain silent, unspoken, decidedly calm and serene on all occasions. Why do you have this queer desire, tell me?’

‘I shall not open my mouth, will never come in the way of his thought – flow. Will only sit quiet before him so long as he permits me. Will not vex him with my personal worries.’

‘You have all this opportunity at the meetings. I fail to understand your desire.’

‘I also do not understand that. Why this desire is haunting me all the days and nights is a big riddle for me too. This day I am determined to have this occasion. My life will be a glorious waste if I do not do that today. I will turn mad, a lunatic, a useless vagabond if I do not have that opportunity today.’

‘But how am I concerned about all your mental aspirations? Why are you bent upon putting me to hazard and make me what is beyond me?’

‘Don’t tell me that is not in your reach. Is my agony nothing to you?’ asked Sukhadev keeping his mouth open for a long time.

‘I have made it clear to you many times. He is not under my control or authority as such. I am just one more person like you and thousand others who carefully listen to him. How do you expect me make a recommendation on your behalf? I am very insignificant, do not like middle-man’s approach like this. Why do you keep me embarrassed for long?’—I had to say all this much against the displeasure he would reckon.

Just then some other person came in.

Sukhadev became envious and impatient on the third person’s entry.

That person took only five-six minutes talking to me. Sukhadev's agitation grew intolerably high in this short while.

Sukhadev opened his topic again as immediately as he could once that person left us. 'You say you have no concern in the matter. I do not know any other person who could be more deeply concerned. I am burning with all my problems, too eager to understand what life is, what death is; how pleasure and pain make us dance to their tunes. It is you who have shown me the light in him. It is you that made clear to me that his way of life and relationships are the ultimate to me. You made me swim in his philosophical approaches. How can you make me not reach the other end?'

'I cannot take responsibility for what you think. I must have suggested certain things to you. You have to run through them if you so desire. How can you make me responsible for all your aspirations? How am I connected with them?'

'One way you may be right, sir. But the fact remains, you know him well. You can make me sit before him. But why do you consistently abstain from doing that? Why are you that inconsiderate?'

'All that is your imagination, I must say, you make me big of what I am not. For myself, I do not go and sit before him in a way you desire to do. You can go, meet him, discuss what all you want to. Why do you crave from a middle-man like me? Is it not diametrically opposite to his expressed views?'

'May be true, sir. But I do not know why I crave for your mercy in this matter. — Whatever you may consider, you must take me to him today, I shall not allow you to postpone the event.'

'Who am I? What authority do I have?'

'I do not know about authorities, but you have the approach. You cannot disown.'

'Consider for a moment why you want me do that. Question yourself and see. What do you talk to him?'

'I do not know that. I must do, that's all.'

'I am asking: Why?'

'I am not that intelligent to discuss matters with him. I have no intuitions too, I am sure of that. I only want to sit at his feet for a while. I will weep my heart out before him.'

'He will not allow you to do that.'

'If he agrees I will place his hands over my head. I will soothe my heart in his presence.'

'Maybe he will permit you to do that. But my question is: What will you get out of it? Why are you bent upon entering into his solitude?'

'His solitude makes me too solemn and helps my consolidation. That is my hope and expectation, if you permit me to put it that way.'

I was trying to tell him once more that it is cruel to force ourselves upon others. He was in tears. He was not attempting to even wipe his cheeks., tears flowed on and on.

This will bring him the relief, the solace, I thought. I did not attempt to console him by my words, did not point his helplessness.

That afternoon – we had our lunch, had rest for an hour, heard his talk on the video for some time and then started out. The Maruti Zen with Dandayudhapani at the wheel took us silently and securely. We crossed the bridge. Jasmine scents one side, the waste waters with another avoidable smell the other side, the car took the right turn and moved on for few minutes. Dandayudhapani stopped the car in the portico. We walked into the hall, got up the steps and entered the big room. A small round table in a corner, two or three books thereon. In another corner a small bed neatly arranged awaiting occupation, in yet another corner he was sitting in an armless chair folding his hands in lap.

When we entered the room, that oval-faced person with his half-closed contemplative eyes was emitting the bright lights in tender colors. Those eyes opened in full, a lotus blossoming. Tenderness and compassion over powered us.

Noticing us, he stood up and walked towards us even as we did the usual 'namaskar' and wanted him not to move.

'Come,' spoke his sweet voice.

'This friend is anxious to meet you. Is well informed and an understanding man,' said I not to speak much.

He took on the folded hands of Jayadev into his own and for a long time held them together.

He then moved those hands up to his own head. Later, placed them on his heart and smiled. He again rubbed his own face with Jayadev's hands.

His beaming eyes looked into Jayadev's face and being for a while. No words, no dialogue. His thoughts and reflections had a radiated flow into our hearts.

A novel brightness in light, and an incessant flow of understanding and communication.

New scents went round the place. We did not know how long we were soaked in that serenity. Sukhadev, in which realm of the world he is, cannot be estimated by me.

We were not conscious of ourselves till someone entered the room and came nearer with the tray of biscuits and cups of coffee.

Sukhadev received the cup of coffee from his hands.

'I now know what perfection in life means. This is an unforgettable day in my life. I salvage this serenity for lives to come,' said Sukhadev, after the dinner.

When the T.V. ended the reporting of news for the day, our 'sushupti' commenced.



13

Assessment

PRATIK A. DAVE

'This is our Peer Team Report. You go through it, and if you find it otherwise, you may have right to seek clarifications regarding our report to the Chairman of the Higher Education Department, New Delhi. You may write your all clarifications in a separate piece of paper and let these both reports to be speed posted by you', explained Dr. Sudha Chakraborti, the Peer Team Committee head to the Principal cum Coordinator Dr. Arjun Bhalla, a hurly burly, 59 years old English subject principal of the Sarswati Arts & Commerce College, Mandvi.

The Higher Education Assessment and Accreditation Committee (HEAAC), New Delhi, Peer Team consisting three members took a three-day visit of the college for the assessment of the infrastructure, quality education and the future development plans of the college in the rural area of Kutchh, Gujarat. The team, during its stay for three days in the college, met personally to all the 10 lecturers, students, former college students association, Parents' Association and the Co-ordinator of local HEAAC Steering Committee head of the college, Principal Dr. Bhalla. The team found gross incongruities in the Self Study Report and the existing reality of the college. The SSR mentioned that all 10 teachers were the versatile readers and regularly spent 2 hours in the college library furnishing themselves with the latest subject wise information. Even the college library Teachers' Register showed regular entries of the teachers' presence in the library. The former College students' Association comprising of the last five years reported most of the college teachers were idle, irresponsive and very much weak in their mastered subjects.

Most of the teachers were not only negligent in engaging their classes, but they had been very much busy in their private professions, where they used to remain very much regular and active. When the team members met the college students, some of the students were very much enthusiastic sharing their views with the Peer Team members.

‘Sir, our classes are regularly taken by our teachers,’ said Monal, a third year special English student to Dr. Somnath Batra, one of the three-team members.

‘Madam, we are taken daily to the computer room for one hour and our Prof. Jani Sir guides us to surf on the informative sites. Yes, we always make regular entries of our visits of the computer room and the sites we surf. See, this is the Computer Room Visit Register,’ told Maynak Shah of the second year commerce student to the team leader Dr. Sudha Chakraborti.

‘Since how many days you have been engaged in the decoration of the class rooms?’ asked Dr. Yashpal Mohanti to Miss Rupal Dedia of First year B.A. class.

‘Sir, there were different teams formed, who were assigned different duties to make wall papers of Hindi, English and Gujarati writers and scribes to be hanged on the Walls of the Class rooms. The third year commerce students diligently prepared the charts of Economics and Balance Sheets graph in the commerce classes. We did it joyfully for the last two months, coming to the college even in the afternoon. These two months were the most entertaining one in my three years’ college life’, Third Year Hindi student Ladies Representative Miss Sobha spoke in a jiffy to the team.

‘Only these last two months....?’ Dr. Sudha caught the words.

‘No, Sorry ...Madam. I mean, we like all the three years. Sorry, Madam. All the professors are really scholar,’ Miss Sobhana clarified with a tinge of fear.

‘Yes, all the students are very diligent, aren’t they?’ asked Dr. Mohanti to Dr. Batra.

‘Yes, you are extremely right. They have decorated the college like a bride,’ Dr. Batra replied.



‘Let me go in... w...h....y ... you ... stop me today. You... Son of...B....I come everyday. I am the college Inspector!’ Loud shrieks heard in the college corridor. The college guards had a scuffle with some one.

‘How is this noise, Dr. Bhalla?’ worriedly asked Dr. Sudha.

‘No, madam, he is a lunatic. He takes a regular round of the college corridor. He is not a harmful fellow. He keeps his hands folded and takes a round and goes. This is his routine work’, explained Principal Dr. Bhalla.

‘Madam, he is the former student of the college, but did not complete his study, as he lost his balance of mind,’ informed Prof. Jani to the Team Leader.

‘His case seems identical to that of Julius Caesar’s mad man’, commented Dr. Batra.

During the valedictory function of the Peer Team, Dr. Sudha Chakraborti mentioned that the college teachers’ engaged in their private businesses at the cost of their highly paid noble profession of teaching. She indirectly warned the teachers to stop their building construction, stock market speculation and personal tuition at the cost of their college teaching. Else, the college would have to suffer a lot during recreditation by HEAAC. She further explained the objectives of HEAAC and why it required. Even after trillions of revenue wasted, the level of education has not improved a bit even after India’s independence. The team humbly refused to have any gracious gift by the college teachers.

The Next day, Principal Bhalla called on a college staff meeting to discuss the aftermath of the HEAAC Peer Team. The common feeling prevailed among the teachers that the HEAAC Peer Team was unnecessarily strict. In this Semi-

Urban area, it was impossible to provide quality education. The college expected at least 'C' grade in view of their over all manoeuvred performance.



After a month passed, the HEAAC Committee did not allot any grade to the Sarswati Arts & Commerce College, Mandvi. It created a huge furor among the college staff as well as the college management. Everyone turned blue.

Simultaneously the Principal received a personal letter from the Peer Team leader Dr. Sudha Chakraborti. Its content was this.

My respected Principal Bhalla Sir and respected teachers,

I am very sorry to say that first time ever a student failed her teachers. Sir, If you can recollect, ruminate your initial first three years, when you were newly appointed as an English teacher in the Sarswati Arts & Commerce College, Mandvi during 1978-79-80. There was a 'notorious' girl student of 18 years, whom you felt, harassing you much asking syllabus related questions and if any of her teachers was reluctant to take classes, she used to complain to the principal. Yes, I am that 'Shanti Parmar', daughter of a very poor family of Mohanbhai Parmar, who was a clerk in Mandvi Sanitation Office. I was considered a mole in the eyes of the then teachers, simply because I, as I feel today, was more inquisitive and eager to quench a student, which was inside her. Being a student, I could not complain because of the fear of being retributed. But after my graduation in 1981, with higher second class, my father sent me to Delhi for the further study. I am very much indebted to various government and private scholarships. I had to change my surname 'Parmar' as it was a badge in my further study even in Delhi. I officially changed my name as 'Sudha Paneri' and cleared my I.A.S. in the very first attempt. I was given option to go for collectorship, but I wanted to remain in contact with Education. My wish was granted and I was appointed as a secretary in the Human Resource Ministry. I completed my doctorate in Education in 1987. The title of thesis was 'Higher Educational Environment in Rural and Semi-Urban areas of

Gujarat: A Case Study'. I further wrote 9 books on Education improvement as my post doctoral work, which are, I am very much happy to state, in the syllabus in the various overseas universities of Canada, New Zealand and U.K. Then I married to my Ph.D. guide Dr. Debanand Chakraborti.

I was very much eager to visit my college and that is why I requested to the HEAAC committee, which fortunately appointed me as the Peer Team leader for the assessment of our college. I am that 'Shanti Parmar'.

I am very sorry to say, the education level and the level of Knowledge of my teachers is as poor as it was 30 years ago. Manipulation and manoeuvring have still been in vogue in the college.

I am extremely regretful for the 'neutral assessment' of this college.

Thanking you,

Yours obediently,

Dr. Sudha Chakraborti.



ARTICLES

1

Archetypes of Contemporary Indian Cinema

NIPUN CHAUDHARY

Cinema, a medium which Indians took to with great ease and rapidity, has indeed been part of the nationalist historiographic project since the early years of the 20th century. Nevertheless, during the next decade, foreign characters of Indian origins suddenly acquired totally new connotation. This new generation of neo-traditional film combining ethnic nationalism and the praise of materialism therefore also seek to champion a patriarchal structure that idealizes the women sublimated by either virginity or motherhood while insisting on her submissiveness. In addition, the emigrant is no longer accused for forgetting his roots and values: it is the host country and more generally western culture that are held responsible if at all. Ideal Indians have hence become deterritorialized models of national identity. Even though filmmakers, the government, and the media keep pronouncing it as such there is no such thing as the “Indian film industry” – in terms of nationally integrated structures of financing, production, distribution, and exhibition, even if there is some overlap and circulation of personnel between the six main film industries in India.

There are many film industries in India of which the Bombay-based Hindi film industry, now better known as “Bollywood,” is the most well-known globally; however, Hindi films comprise about 20% of the total number of films

produced in India, with an equal number [and sometimes more] of films being made in Telugu and Tamil every year. When all of the films made in all of the languages – about 20 or so – are tallied up, that is what makes India the largest feature film producing country in the world; Bollywood doesn't make 800-1000 films a year, it makes approximately 200 or so a year. However, even with large companies like Reliance Big Entertainment and UTV, it appears that the independent producer and distributor are still required to carry out the actual work of producing and distributing films. May be we still have a lot to learn from Hollywood but this much is undoubted that, Indian cinema stands second only to Hollywood, especially in terms of its turn out of movies and movie stars. In the earlier times with the orthodox views about dancing, singing and acting, cinema was not considered to be a respectable career, not meant to be followed by the youth of good respectable families. However, today the boys and girls who join cinema as a career are children from good wealthy and respectable families, and cultured families. This is because there has been a sea change in the thinking processes of the modern people. Also, this change has helped in the improvement of the turnout of cinema. From the earliest times of the existence of cinema in India, it has always been the most popular and the cheapest mode of entertainment. This is why it got the impetus that brought it to this level of success, and its present size.

Even today, cinema in India is very popular but, with the advent of the TV and many other avenues for entertainment, it has become a little less important in the average person's entertainment list. Besides, the VCP and DVD'S have further decreased the habit of going out to the cinema halls to see movies. When a picture is available at home, why would anyone like to go to a cinema hall? Thus, though going to cinema halls has come down the popularity of the cinema is still on the upward swing. The cinema in India has, in spite of all hazards retained its unchallenged popularity. It still remains the most liked mode of entertainment both for the Indian gentry and the Indian masses. It is a matter of pride

that, Indian cinema has not only remained popular in India, but it has increased its boundaries elsewhere in world. It is very popular in most of the foreign countries, more so due to the Millions of Indians residing in foreign countries. Today, both the multiplex audience and single-screen viewers are getting what they want. Yet, they want more. So, the corporate production houses are dishing out lot of low-budget, high content movies almost every week. That's why we are flooded with new films.

Indian cinema has been an important means of communication, education and entertainment. Like literature, it is the reflection of our society and influences our society, especially when it comes to "young adults." Like other works of arts, cinema is the reflection of the hopes, aspirations, frustrations and contradictions of the society in which it is created. With the changing socio-economic scenario, film production in India also underwent changes. Previously the films had a message for the society but nowadays the case is different. The films earlier produced were basically based on historical, mythological, cultural as well as ethical facts. They had more of moral values than mere mindless storyline. It guided the new generation to a better living and also promoted the Indian culture and beliefs and hence made the children more aware about Indian moral values. "Hindu-Muslim brotherhood", perfect Indian families and their "typical values", the "corrupted politicians" were greatly highlighted in the films produced before the modern era. Even the great epics were picturised in reels and thus added a new essence in Indian minds. People believed whatever they saw and tried to implement the same in their life. Films like 'acchoot kanya', 'godaan', 'awara' were typically based on social issues of India and well reflected that the producers of that time were fully aware of their social responsibilities. Cinema like these were specially made to promote patriotism, mutual cooperation and harmony and aimed at eradicating the social evils from our Indian society. Many other social evils including untouchability, sati, prohibition on widow remarriage, social discrimination were also attacked by many

films of earlier times. These films provoked majority of the Indians and it also succeeded in eliminating few of the social evils from our so called Indian society. It made the Indian ponder upon such issues and instigated them to take a step ahead in cleaning up our society from all the unwanted beliefs.

Nowadays the case is entirely different. The face of Indian cinema has changed in the last decade. Indian cinema is now imitating the cultural values of western countries which is accepted by half of the Indian mob and discarded by the others. The cinema brought up nowadays imperils social values and are eroding away our India borne social values. Recently cinema is becoming an important part of lives despite the advent of television and other means of mass communication. Some people believe that it becomes the chief responsibility of the cinema creators to restrict their films to ethical values to safeguard the innocent minds of the next-gen kids. With growing materialism and consumerism, the social obligation of the cinema has been replaced by the commercialism. The hits and flops of the film at the box office is the most important thing which is taken into account during the process of filmmaking. Keeping this in mind, such ingredients are jammed, necessarily or unnecessarily, in the films, to ensure its success, without thinking that such ingredients of sex, violence, etc. are causing great injury to the social fabric and the individual as well. Greed for materialistic things have chewed away the brains of those involved in the film making process which is well reflected in the films which have trashed storyline and nothing else but vulgarism which is smartly quoted as the "essence of glamour." It is due to this negligence, that film industry has been a target of criticism. Even the apex court of the country had to come forward and ask the Censor Board not to release sex and violence soaked films. It further goes on to advise the Censor Board to "step in firmly and insist that the film being released has a message to improve the value of life and contains only such scenes which promote good values." Certain crimes are committed by being motivated from some films. Reports of such instances very often appear in newspapers.

The cinema is an important tool of both education and entertainment whose magnetic charm has captivated millions of hearts all across the globe. The glamorous story that is depicted across the cinema screen combines the delights of fiction with truthfulness of real life and presents for the pleasure of our mind a material whose intellectual and emotional values linger last in mind and remain unsurpassed by other kinds of artistic creation. Big crowd of people at cinema halls is proof of its immense popularity. This great mass appeal of cinema has invested it with great deal of social influence. But after 2000 AD Indian cinema has experienced a transformation towards 'glamour'. Well to accept it or not Indian cinema is now abusing women. They are being utilized to commercialize films and are being insulted by making them work in uncomfortable outfits and making them to intimate scenes with their opposite cast. Many journalists have even supported these scenes saying that their inclusion in the film is necessary for the storyline. It will only continue to harm the sensitive minds of the children and will also desensitize the adults to criminal situations because of their regular interaction with criminal situations in the form of cinemas. Children in the adolescent stage are becoming more prone to the side effects of the modern west life imitated cinema and are indulging themselves in committing crimes or even becoming a victim of it. They are desensitizing towards criminal situations and even abusing girls inspired by the actors in the urbanized Indian cinema. Well it depends upon us how we imbibe the corrupted modernized cinema and ask ourselves that why we don't take a step ahead and boycott these films? As we should not forget that Commercial Hindi cinema plays a central role in the negotiation of national identity too.

In the 1990s, the rise of Hindu nationalism, the liberalisation of the Indian economy and the renewed affection of the Indian middle class for cinema halls, previously deserted in favour of home entertainment, generated more production and more revenue. This period coincided with a new academic interest in Bollywood. Indeed popular Indian cinema in Hindi

constitutes a particularly interesting area of study as much because of its history as because of its key role in the creation of the national identity and its place in the collective imagination. Directors, producers, distributors, financiers, officials in the central board of film certification all seek to ensure the projection of lucrative, aesthetically, pleasant and acceptable contents. This results in a prescriptive and normative body of works that have, over the years, reflected and most shaped ideas of national identity, gendered behaviour and acceptability. The character of expatriate Indian cinema perfectly illustrates this phenomenon. But after 2000A.D. the symbol the Indian achiever, a kind of Indian able to assert his ethnic and identity in a globalized world: capitalist, male, family-oriented, technology-savvy and a devout Hindu all at once. A few films like 'Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge', 'Pardes', 'Kabhi Khusi Kabhi Gham' and 'Namaste London' have given him pride of place and have generated new practices or rejuvenated old ones. All through the 20th century, popular cinema evolved with Indian nationalism and politics and developed pro-independence, socialist, reformist, neo-traditional, capitalist, globalized and ethnic themes.

Cinema, a medium which Indians took to with great ease and rapidity, has indeed been part of the nationalist historiographic project since the early years of the 20th century. Nevertheless, during the next decade, foreign characters of Indian origins suddenly acquired totally connotation. This new generation of neo-traditional film combining ethnic nationalism and the praise of materialism therefore also seek to champion a patriarchal structure that idealizes the women sublimated by either virginity or motherhood while insisting on her submissiveness. In addition, the emigrant is no longer accused for forgetting his roots and values: it is the host country and more generally western culture that are held responsible if at all. Ideal Indians have hence become deterritorialized models of national identity. The sentimental family dramas with endless marriage songs and teary dialogues are no more acceptable. Even the actors like to play

ordinary mortals with their own set of complexities. 'Page 3' was such a movie showing rollicking chronicle of the high society folks.

Cinema is the beautiful combination of art, literature and science. The Indian Cinema has changed a lot during these years. There is a change in technology, change in contents and change in presentation. The growth of the Indian film Industry has been a very interesting one. Today this industry gives diverse audience a lot to look forward to. Films have undergone as many trends, shifts, and style as any other artistic genre. We have seen realists, surrealists, movements of stunning drama or startling style. We have seen hundreds of brilliant directors produce thousands of brilliant films. We have seen countless moments frozen in time on the silver screen, never to be forgotten. The last ten years saw a growth in Bollywood's popularity in the world. This led the nation's filmmaking to new heights in terms of quality, cinematography and innovative story lines as well as technical advances in areas such as special effects, animation and so on. The traditional cinema and entertainers are still going strong, but there is also a new confidence amongst young directors to stretch out their muscles and try out different hybrid forms. Now films are not made focussing on narrow crowd of audience, instead a diverse crowd of audience and their tastes are look forward. Audiences also realised that good films are possible with different subjects and storyline. Tastes have changed so much that today's films can draw their storyline from a whole range of subject, like a cricket match where India defeats her British oppressors, hockey matches, football matches or even a weird blue alien, and still be commercial successes. So long as the story is simple and well presented with a great caste, you can be sure of a hit.

Cinema, like other modes of media, is inspired and influenced by the society and portrays it colourfully. A glance at the Indian films produced recently confirms to this fact. Reel life, they say, is a reflection of real life. For some reason the Indian cinema has dealt with reality in its own unique way.

The changing trends in films reflect the changes taking place in our society. These movies, devoid of selection or fineness, also represent life and society though negatively. The anguish and protest of public over corruption and abuse of power are reflected in an all-powerful hero who fights for justice. The struggle and tension of common man is portrayed through him. Absurd jokes and artificial comic scenes are added to make people laugh and relax. Common man's insatiable and secret desires are the reason for vulgar and obscene films. Here also, the link between man and society is revealed. Earlier, films of rural background were the first choice. Now-a-days more and more films, both art and commercial ones, focus on the urban life, the changing pattern of life in villages and towns, new social ethics and the impact of modernisation and globalisation on society. Earlier commercial films avoided or treated these subjects casually or left them to the so-called art films. The shift clearly shows the changing face of our society. But the centre remains the same—man and his society. Film may be bad or good, based on a fiction or a real story, centered on a village or a city life, but it explores the phenomenon that is man and his often contradictory relation with the society.

Contemporary Cinema has introduced movies of various tastes like 'Chak De India', 'Paan Singh Tomar', 'Azaan', 'Newyork', 'Slum Dog Millionaire', 'Barfi', 'Taare Zameen Par', '3-Idiots', 'Lagaan', 'Rajneeti', 'Guzaarish', 'Rang De Basanti', and many more. These films have won many awards. This kind of movies show that directors are trying to be more creative and they are ready to bear risk by introducing new elements. Modern Indian cinema contains catchy music in the form of song and dance numbers woven into the script. Remixing of film songs with modern beats and rhythms is a common occurrence today and producers even release mixed version of some of their songs along with the films regular soundtrack album. In modern films, Indian dance elements often blended with western dance styles are used. Dialogues are usually written in an unadorned Hindi that would be understood by largest possible audience. Earlier for

advertisement posters and billboards used to be hand-painted but now billboards are created with computer printed vinyl. Music and music videos are released before the actual release of the film for advertisement purposes.

In the 20th century, Indian cinema, along with the Hollywood and Chinese film industry, became a global enterprise. At the end of 2010 it was reported that in terms of annual film output, India ranks first, followed by Hollywood and China. Enhanced technology paved the way for upgrading from established cinematic norms of delivering product, altering the manner in which content reached the target audience. Visual effects based, Superhero and Science fiction films like 'Krrish', 'RaOne' emerged as blockbusters. Indian cinema found markets in over 90 countries where films from India are screened. Indian cinema has more recently begun influencing Western musical films, and played a particularly instrumental role in the revival of the genre in the Western world. Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning film 'Slumdog Millionaire' (2008) was also directly inspired by Indian films, and is considered to be a 'homage to Hindi commercial cinema'. Most recently 'Barfi' starring Ranbir Kapoor is also nominated for Oscar. The provision of 100% foreign direct investment has made the Indian film market attractive for foreign enterprises such as *20th Century Fox*, *Sony Pictures*, *Walt Disney Pictures* and *Warner Bros*. Tax incentives to multiplexes have aided the multiplex boom in India.

Films have played a larger role, being a medium for social change although the pace of change has been too sluggish to be noticeable at the first instance. It started in darkness of auditorium in form of natak and has grown up in big Indian cinema has often provided a positive reflection of identity. Films have also contributed to national integration in a big way, bringing about a kind of cultural unity and promoting unity in diversity. It has brought about an appreciation for music cutting across regional barriers. Recreation is as much necessary for healthy growth as work. Life will be dull and

unpleasant if there is no occasional amusement to cheer it up. Therefore, from the earliest times recreation in different forms has been introduced in healthy and civilized society. Dance, drama, singing, puppet show and various other forms of entertainment have found favour with the people. Today life of man has grown complex, full of worries, cares and anxieties. The mechanized Way of life has bred monotony; therefore these modes of entertainment have also undergone revolutionary change. The latest and the most popular form of recreation is Cinema. Its phenomenal popularity and development is due to its mass appeal and that it is well within the financial limitation of common man. The people belonging to different walks of life patronize it and find it equal to their varied interests. Films depict historical, mythological and social themes bearing on Indian lives, whether of the past or the present make a special appeal to the people. The Cinema has been found to be the most effective method of exposing social evils such as dowry system, etc. Civic sense and public morality is brought through them. The political awareness, fight for the rights and the general awakening of the masses is largely contributed by Cinema. As a means of propaganda, publicity and advertisement, its services are invaluable and it must be preserved and fostered at all costs.

In this respect cinema can serve the goodwill mission of presenting the correct image of the country and the people abroad. Thus, Cinema can be used for establishing mutual international understanding and paving the way for permanent world peace. However, it cannot be neglected that there is a major single factor which earn substantial and much needed foreign exchange. Commercially also Cinema has opened up a lucrative profession. Besides encouraging young men and women to enter the field of acting, and has provided employment to millions of people as technicians, designers, photographers, dressmakers and various allied agencies. The artists' right from the storywriter to a poster designer have found a ready market for their talent. Poets and even literary men who had been looked down upon for ages have found

with Cinema a fresh lease of life and livelihood. Apart from its various advantages, Cinema is not free from its evil effects. Film artistry is, unfortunately, compelled to compro-mise with people's popular taste and appeal to their lower instincts. Too many films dealing with sex problems and with the ways of the criminals are now shown. These are apt to affect public morality. The substandard catering of music and recreation is likely to injure public taste and outlook and is not ultimately good for the art. The Cinema has far reaching effect upon the youth of the country. The films make them prematurely sex conscious and they start reacting the scenes of romantic pictures in their regular life. A sense of dissatisfaction with life is engendered among them. Vandal-ism and increasing acts of rowdyism in the student community are attributed to their indiscriminately frequenting the cinema halls. Again the youth imitating all sorts of fashions from the films lead to the development of expensive tastes and manners. In this respect the role of Government is significantly felt.

Further in India Cinema has to attain the artistic and technical perfection, Government aid by way of subsidy, helping manufacture of raw film and other equipment in the country; admission tax reduction, encouragement to talented artists and techni-cians must be forthcoming. We must not forget that with wide range of depiction and with universality of its appeal, Cinema has tremen-dous possibilities in our country. With our abundant and natural wealth and inexhaustible fund of rich literature, our Cinema, though young and unstable, its growth is inevitable. Cinema is, without doubt, the greatest medium of entertainment but at the same time, it also reflects the true mood of the society. The Indian cinema has changed through times and has always tried to cope with the changing reality. Reel life, they say, is a reflection of real life. The influence has never been unidirectional – Indian society and cinema has been influencing each other altogether. Cinema is the replication of the society and society also watches and starts accepting the changes introduced by cinema, I think both influence each

other well. Generally behind any creative thing there is an inspiration, hence for the cinemas it more the society that we live in. Through cinemas, only we come to know about the different issues that are prevailing in India but somehow we ignore them. Its cinema only, which brings that ugly face out in the market. In many ways the last decade in Indian cinema mirrors changes that occurred in the Indian economy. Film critic Lata Khubchandani writes, "Our earliest films...had liberal doses of sex and kissing scenes in them. Strangely, it was after Independence the censor board came into being and so did all the strictures." Plots now tend to feature Westernised urbanites dating and dancing in clubs rather than centering on pre-arranged marriages. Though these changes can widely be seen in contemporary Bollywood, traditional conservative ways of Indian culture continue to exist in India outside the industry and an element of resistance by some to western-based influences. Despite this, Bollywood continues to play a major role in fashion in India. Some studies into fashion in India have revealed that some people are unaware that the changing nature of fashion in Bollywood films is often influenced by globalization; many consider the clothes worn by Bollywood actors as authentically Indian.

To conclude, I must say that Indian movies have undergone many changes and can be divided into four sections-specialized, diaspora, regional and commercial. Bollywood has reached to its extent in presenting entertainment for almost all the sections of the society. Most of the modern film makers have realized their responsibility and have given a lot of space to various stories portrayed in the form of movies but still many film makers exist whose primary focus is on commercializing media and presenting things in a way which is actually not required.

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2

Isn't it Time We Changed His-story to Her-story?

KSHAMA SHASHIDHAR

Introduction

The assumption that women are biologically different from men has primarily lead women to their subordination all over the world. Freud's statement that 'anatomy is destiny' has dangerously downplayed the role of women. Therefore women are thought to be inferior and that nothing can be done to make them feel better. No human effort can change this factual destiny which women of all ages, from all over the world have to accept quietly. They are thought to be not only physically weak but morally and intellectually inferior too; an assumption which is once again totally wrong. Even the great Aristotle had felt that men were naturally superior to women and therefore men could always dominate over them.

According to Freud, men came to consider themselves superior to women on account of the biological gift of the phallus, which women as human beings lack. He assumes that biologically men are superior to women due to this natural gift of the phallus to them. But what is the use of the mighty phallus, if it is not allowed to do its duty, for which a woman is definitely required? He also said that men's tasks are performed consciously and rationally and at the same time are planned and productive. Women's tasks are seen as basically determined by her nature. This makes it easy to assume that women have less or no intelligence and men have been granted unique qualities by the creator. This clearly shows that men are always in a dominating position to exploit women in innumerable ways.

Factuality

Just because a man's sexual organs are on the outside and a woman's inwards, does it necessarily mean that she is inferior to him? Just because he is the giver and she the taker of sperms in the semen does the man become superior to woman? No! Aren't they actually complimentary to each other? If the sperm does not reach its destination, (the female egg), how can fertilization take place? By the same logic, how can the male have the slightest chance then to become a father? Sp just as two hands are required to clap, similarly a male's and a female's union is required for a man to show his manliness! Then can one actually survive without the other? Can the human race move forward without each of these sexes doing their duties appropriately? How does then the female become inferior to the male? Agreed that she may be physically weak as compared to her male companion but the man in spite of all his manliness, is unable to spew his virile seeds anywhere else except into a woman's womb, for him to father a child! No amount of the strength of his six pack muscles are of any use to show his strength as a father of a child unless a woman is prepared to accept his seed, which when only united with her's, will make some sense to make him a father!

Sexual division has always favoured men in patriarchal structures in all spheres of life. Men have always strived to determine what part women shall or shall not play in their lives and in the society. It implies that till today the position of women in almost all societies is in one way or another 'inferior' to the position of men, all things being equal.

According to Carmen Diana Deere and Magdalena Leon de Leal who have done a comparative study in twelve countries in regard to all aspects of men and women, there is distinction not only in sexual division of labour but also sexual division in access to means of production, the sexual division in decision making power and the sexual division in distribution. It is pointed out that in the sexual division access to means of production translates the reciprocal social power

of women and men and it is unfavourable to women. In reality, there is no relation between the quantity of work performed and the social power gained through it. The control over the productive process is with men as also the process of decision making. It appears that men often get more than they deserve and that women are frequently the last served, especially in periods of shortages.

Sherry B. Ortner, in her article, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture' says that it is not biology as such that ascribes women to their status in society but the way in which every culture defines and evaluates female biology'. So she concedes that if this universal evaluation changed, the basis for female subordination would vanish.

Culturally, it is the parents, teachers and other adults who shape a child's behaviour and inculcate values according to the child's gender. Have parents actually tried giving dolls to their male infants and seen how they have reacted to it? Or vice versa, how many parents have given creative gadgets to their female infants and seen how they react? The point is, they do not try it at all. Why? Simply because they are psychologically made to believe that little boys would probably enjoy playing with creative gadgets and little girls with dolls.

To face challenges in the world confidently, boys are often much better prepared by their nurturers. They are put to better schools at an earlier age than the girls. The result of this is that, by the time the boys are attuned to the school environment, they are already familiar with all activities revolving around them, be it various games, toy automobiles, logos, guns, rifles, gadgets or even their school laboratories which offer them huge potential for hands-on training, which is very often not the case with the girls. This obviously gives the boys an upper edge over the girls because by the time the girls are ready to do what the boys are doing, they boys would have had already moved several steps ahead, with their confidence and experience. The boys are even well fed

nutritionally so that physically and mentally they will become adept at problem solving. Girls on the contrary are given toys like Barbie doll, or little house play things or just soft toys. Hence care is taken to see that the boy grows up virile and intelligent but the girl in just building emotional human bonds. Sometimes their vibrant energy may be additionally used for just drawing or painting. This acquaints us with the bitter truth that girls are therefore much less well equipped to manipulate things to their advantage. As this is a severe yet real disadvantage, girls feel at odds and completely uncomfortable to compete with the boys in such an environment around.

Scholars like Autumn Stanley contend that during the Industrial Revolution, women contributed to the development of machines but their absence from the patent books can be attributed to the fact that patents required disposable income and time, both resources of which women historically have had less than men. Another thing was that the technical and mathematical training necessary to build models of inventions and patent them was not available to women because of gender segregated education. Besides, cultural stereotypes prohibited women from claiming credit for their achievements. Married women in the United States and Britain could not even own their innovations or patents until after the Married Women's Property Acts were passed, first in New York in 1848 and 1860 and then in Britain in 1870 and 1882.

The institution of marriage is considered a must for females in almost all societies of the world. This compulsion does not remain for males. Why? The chauvinistic males have since time immemorial seen to it that by forcing marriage on the females, they would be left with no option but to carry on the duties of child bearing, child rearing and of course to cater to the need of other extended members of the family. Even in India, irrespective of the fact whether an unmarried woman is highly educated, highly skilled and has occupied top administrative or professional post with challenging roles to play outside her home, she is gently reminded that she has to

think of marriage. For most Indian parents, marriage is the be all and end all of everything. That explains why, the moment a girl child is born into a family, the parents start thinking of her marriage and start making small investments in gold. This would lessen their burden at a later stage at the time of the girl's marriage, where all this gold could be given off as part of her dowry. She may be ultimately given a choice to choose her spouse but not the choice to live all by herself independent of any man in her life. If she decides to stay out of marriage, she would be considered a woman out of her mind! The question is, why should marriage always remain a priority for a woman alone and not for a man? By this, once she is married, she would be rendered chained in domesticity further making it all the more difficult for her to realize her potential to the fullest!

Present day women with their empowerment through education and skilled jobs can make it alone in the journey of life but the society at large fails to accept this fact.

Science tells us that the male brain is different from that of the female and assumes that men are good at Science and Maths and those subjects which require analytical ability. Sadly, it says that women are good at languages and communicative skills but not so good in Science and Maths. In reality, no research has been able to prove this so far. Then how can it be concluded that man is generally more intelligent than woman? Hence one would be forced to agree with Judy Wajcman, the great professor at London School of Economics and Political Science when she says that technical competence is central to the dominant cultural ideal of masculinity and its absence a key feature of its stereotyped femininity. Stanley says that the basis of this lies in the fact that cultural views are also acutely masculine!

Women had no standing to call themselves researches or scientists and were kept away from those areas where they could get access to knowledge, necessary for inventing and protecting tools and even ideas. Efforts were and still are

always made to diminish the significance of their technological skills in areas they are expected to have expertise. Their unpaid labour has always been thought to be inconsequential and so it was and still is not thought to have any impact on the economy. Women's work has been deemed to be inferior because they do not get wages for their domestic work and also simply because those tasks have been performed by them! It is argued that women should be able to make independent decisions concerning their children and home rather than being dictated terms on how they should be making their living. By this the women would be consciously working for their own betterment, giving lesser chances for men to dictate terms for women. The women's interests then would no longer be neglected.

Hence the female sympathizers argue that women should not be chained in any manner in the garb of marriage. They also reiterate that if the woman decides to stay at home and look after the children and run the entire family, she should have the freedom to do so on her own terms and not that of her spouse or in-laws. This is all the more important since she not paid any wages of her invaluable contribution to her home and its inmates. There is no yardstick whatsoever to measure her contribution to her home and its members. Neither is there any specific work contract regarding working time for her at home. If she decides to disagree to run the house, then Is it truly possible for the man in question to put in the same type of energy or effort or even concentration to bring in the wages that he would have brought in, if his wife had not silently sacrificed for him in innumerable ways? Does this not mean that her conspicuousness in domestication of the house is really something for which no value can be placed? Therefore, it can be argued that without her co-operation at home, in dealing with different issues of the house, her spouse can only bring home lesser wages! It is only because of her co-operation, that the man of the house will be in a position to bring in greater income than otherwise. So it is important to realize that

a woman's share in domestication can neither be ignored nor commercialized.

There is also the question of nature having made it possible for her to reproduce and whether she likes it or not, whether she accepts it or not, whether she wants it or not, her uterus bowl has made it possible to give birth to offspring, a fact that she cannot run away from. It is basically from this idea of reproduction, which nature has granted only to the woman, who while conceding this as a great gift from god, has to also agree that it is this very thing that puts her in trouble. This double edged sword, both of carrying a child in her womb and delivering it, has never been granted to man.

Patriarchy has allotted women different roles from those of men. Men are always accorded roles that have an air of natural superiority whereas the roles of women are always weak and mild. This sort of division of labour between men and women is a convenient way of keeping a woman under man's subordination. Domestic work is unquestioningly thought to be a woman's work in all societies while the function of reproduction has automatically been the basis for the association of women with child care and other domestic tasks related to the daily maintenance of the family.

Does a woman really have even productive freedom? Shouldn't this freedom be partly a woman's if not fully whole? Shouldn't the right to bear or not to bear children lie to some extent with her? Similarly shouldn't she have the right to space childbearing? Yet, in all countries it is a known fact that a woman has no role even over her body! It is like as if after marriage, her body is offered on rent to her husband and the fruits that she would thereafter bear, be the property of her husband and her in-laws! So where does the woman have her voice?

There is also the need to note that in all societies anatomical differences between men and women have placed different cultural expectations that define the ways in which members of each sex should behave. Men and women differ

in their access to the 3 Ps, namely power, privilege and prestige. The distribution of problem of who gets what, when and how has traditionally been answered in favour of males. Despite being in majority in number, women are socially, economically and politically disadvantaged in comparison to men, which reduce them to a stifled group.

Historically, they have encountered prejudice and discrimination which has worked to their disadvantage. They possess physical and cultural traits that distinguish them from men – the dominant group. In contrast, by virtue of their larger size and greater masculine strength, men were assigned hunting and defence tasks. Gender division of labour promoted the survival of the species and therefore was retained. Men are assigned with roles which are associated with deriving a livelihood and women only in tasks of nurturing their children, which in reality is an extension of their reproductive roles.

In earlier years when there were no birth control methods, women used to bear over a dozen children or even more. Sometimes they would have still born children, miscarriages or abortions. All these were physical problems which waylaid them from achieving anything substantial from the point of view of the society. Infact, every impregnation would render the women helpless, as they would be totally involved in the welfare of their children at all times, leaving them no time to even think about themselves. So where was the chance for such women to contribute anything to the society, especially by which they would be highly recognized?

Sexual division of labour was a clever social vehicle devised by men to assert their superiority over women in all respects. By relegating women to the house, men have been able to deny women those resources they need to succeed in the larger world. Gender stratification also derives from economic exploitation of women's labour. Others say that the fundamental motive is men's desire to have women readily available for sexual gratification. However there are still others

who emphasize that the appropriation of women is not for copulation but for procreation, especially to produce male heirs and daughters which in turn can be used as exchanges in cementing political and economic alliances with other families.

The early liberal ideological position on sex roles maintains that all individuals are unique but of equal value. Women and men are alike and have the same 'natural' rights. The conventional ideologists however maintain that men and women are essentially different types of beings and that women can never compete with men on any level at any given time. So just because she is physically weaker when compared to man, does it take away all her strengths, that she has to be thought of as a precious property that need to be cared for? Man is woman's lord and master and woman is man's mistress and servant maid; that's how the men would like to be known.

Conclusion

The broader question is who has decided what are the tasks for men and what are the tasks for women? Is it the men, is it the women, is it both or is it the gods? Unless infants, girls or boys are treated equally at home, right from the time they are born and unless baby girls are not handled like pieces of porcelain and boys are macho men, things are apt to remain as dismal for women as were centuries ago. Segregation between the two sexes should be minimum and they should both be brought up as complementary to each other rather than inferior or superior to each other. Schools, work places, play areas and areas where there are bound to be interactions between the two sexes should be made conducive so that members of both sexes will contribute equally in some way or the other to the society at large and reciprocally enrich each other, too.

Parents should have it in mind that they are the ones who are most responsible at home in their children's upbringing. Whatever attitude the girl will grow up with, will depend on

how well she has imbibed the values that she had got at home from her parents and how well she was treated on par by her parents in relation to her brothers. So there is still a lot to be done to see that a woman is liberated in every way that is mentally, physically and socially! There are still miles to go to reach the required destination. Governments of all countries should keep a tap at how well the women of their country are protected so that they live fearlessly and happily like their male counterparts. They should enshrine equal rights for women in all sectors. So the much asked question still remains a mystery – Will the women's voices always remain stifled? Isn't it time to change his-story to her-story?

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3

Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*: Subverting Conventions – A Story that Needs to be Told

PAYAL KISHORE TRIVEDI

A 'Story' takes the form of a woman. She is eager to be told and arrives at a dilapidated temple in search of an audience. A man sitting at the temple is trying to keep awake the whole night in order to evade a curse. He opts to hear the story and also agrees to pass it on to others. Thus begins the story of Rani in Girish Karnad's play *Naga-Mandala*.

Rani is kept locked in the four walls of her house by her husband Appanna. He arrives home only to have his food and then leaves without speaking a word to her. He also has a concubine and does not care to acknowledge Rani's identity as his wife. Kurudavva, a blind woman gives Rani a piece of root to attract her husband's attention. Rani mixes the paste of the root in the curry that she prepares for her husband but on seeing the liquid become red in color, she gets scared and pours it in the ant-hill wherein resides a King Cobra. The snake falls in love with Rani as he drinks the curry. He arrives in the disguise of her husband and makes love to her every night. After some days, Rani becomes pregnant and has to pass through an ordeal to prove her chastity. In front of the entire village, Rani holds the King Cobra in her hand and proclaims that she is touched by none other than her husband and the snake. The serpent does not bite her. Thus, Rani is touted as the goddess of the village. Her husband Appanna has no other option but to accept her as his wife. Nevertheless, the play does not close neatly on a happy note. The apparently pleasurable

ending of Karnad's play when Rani clears the test of chastity and is ennobled as a goddess incarnate is juxtaposed with Appanna's serious disbelief in Rani's innocence. His doubts about Rani dismiss that she is actually blameless:

APPANNA: What am I to do? Is the whole village against me? Have I sinned so much that even Nature should laugh at me? I know I haven't slept with my wife. Let the world say what it likes. Let any miracle declare her a goddess. But I know! What sense am I to make of my life if that's worth nothing? (41)

Appanna's conjectures negate the preconceived notion that a rural woman's docility makes her incapable of understanding the basic facts. Rani's rustic simplicity and innocence do not impair her caliber of noticing the obvious difference between the Appanna in the morning as her husband and the Appanna in her bedroom every night as her lover:

RANI: You talk so nicely at night. But during the day I only have to open my mouth and You hiss like a stupid snake. (22)

Rani's remarks make it obvious that she is not naive to the extent of being fatuous. Moreover, the moment Rani is brought for the ordeal to prove her innocence; she pronounces the truth of the most ambiguous nature which confounds her personality and leads one to believe that she is not at all gullible:

RANI: My husband and King Cobra...Except for these two I have not touched any of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me...(40)

On the forefront, Rani's declaration appears to be a fact. The play shows that she obviously sees her no one else but her husband Appanna in front of her day and night; albeit in distinct or entirely opposite manners. Karnad explains that in conservative Indian families, a wife is used to seeing her husband in two different roles:

...The position of Rani in the story of *Naga-Mandala*, for instance, can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of a young girl in the bosom of a joint family where she sees her husband only in two unconnected roles – as a stranger during the day and as a lover during the night...The empty house Rani is locked in could be the family she is married into...(Dodiya 36)

Karnad's point leads us to understand Rani's condition. She has to be a submissive wife satiating her husband's demands but not question him on any of the oddities in his behavior. Thus, perhaps she remains indifferent even when she keeps noticing some obvious dissimilarity between her husband at night and in the morning. Along with admitting that Rani is a rural woman constrained with certain norms, Karnad also does not deny that she lacks the basic ability in her to sense the facts and thus he acknowledges that Rani is blind to her infidelity stating that, "...the blindness of the mother (Kurudavva) in the sub-plot is genuine, but the blindness of Rani is ambiguous. She is deliberately blind to her infidelity. (Kurkotti 2)

Two very distinct observations by the playwright on his protagonist add an unresolved ambivalence which is perceptible when Rani holds the cobra and admits that she has only been touched by her husband and the serpent. At this juncture, the play confuses the nature of 'truth' and it seems that deliberately Girish Karnad tries to underline that absolute fact is a vague concept. Truth is not always apparent and what is apparent is not necessarily the truth. This is also highlighted towards the close of the play as the story of Rani refutes the possibility of a happy married life between Appanna and Rani divulging the truth latent beneath the many apparent pleasurable nuptial engagements:

STORY: No two men make love alike. And that night of the Village Court, when her true husband climbed into bed with her, how could she fail to realize it was someone new? Don't you think she might have cried out in anguish to know the answer?... When one says 'And they lived happily ever after', all that is taken for granted. You sweep such headaches

under the pillow and then press your head firmly down on them. It is something one has to live with, like a husband who snores, or a wife, who is going bald. (45)

The story's question becomes a means of a serious exposé that Rani perhaps represents the section of women that choose to knowingly engage in an extramarital relationship in spite of all social taboos. Appanna could lock her in the four walls of her house. However, he could not curtail her desire which engendered the magical serpent lover who fulfilled the need of love in her. With such a glaring fact being presented in front of the readers/audience, *Naga-Mandala* ceases to remain a simple folk play about a woman's affair with a magical serpent but instead becomes a contemporary drama that refuses to take didactic or absolute moral notions for granted. Thus, it seems the playwright chooses to close his play by two endings instead of one. The first ending shows that the cobra dies and is cremated by Rani's son. This indicates her acceptability of the cobra in her life as the father of her child. The second ending shows that Rani permanently hides the cobra in the long locks of her hair. Both the endings seem to connote Rani's decision to acknowledge the presence of the cobra in her life. Without asserting the fact that it is a woman's decision to have someone in her life that could satiate her desire for love, *Naga-Mandala* is Karnad's implicit attempt to voice a woman's freedom of choice. It is not the play about adultery. It is a play that questions all alleged conventions that give license to a man to have his share of hedonistic pleasures at the cost of violating social norms while deny the woman the basic autonomy to exert her will. This is where *Naga-Mandala* becomes a radical attempt to destabilize unwarranted impositions of the society. Nonetheless, it becomes important to acknowledge that the story of Rani is based on a moralistic folktale of southern India about a serpent god's benevolent assistance to a woman named Kamakshi for bringing her husband back from the clutches of a concubine. A. K. Ramanujan informs that this story is a *vratkatha* or a sacred account (Dharwadkar 445) narrated on a particular day in the South called *Shubrayana Shashti* dedicated to the snake gods.

It seems that Girish Karnad's choice to write a drama based on a didactic folktale of southern India reflects the playwright's intent to disregard stringent or obdurate morality in a non-committal mode. Karnad in fact identifies the strength in the genre of the folk drama to upset standards of morality while exalting tradition at the same time:

The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head. (Dodiya 34)

Naga-Mandala becomes paradigmatic of the dual function of folk drama identified by Karnad. The play celebrates the rich tradition of folk theatre but it also becomes the medium through which Karnad seems to upset conformity. Moreover, it appears as a play that presents the importance of women-centered tales to enlighten stalwarts of patriarchy. The man in the sanctum of the temple survives in the end because he consents to listen to the female story of Rani that wants to be told. Thus, Karnad attests the utility of folk stories in the world and reintroduces them differently from their cliché image as merely heirlooms of the past or pursuits of recreation. Indeed, reading *Naga-Mandala* makes it clear that it is a 'story that needs to be told'.

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4

Colonial Cultural Reality Shaping the Mindsets: A Study of *English August*, *The God of Small Things* and *Q & A*

SONU LOHAT

The novels taken for critical study in this research paper serve as the true panorama of typical Indian reality. There is true artistic representation of various shades of socio-economic, cultural and psychological phenomena of Indian life in these novels as the novelists viz. Upamanyu Chatterjee, Arundhati Roy, Vikas Swarup seem to be preoccupied with the artistic act of exploring the factors which shape perceptions, demeanors, attitudes and approaches to life. In fact, as psychological studies have proven and the concerned novelists have explored, the inner reality of one's mind and thus total mindset, especially in Indian case, have great shaping influence of outer social and cultural reality.

Various history and culture studies have shown that owing to continual colonial rule and feudal practices in India since long the common Indian mind has come to develop the mentality of servility. The plots in the novels taken here represent the very fact of perpetual sense of colonized mindset in the form of snobbery, servility, anglophilia, social cynicism and so on. Colonial rule, even before the British, feudal practices and caste hierarchy had shaping influence on the minds of the people. The thematic aspects depicting the Indian social life having deep rooted hierarchical system, disparity between rich and poor and the profound sense of colonial rule have great influence on individuals in forming the perceptions and attitudes.

Such social reality shaped by the feudal and colonial hegemony can be understood on psychological plains that how an individual cannot form his own ego and free thinking. Scientific observation and study of Dr. Sudhir Kakar, psychotherapist at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, reveal this fact of conditioned mind in Indian reality. V S Naipaul in his famous book *India: A Wounded Civilization* quotes this study:

We Indians, Kakar says, use the outside reality to preserve the continuity of the self amidst an ever changing flux of outer events and things. Men do not, therefore, actively explore the world; rather, they are defined by it. It is this negative way of perceiving that goes with 'meditation', the striving after infinite, the bliss of losing the self; it also goes with *karma* and the complex organization of Indian life. Everything locked together; one cannot be isolated from the other. (*A Wounded Civilization*, 2002: pp. 91-92)

The perception of an average Indian, as Kakar's study relates, has deep influence of inevitable culture; while the culture itself has colourings of colonial practices, collective commonalities. Perceptions, thoughts, predicaments, needs, general approaches and attitudes are determined by outside world, the colonial culture. This psychological inner phenomenon of making perceptions and attitudes can be better taken into critical analysis by likening it to computer functioning. The electronic device is given input then there is inner process and the result is output which is always in accordance with the characteristics of input. In similar ways, in a country which has been witnessing the unending cycle of colonial and feudal practices such perceptions and attitudes of individual are shaped which has typical characteristics of snobbery, hypocrisy and cynicism.

The phenomena of such typical snobbery, cynicism and hypocrisy find ample echo in the selected novels here and Upamanyu Chatterjee in *English August* intensively explores the typical shades of British styled but Indianized bureaucracy which is the true representation of colonized attitude. Indian

bureaucracy was chiefly inculcated by the British ways of ruling; they were white skinned, superior sahibs for the Indians. Chatterjee, keeping the objective distance from variously shaped but ethnically same characters, views the Indian bureaucratic reality of from the perceptions and perspectives of his young protagonist Agastya Sen. He is a newly elected anglicized IAS who is terribly misfit in a cog of Indian hinterland called Madna; bestowed with essential attributes of free thinking and freedom of choice and therefore his perceptions and attitude are free of the influence of colonial reality.

Through observations of Sen Chatterjee scoffs the farcical situations arising out of servile attitude of the discomfited subordinates in presence of their seniors and their cynical bullying the mundane people. Such cycle of shaping of perceptions of cynicism, snobbery and servility keeps an individual in the grip of such system preventing him further develop free thinking. The novelist has artistically laid bare the stark reality of deep rooted inclinations of average Indians to serve the powerful and higher snobbishly and bully the inferior. Vivid and humorous descriptions of the discomfitures of subordinates and of average people carry the fact of enslaving dominant Sahebgiri. Subordinates are found piteously uneasy in the presence of higher authority; the novelist satirically ridicules the discomfitures and robotic servility of such official caricatures:

If you can tick off a subordinate in the language, thought Agastya, you are really fluent. On the far side of the desk stood a trembling suppliant, weeping fresh tears, as though he had just been beaten. The other old man being shouted at turned out to be the District Supply Officer. Later Agastya would conclude that they all looked the same, the denizens of the Collectorate, aging, with soft faces that hasn't seen much sunlight. They all wore pale shirts and loose pants. Their short pockets bulged outrageously with pens and spectacle cases. Most smelt nice, of some very Indian perfume, or scented hair-oil, or paan, they would withstand

like placid buffalo, anything that an industrious superior could shriek at them. (*English August*, 1988: p. 14)

The influence of Sahebgiri is not confined to lower rank officials only but the entire society seems under the sway of towering Sahebgiri, "The petitioners always stood. Srivastav asked them to sit only if it seemed that they would take long; if they sat it was on the edge of the chair." (*English August*, p. 18) Although the chairs in the office of the Deputy Commissioners are meant for the general public, no one dares to sit comfortably before the powerful bureaucrat. The bureaucracy always has colonizing impact on the general masses. Those on higher positions such as deputy commissioner are also under the influence of snobbery, cynicism and hypocrisy as shown in the novel. Quite hypocritically Srivastav takes it his pride to reach late on his duties and deliberately being unpunctual in other occasions. Attributes like austerity, punctuality and regularity are ascribed to subordinates as Sahebs are the royal gods and thus no one can expect them such virtues, "Take my case. Office starts at ten thirty, I reach at eleven sharp.' He made it sound like a virtue." (*English August*, p. 25)

In fact, the age-old feudalistic and colonial bent of mind and British styled bureaucracy have been shaping factor for the present day Sahebgiri as is hinted in the novel. The constant hierarchy in Indian Babugiri owes much the age-old Indian caste system and feudal system and hence it inevitably inculcates the sense of snobbery, hypocrisy, cynicism, servility and even servitude in the minds of the people. The novel is a farce on Indian administrative system of 1980s peopled by the grotesque end-products of this system such as robotic clerks who are always keen to serve and please their bosses. This Sahebgiri can be seen as colonizer with feudalistic characteristics even in the postcolonial Indian society which is still replete with people of servile mindset. The perception and attitude typical of snobbery and cynicism have been described with Chatterjee's profound discerning insight into the slavish minds. The mind of a layman is so conditioned to

the fact of Sahebgiri that the position and rank matter more than anything, "A fat officious man said, 'Yes?' The naib tehsildar mumbled something and the officious man immediately turned servile. 'Good morning, sir..." (*English August*, p. 12)

Such mentality of twin but opposing snobbery and cynicism of an average officious clerk shifts at once in accordance to the type of person he is dealing with. To naib tehsildar, who is of equal rank to him, the officious man very indecently and straightforwardly say 'yes' which signifies cynical attitude. Whereas when the rank of Agastya is mumbled into his ear he snobbishly turns servile to serve the IAS, the master positioned at higher rung in the vast scheme of Sahebgiri. The sense of snobbery is so deeply rooted that human values are put on stake but the rank and position in power hierarchy are blindly worshipped. If the appellations like IAS and IPS are put with the names of the person the name and identity as a human are lost in bureaucratic zilch while one's rank and position of power only matter for the society, "Srivastav introduced him to somebody, no one heard anything except IAS', then they began fawning on him too." (*English August*, p. 21) Even the Deputy Commissioner, Srivastav is so caught in the spell of snobbery that his stress mechanically falls on the prominent syllables 'IAS' in the sentences he utters.

By evaluating the politics of this snobbish madness with ranks, positions and power Chatterjee has raised finger to the very ontology of human life in colonized society; the crisis of existentialism where one's identity as a human is in peril. The man is seen, as analyzed in the novel by Sen, still in shackles when his name and life are overshadowed by positions in the system. Actually, anatomy and politics of such snobbish attitude and servile mindset in the bureaucratic hierarchy and power position reflect typical shades of Indian caste hierarchy. Besides, the imperial Raj has played a great role in giving present day bureaucracy such a form; as the construct of the

politics of bureaucracy owes much to the British contempt and cynicism against Indians during Raj. This cynical and contemptuous attitudes to the natives during colonial times gradually infused the sense of deep snobbery and servitude in typical Indian bureaucracy, "From the Indian point of view such British bureaucracy was not only mechanical but also insensitive. It had thoroughly crushed the Indian self respect and left no trace of national feeling in the minds of the Indians. The attitudes of the British Civil Servants was contemptuous. (Modern India: A Textbook for Class XII: NCERT, 2003: p. 67)

But Chatterjee does not turn contemptuous or cynical in penning down this bureaucratic reality; he rather mockingly and thus objectively describes the intricacies of Indian bureaucratic system. Chatterjee gives clear idea of the politics of administrative system in India:

District administrative in India is largely the British creation, like the railways and the English language, another complex and unwieldy bequest of the Raj. But Indianization (of a method of administration, or of a language) is integral to the Indian story. Before 1947 the collector was almost inaccessible to the people; now he keeps open house, primarily because he does a different, more difficult job. (*English August*, p. 10)

English, August, therefore, is an intensive attempt in exploring the prevalence, sway and colonizing characteristics of Indian bureaucracy; its impact causing the sense of servility, hypocrisy, cynicism etc. in individuals and society. But such phenomena of the continuing influence of British Raj and resultant snobbery for the Western world and cynicism for the rest are illustrated in the form of irrational anglophilia and sense of Raj hangover in *The God of Small Things*. Critical analysis of the novel helps understand Arundhati Roy's versatility of thematic range along with a unique style of writing. This novel, critically speaking, can suitably be placed in the category of literature which is characteristically termed as neo-colonial inclining towards no specific set of values. Nor the satire on snobbish attitudes and colonized mindset should be taken as advocacy for nativeism as Roy does not sound

yearning for reconstruct of the postcolonial Indian society. However, she is found engaged fiercely and analytically with the reality of postcolonial India and with exploring the factors responsible for colonial hangover in this country.

Strong sense of snobbery for the West and cynicism for the natives finds echo in the projection of phenomena of Anglophilia which dominates the narrative of the novel even during post-independence times when British are no longer in India. Such snobbish imitation for Western ways has the great influence on individuals such as Pappachi, the 'Imperial Entomologist', is the prototype anglophilic having special passion and apprehension for his anglicized status in society, "Ammu said that Pappachi was an incurable British CCP, which was short for chhi-chhi-paoch and in Hindi meant shit-wiper. Chacko said that the correct word for people like Pappachi was *Anglophile*. He made Rahel and Estha took up *Anglophile* in *Reader's Digest Great Encyclopaedic Dictionary*." (*The God of Small Things*, 2002: pp. 51-52) His leanings for the higher West in the form of his snobbish attitude is the grotesque illustration of continuing colonized mindset and Raj hangover in postcolonial India. In fact, this anglophilic snobbery is a legacy in the society as a whole represented by the snobs like Pappachi for whom "British is better" and, logically, people like him want to imitate British ways. Roy gives rather humorous but ironical description of Pappachi's hollowness and illusion:

He bought the sky-blue Plymouth from an old Englishman in Munnar. He became the familiar sight in Ayemenem, coasting importantly down the narrow road in his wide car, looking outwardly elegant but sweating freely inside his woolen suit. He wouldn't allow Mammachi or anyone else in the family to use it, or even to sit in it. The Plymouth was Pappachi's revenge. (TGOST, p. 48)

Such colonized attitude and servile mindset is fore-grounded in the fact of racial and cultural hegemony of white complexion; the perception governing the people like Pappachi with the sense of collective identity as they want to claim some

coveted place and receive recognition among the ruler, the superior i.e. British or American. This sense of illusory belongingness to the West and the rejection of what he belongs to keeps Pappachi in dualities; in heteroglotia or inbetweenness where he loses all his true selfhood. Representing the first generation of the Ayemenem family, he does not question his snobbery for the superior west; yet Chacko, his son in second generation, is aware of this predicament. Yet, he finds himself unable to reject this Anglophilic snobbery owing to India's economic and cultural dependency on the West, now represented by America.

The sense of snobbery touches the culmination when Baba, Ammu's self-chosen husband, goes to the extent of offering his wife to his white skinned employer. This alcoholic man takes the Western superior culture as liquor to take control of his nerves and keep him in the stupor of anglophilic snobbery. The projection of Raj hangover and resultant Anglophilia in the novel brings forth the fact of continuous colonial reality and the influence of this reality in shaping the perceptions, attitudes and thus mindset. Extraordinary treatment to Sophie Mol and her mother Margret Kochamma reveals the sorry state of affair of Indian mentality of high snobbery to the West. Rahel and Estha are cut to lower size when compared to 'angelic' Sophie Mol. In order to be up to the level of civilization of their half-British cousin, the twins are forced to practise their English pronunciation, and they are forbidden to speak Malayalam, their mother tongue, even among themselves:

Rahel and Estha had never met Sophie Mol. They'd heard a lot about her though, that last week. From Baby Kochamma, from Kochu Maria, and even Mammachi. None of them had met her either, but they all behaved as though they already knew her. It had been the *What Will Sophie Mol Think Week*. That whole week Baby Kochamma eavesdropped relentlessly on the twins' private conversations, and whenever she caught them speaking in Malayalam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source. From their pocket money. She

made them write lines– “impositions” she called them—I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English. A hundred times each. When they were done, she scored them out with her red pen to make sure that old lines were not recycled for new punishments. She had made them practice an English car song for the way back. They had to form the words properly, and be particularly careful about their pronunciation. Prer NUN sea ayshun. (*TGOST*, p. 36)

In a world of snobbery for the other world and cynicism for own society the sense of colonialism is perpetual and thus there is hardly any hope for true freedom. The children are conditioned to develop hatred for their own language in comparison to that language which is spoken by the superiors like Sophie Moll and her mother Margret Kochamma. Associated superiority to English is ubiquitous in this country of colonial reality, ‘See how nicely he speaks English’ (*TGOST*, p. 325). Rahel and Estha have to witness the excitement provoked by the arrival of Sophie Mol, a reaction that spells out for the unfortunate twins their lower racial and inferior cultural status. Such discriminations signify the politics of racist schemes, cultural and economic hegemony and firm grip of Raj hangover, “Kochu Maria took both Sophie’s hands in hers, palms upward, raised them to her face and inhaled deeply...,tender London hands clasped in calloused Ayemenem ones.” (*TGOST*, p. 179)

For Chacko having a British ‘ex-wife’ like Margret Kochamma, an emancipated woman who has ‘..youthful assertion of independence’ and a fair skinned doll like daughter ‘angelic’ Sophie Mol is a matter of pride and the snobbish family relishes this fact as a social prestige. The satirical description of the characters like Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Chacko and somehow even Ammu being mad and frantic to receive superior British guests is significant to frame one of the dimensions of continuing Raj hangover in the novel. Margaret and Sophie Moll are expected to embody a superior civilization, and thus receiving them snobbishly is regarded as a motive of pride and joy for the family.

Baby Kochamma, an aged hypocritical spinster, is a grotesque character epitomizing snobbery and servility to contingent authority and cynicism to inferior. Even Comrade Pillai, who evades poor Valutha in the hour of crisis, represents the ugly face of so-called Indian Marxism; ironically such cynical hypocrites are governed by the snobbish sense of believing in social hierarchy and power. For such people the sun always rises rather in the West. This phenomenon of making of such perception and behaviour in Indian social reality carries the seeds of impending colonialism. Since Valutha belongs to the lower caste he has to be subject to constant suffering and fatefully meets catastrophe owing to cynical and rancorous treatment at the hands of snobbish people. This is the truth in feudalistic and colonial social reality of India that the underdogs or have-nots mostly have to succumb to the social code and cultural powers. The idea of cultural hegemony implying big dichotomy between rich and the poor and thus influencing the individual perception and attitude has been dexterously propounded by Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

The settler's town is a well-fed town, an easy-going town; its belly is always full of good things, the settler's town is a town of white people, of foreigners. The town belonging to the colonized people or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, people by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is world without spaciousness; men live on top of each other. The native town is hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light.... The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dream of possession—all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife, if possible(*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961: p. 30).

Such social disparity and hierarchy makes people in general have desire and tendency to become like rich; to imitate their ways and thus they gradually develop snobbish attitude towards them yet unsympathetic to the underdogs. The story

of Ram Mohammad Thomas in *Q & A* is the true representation of such social reality. Vikas Swarup in this novel dexterously lays bare motley facets of multi-pronged Indian society which is primarily characterized by certain prejudices, stereotypes, beliefs and disbeliefs owing to social segregations based on caste and feudal system. The social reality in India always relates to the fact of discrimination, feudal and colonial mindset and thus resultant snobbery for the rich and cynical rejection of the underprivileged. When Thomas is arrested and cynically treated by the police he, representing the common Indian mindset, carves out the hierarchy of professionals in conformity to their status which presents the clear picture of Indian social hierarchy:

We were always told never to pick a quarrel with the police.
Street boys like me come at the bottom of the food chain.
Above us are the petty criminals, like pick-pockets. Above
them come the extortionists and loan sharks. Above them
come the dons. Above them come the business houses. But
above all them all are the police. (*Q & A*, 2005: p. 25)

Though it is a food chain pertinently made by the protagonist on the basis of his experience yet it reveals the perception of the common man signifying the power politics in the country. The police here, has been placed highest owing to the fact of the exercise of powers and later Ram has to reshuffle the hierarchy giving way to lawyer his ignorance of the powers of politicians notwithstanding. What Swarup explores here is the fact that possession of power determines one's status which ensures his acceptance in the society. Thomas is never accepted by the snobs and cynics owing to the fact of his humble origins as the people are in general cynical against the underdogs.

In artistic endeavour to lay bare the governing sense of colonized outlook, snobbery for the West, elitism and cynical jettisoning the underdogs Swarup has devised the narrative to revolve around the reality game show W3B. It is against the backdrop of this show that Swarup skillfully unravels the composite facets of Indian social scene wherein hell-bound poor labour class is supposed to be destined within the

seeming world of destitute. The success of a poor underdog is the hard pie for the cynical and snobbish society of rigid colonized mindset to swallow down. This fact of an underdog's ability to find answer of odd questions and winning a billion causes sense of disbelief and doubt of some cheating. In prologue the first person narrative begins with the narrator or the protagonist being captive in police torture cell for the alleged cheating in the quiz W3B. The authorities, blaming him rest their conviction on the fact that this game show is so tactically devised that even high level scholars cannot possibly go beyond answering half of its total questions; how someone devoid of any formal education and who has not basic idea of even simple general knowledge can pick right options.

Nobody including producer of the show, the police, American owner of the channel Neil Johnson believes him for having won a billion rupees. Swarup brings forth the prevailing colonizing attitude of the society believing in something economically and culturally higher only and cynically rejecting the rest, "I want your help to prove that Thomas cheated on the show. That he couldn't have known the answers to all twelve questions without an accomplice. Just think. He's never been to school. He's never even read a newspaper. There is no way he could have won the top prize." (*Q & A*, p.18) Even Smita alias Guriya, his childhood sister and his savior lawyer, joins the society in cynicism and utter disbelief of a poor chap's abilities and luck:

The looks of utter disbelief on Smita's face says it all. I can take it no longer. I erupt in sadness and anger. I know what you are thinking. Like Godbole, you wonder what I was doing on that quiz show. Like Godbole, you believe I am only good for serving chicken fry and whisky in a restaurant. That I am meant to live like a dog, and die like an insect. (*Q & A*, p. 29)

Such vehement commentary on the misery of the poor, the reality of postcolonial India, and the ongoing class struggle strike the chords of this novel having Marxist leaning; the

writer being keen to establish the importance of have-nots in capitalist India today. Karl Marx's concern is not limited to the labours working in fields and factory but the idea of economic freedom for those proletarians like Thomas and many who can earn livelihood till they find job unlike those rich who have abundance of riches to live comfortably for generations. Marshal Berman sums up Marxist views:

[T] he modern working class, developed—a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market. (*The Communist Manifesto*, 2011: p. 10)

Like any Marxist writer Swarup also seems to be governed with the idea of economic freedom of the proletarians, eradication of disparity on economic basis and satirizing the colonial mindset typical of snobbery, hypocrisy, servility and cynicism of the Indian bourgeoisie. Being orphan child the protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas has never got chance to have formal education at all yet his training and constant learning through odd experiences in the school of life has bestowed him with special ingenuity. The novelist dexterously deploys the chance factor in one's life by associating certain vicissitudes of the protagonist with the questions which are asked in the game show.

Coincidences and chance factors do work in life not always enhancing the woes of the poor but here they have work wonderfully. Being in the band of typical postmodern Indian writers Swarup in this novel diverts from the conventionally and colonially laid concept of poor protagonists' defeat at the hands of powerful social forces. The earlier Indian colonial literature used to project the protagonists hailing from the humble origin; such literature represented the colonized sense of the third world never going for any transgression. But the writers of postcolonial era have

developed the ability to remain unaffected by any Western cultural hegemony in style as well as in selection of theme. The novelist, here, has devised the ways of success and triumph for the marginal, "Mr. Ram Mohammad Thomas, you have made history by winning the world's biggest jackpot." (*Q & A*, p. 355) Swarup in this novel endeavours to enforce the message of the transition of time in thought and action through the success of a poor chap Thomas.

Like in English August and *The God of Small Things* the people in this novel too are projected as conditioned to be snobbish and servile to seemingly superior and higher. The concept of colonized mindset in the novel not only refers to Indian social context only but the special likings and respect for the West in the form of typical snobbery also. The sense and attitude of servitude of common Indians to the white skinned sahibs is a counter shade of the colonial reality in India, "Godbole presents me to the white man like a ring-master introducing his pet lion. 'This is Ram Mohammad Thomas, Sir,'" (*Q & A*, p. 15).

But the chapter 'How to Speak Australian' carries the heights of typical attitude of snobbery and servitude of the third world to the West. Colonel Taylor, the Australian embassy officer in New Delhi, is highly cynical against Indians keeping them always at arm's length yet Indians are very snobbish for his highness. They are found slavishly servile, grinning hypocritically to him. Swarup vividly highlights the shades of corruption by depicting the lapses in demographic; the petty clerk always at service to white people like Taylor who can easily buy them, "Colonel Taylor gives the census man a dirty look.... The census man salutes Colonel Taylor. 'Don't worry, Sir. I won't bother you for the next ten years.' He walks off happily. Mrs. Taylor is also happy. 'These bloody Indians, she smiles. 'Give them a bottle of whisky and they'll do anything.'" (*Q & A*, p. 125) For the sake of a bottle of liquor the petty clerk forgets his duty and leaves out Taylor's servants from the census though it is very clear to sense the intensions of the ambassador to get his servants excluded from Indian census.

Later Colonel Taylor easily emerge triumphant in his espionage business against Indian diplomacy with the help of some Indian snobbish officials who would not hesitate to sell off secret documents to someone superior white skinned Australian spy viz. Taylor. The police inspector would do anything, arrest anybody to obey him in exchange of Black Dog whisky. Swarup also highlights other shades of colonized mindset of the people in the form of slavery to rituals, deep rooted corruption; depicting the lives devoid of any possibility of human rights. Evils of incest, child-abuse, caste system, hollow pride of royal connectivity, hero worship, irony in the lives of Bollywood stars etc. occur very frequently in the pages of the novel.

However, there is a common concept that reflects the common mood in all three novels—is the characteristic of continuing colonial reality in postcolonial Indian culture that has inevitable influence on the mindset of the people. The anatomy and politics of typical Indian Sahebgiri in the *English, August* relate to the fact of the British Raj imperial influence in shaping of it. The strong hierarchy in bureaucracy presents the farcical but pitiful situation of the lower division officers who are always servile and snobbish in their perception and attitude. Continuing sense of Raj hangover in the form of high snobbery and anglophilia in *The God of Small Thing* is one darker shade of postcolonial India among other things.

Preference of English language to vernaculars, special treatment to white skinned people like Margret and Sophie Moll in the novel all speak of continuing rather colonial perpetuity in the country. Heterogeneity of Indian social system characterized with attitude of total rejection of the poor underdogs and snobbish mindset to those economically, socially and culturally superior constitutes the very core of the novel *Q & A*. Like Chatterjee and Roy Swarup also brings forth the idea of typical servility among common Indians for the white skinned foreigners and cynicism for the underdogs like Ram Mohammad Thomas.

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5

Issues of Women in Higher Education

R.V. SHEELA

The aim of this paper is to examine the major issues related to women in Higher Education. I would like to begin with a few illustrations.

1. A conversation between two girls after they get their S.S.L.C. results:

Meera: Hey, I got 93%. I can definitely convince my father to send me to a prestigious college and thereby realize my dream of becoming a lawyer.

Neeraja: I am happy that I got 94%. But my parents will not be able to support my higher education. I have two brothers and my father has told me that their education is more important and he needs to save to support their education.

2. *Rekha:* My marriage is fixed. My parents said the boy has a good job and I will be happy with him and I need not work.

Roopa: Congrats. Even if your would be husband has a good job, I think you should pursue your career because you have such a promising career.

Rekha: How I wish I could, but it's not possible.

3. *Sudha:* Seema, Why do you look upset? You need to be happy now. You will see your bundle of joy in a month's time.

Seema: Yes Sudha. I am happy for that. But I am very sad that I have to resign my job which is very promising

as I have to take care of the child with no other help. I may not be able to work for a few more years.

4. *Assistant Manager of a Company*: I would choose the young man for the job rather than the young woman though she is more meritorious because she is engaged and may get married. And you know children follow and the company will have to sanction maternity leave and pay her salary for no work. Instead get the man on board, no hassles!!

The above illustrations highlight the plight of women in not only higher education but thereafter in our country. The Society (of course it is we) considers marriage the 'be all and end all of life' for a woman and not for a man. I would deliberately skip the reference to sexual exploitation of women and commodification of women as they have been publicly debated and discussed on the different platforms of the media in the context of the cases of Nirbaya and the rape of the medical student. Though women are granted their rights to education, property as well as social and political rights as citizens of the democratic country, the way things work in society is very different from what it should be. These issues gain wider significance in the larger contexts.

I would like to draw the attention of my audience to the fact that most of us are aware of. Come May, June every year, we get the results SSLC and PUC examinations conducted by the State. The results invariably show that girls pass percentage and merit order, are higher than those of boys. But how many of these meritorious girls join the work force of the country after their graduation in whatever field (be it general degree, technical courses and even medicine) is a critical question. Though Globalization and India's emergence as a country of Techies has made some difference, women work force is grossly unsatisfactory. The flip side of the issue being that women work force goes unrecognized in various sectors of the society including families. The UNESCO statistics indicate that less than 7% of women in India have access to

Higher Education, while in developed countries it is more than 50%.

The various schemes introduced by the State Government like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan focus the primary education of the masses and higher education for many is still a far dream.

In the light of the situation discussed above, we look at the policies of the State. The National Policy for Empowerment of Women, 2001, promises equal access to education for girls and women. Special measures will be taken to eliminate discrimination, universalize education, eradicate illiteracy, create a gender-sensitive educational system. Reducing the gender-gap in secondary and higher education was supposed to be the focus area. Gender sensitive curricula would be developed at all levels of educational system in order to address sex stereotyping as one of the causes of gender discrimination. Education needs to be seen as a necessity for all and not just a luxury for those who can afford it.

In the past few years, the enrolment of women in higher education is significant but not sufficient. A closer analysis of higher education statistics reveals the different nature of the problem in different socio-cultural and economic contexts. From the economic standpoint, higher education qualifications effectively raise both employment prospects and social expectations of the graduates. It is a known fact that skilled persons are preferred over the unskilled ones. Thus it is high time to promote more enlightened attitudes towards highly educated women whose qualifications entitle them to career fulfillment and who as principal or equal salary earners live up to their personal and professional responsibilities.

National Accreditation and Assessment Committee in its study has revealed that there is 'Ghettoisation' of women in general higher education (Arts and Commerce) and mostly men through professional courses (Engineering, Architecture, Medicine, Science and Technology) though with ICT revolution and Globalization the scenario shows some improvement in

the number of women seeking education in Science and Technology and also pursuing careers in the same.

UNESCO/Common Wealth Secretariat study “Women in Higher Education Management” identified the principal barriers that limited access to education, especially higher education; discriminatory appointment and promotion practices; the stresses of dual family and professional roles; family attitudes; career interruptions; cultural stereotyping; alienation from the male culture and continued resistance to women in management positions; propagation of the glass ceiling syndrome which privileges covert criteria over advancement.

Participation of Women in Decision Making

It is a common criticism and a fact too that very few women possess the decision making attribute. Higher education facilitates empowerment which is essential for the participation of women in all aspects of the development process. As charity begins at home, women’s participation in decision making needs to begin at home and expand to the society. Further, higher education provides the expertise usually required for the key posts which shape policy in all fields. Therefore it becomes particularly important for women. Three factors become vital in dealing with these issues.

1. Societal attitudes to women which discourage their participation in decision-making
2. Their lower enrolments in higher education till date (although patterns here are rapidly changing)
3. The absence of a gender dimension in the higher education curriculum

Women find it easier to accede to leadership posts in higher education or in society in general when these issues are addressed

The Gender Dimension of the University curriculum is justified on several counts,

- a. Recognition and enhancement of the university's role in society
- b. The impact of Internationalization and Globalization
- c. The creation and exchange of knowledge
- d. The need to tackle social problems at the grass root level
- e. Mainstreaming of gender issues.

The University Curriculum must offer

- a. Stimulating role models for women studies
- b. Encourage and build their confidence
- c. Present male-dominated careers in a light more attractive to women
- d. Gender sensitivity as an important ingredient of higher education

Cultural Diversity and Cultural barriers impact women's life and role in the society. It is said to be the most problematic area in relation to women as leaders and managers both in higher education and in society at large. Many factors come into play here

1. The historical roles of women in certain society
2. The conflicts arising out of their advanced education
3. Exposure to different cultures and their impact
4. Their own continued commitment to the values of their own race, religion and nation

Despite the profound cultural diversity women need to stand up for themselves and seek greater participation in decision-making and power sharing be it family or the society. Ensuring women's legal rights, strategies and techniques to build leadership, Institutional commitment to gender equity, Acceptance of feminine leadership, would definitely become the social responsibility of higher education. 'Equal opportunities offered in circumstances of inequalities will only perpetuate the existing patterns of inequality'. Affirmative action is required in the present scenario.

The Philosopher President Dr. RadhaKrishnan (1948) said, 'There can be educated people without educated women. If general education has to be limited to men or women, that opportunity should be given to women, as from them it would most surely be passed on to the next generation'.

The world today is moving towards greater democracy and market oriented politics in an effort to improve human development. 'Knowledge-oriented' and 'gender inclusive culture' is paving the way for human development. The onus of development obviously falls on the State

1. Provide women with solid foundation in Mathematics and Science
2. Discourage the system of tracking students into arts and commerce and science streams at the second level of education
3. Provide childcare facilities at the institutions of higher learning and work places
4. Create special funding for women's higher education
5. Provide means through which the issues of gender inequality can be addressed formally and informally, at all levels of the society.

The President of India Shri. Pranab Mukherjee, while addressing the Parliament last year, said "Education is the true alchemy that can bring India its next golden age. Our motto is unambiguous, all for knowledge and knowledge for all." I would like to conclude my paper with that hope and optimism for the future of women in India.

6

Psychoanalytical Reading of Vikram Chandra's *Dharma*: A Metaphorical Approach to the Narrative Technique

SUTAPA DAS

The aim of this paper is to chart out how narrative technique works as a 'conduit' metaphor to bring out the latent discordance of the psychic realm. In order to follow the scheme, I shall have to rest my discussion primarily upon the works of the theorists like Genette, Mikie Bal, Susan Snaider Lanser, Marvin Minsky, M.Perry, Lecan for their contribution in their respective fields of narrative, artificial intelligence and the psychological approach to literary criticism. Theoretical progression of my scheme will entirely be grounded upon one of the short stories of Vikram Chandra, 'Dharma', from his collection of short stories "Love and Longing in Bombay."

Structurally speaking, 'the arrangement of events' is the 'story' that the 'Narrator' 're-presents' to the 'Narratees' or the 'readers' in the case of a literary text. So, the basic component of the narrative is 'event'. The 'Narrator' 're-presents' the 'story'¹ to the readers, who, with their competent and comprehensive analytical skills, try to chart out the 'techniques' employed there and to weigh the aesthetic outcome of them² according to the set-up socio-cultural norms, and thus, rather unknowingly, steps in the boundary line of literary appreciation or more precisely to put in, the 'sphere of Narratology'. The first crucial query that poses a challenge before a competent reader is, to figure out whether the 'Narrator'³ him/her self does 'perceive' the events, or (s)he just re-presents them as 'perceived' by someone else, may be 'one'

or 'some' of those text-bound entities; if only the Narrator's 'perception' is not imbued with none but the author's 'perceptions'. It is worth microscopic dissection; for one's perceptual 'biases' have profound influence in the formation as well as his or her understanding of self-identity. 'Perception' of any event, is thus governed by a complex network of social, psychological and cultural constraints and when it comes to 're-present' that 'perception' in words, linguistic and semantic norms also contribute a lot. According to Susan Sniader Lanser, "verbal interaction necessarily reflects two planes of human activity, the linguistic and 'perceptual' – both governed a 'point of view'.⁵" Further she draws our attention to the "potential (if not inevitable) gaps between what is, what is perceived and what is said", an approach that stimulates us to tap every perceptible "set of relation between 'reality' and 'words.'"

As far as the communicative mode is fictional, these 'sets of relation' can yet be re-organized by the aesthetic conventions, for the author experiments with imaginary 'perceivers' and imaginary 'narrators', a practice that produces multiplicity of such set working as the sub-sets of higher frames. Hence "classification is a common practice of recent literary theory"⁶, to chart out the configuration of these sets is possible with the help of the narratological tools provided by the theorists. Menakhem Perry (1979:43) advocated for the necessity of Frame Theory in the process of reading and interpreting a narrative text, a theory which, in due course of time, is more explicitly worked out and developed with the help of artificial intelligence research since about 1975. Marvin Minsky supplied us the working definition of it.

Here is the essence of frame theory: When one encounters a new situation (or makes a substantial change in one's view of a problem), one selects from memory a structure called a frame. This is a remembered framework to be adapted to fit reality by changing details as necessary. We can think of a frame as a network of nodes and relations. The 'top-levels' of a frame are fixed, and represent things that are always true

about the supposed situation. The lower levels have many terminals – “slots” that must be filled by specific instances or data. Each terminal can specify conditions its assignments must meet.... A frame’s terminals are normally already filled with “default” assignments.⁷

Accordingly, if certain textual data does not fit in any given frame—framing or shifting to an altogether different module is also possible for a competent reader. The interdependency between textual data and frame recently has been termed the “Interactive Model” of the reading process. And the interaction between these two is vividly stated by Manfred Jahn.⁸ in order to foreground the “Proteus Principle.”

“The frame tells us what the data is and the data tells us whether we can continue using the frame. Only if the data is reasonably determinate, say if we encounter a first-person pronoun outside direct speech or thought, do we know that this must be a narratorial self-reference; and if our current frame does not support an overt narrator then it is inadequate and must be replaced by, or give way to, a different one.”

Keeping this in view, in this chapter, I shall focus chiefly on the aspects of focalization and its relationship with narration, the discussion that necessarily circumspects different narrative situations as well as levels of narration which is marked out by shift or infraction in reflectorial perception. While trying this; I have treated and tested the textual data in respect of the frame of reference that may be regarded theoretically as “defaults” or “ideal types” by Franz K. Stanzel (1984).

Once the status of narrator is determined with acceptance of the fact that it may require constant switching from one frame to another; ‘Focalization’, “the ways of perceiving the events of a story” immediately draws our attention, in case of ‘Dharma’, more so, because these potential gaps between narrators and focalizers are to be considered here as the ‘Conduit’ Metaphor. The idea of ‘conduit metaphor’ may yet be extended to the transmission model. The ‘mind’ in conduit metaphor is regarded as the ‘container’, ‘ideas’ are entities, and communication involves ‘taking ideas out of the mind, putting

them into words and sending them to other people'.⁹ Author in 'Dharma', transfers his ideas to his readers with the help of the designed criss-crossing narration and focalization, the technique serving as 'conduit' here, the 'idea' being the 'obsessive-compulsive nature of the protagonist's subconscious mind.

According to Hindu philosophy, Dharma, Kama and Artha are the 'purusharthas' or the goals of life, the remaining one being "moksha" – the Nirvana. There is no precise western equivalent to translate the term "dharma"—it is an attitude, a disposition. Hindu philosophical schools classify dharma under two heads – i.e. 'samanya' or the general or the universal dharma and 'visesha' or the specific or the personal dharma. And if we concentrate on the interpretations of *Gita*, Vishnu *Samhita* or *Padmapurana*, it becomes evident that forgiveness, self restraint, truthfulness, absence of anger etc. Come under general dharma. Again, 'dharma' assumes various kinds out of which 'swadharma' deserves supreme importance. Sri Krishna explains to Arjuna in *Gita's* second chapter that one's duty is of paramount importance—for it is the means to fulfill the purpose of life. Dharma refers to where one is in life at a particular moment, the duties that belong to that position, and above all what is dharma in one set of circumstances becomes 'adharma' in another set. Thus it is not a fixed concept, like a flux it changes as we come across different changes in our life.

The discussion is not out of place or irrelevant at all if we concentrate on the text of 'Dharma'. Here the chief protagonist Major General Jago Antia is introduced as a 'copybook' example of the person as has been described by Lord Shri Krishna in *Gita's* second chapter (lines 31-32), where it is clearly stated that for 'Kshatriya' (one who has been attributed the task of ruling and protecting the country by the 'chaturashrama' system) nothing is more desirable than to fight against enemies and kill them, for it is the 'dharma' that is to be followed by this class of people. Certain traits are considered as essential for them as courage, righteousness etc. along with those traits mentioned under the head of 'samanya'

dharma. But the narrative technique employed here, succeeds in demythicizing the conventionally set up concept of 'dharma' and pleads for the presence of apparently confronting traits in one's disposition as something natural that humanizes the character.

Each of the five stories in 'Love and Longing in Bombay' is initiated by Ranjit's accounts where he expresses his personal experiences, hence they are to be considered as 'First-Person Narratives'. His status as an FPN (First-Person Narrator) should be sketched out first for the better understanding of the multi-layered structure that his narration gradually unfolds. According to Genette, the status of 'I-Narrator' is determined by the varying degree of perceptual limitation in between 'Narrating-I' and 'Experiencing-I'. In his seminal essay on focalization and First-Person Narrator, William F. Edmiston stresses on the 'diegetic locus of the perspective rather than on Genette's criterion of psychological penetration'¹⁰ to 'designate the vantage point of narrating self and that of the experiencing self'. According to him, it is, (a) the restriction over the revelation of subsequent knowledge (b) the narrating self's spatially limited focus on and (c) psychologically too, limited access exclusively over the thoughts and feelings of the experiencing-self that labels the focalization as an internal one. On the contrary, in external focalization, the narrator recounts the story as an observer from his present spatio-temporal standpoint.¹¹ Technically this focal stance is midway between a zero focalization where the focalizer knows more than he is expected to, a standpoint resembling to omniscient Narrator and the restricted perceptual access of an internal focalizer. Temporally and spatially he is 'external' to the story world he represents. In the light of above discussion Ranjit's status as a narrator and focalizer is to be determined, and if any 'refraction' regarding this is noticed in the text, it is to be examined within the existing frame mentioned above and to be replaced accordingly if necessary.

The authorial voice in his 'I-Narrative' introduces one Mr. Subramaniam in 'Dharma', depicting his physical features and the sharp contrast between them (i.e. the I-Narrator and Mr.Subramaniam's) regarding their age, social status and of course, profession. The 'I-Narrator' 'confesses' that at the first sight, he does not consider it necessary to pay attention to him (Subramaniam) or to take him as a person of good account; instead what he does is, "...weighed him and dropped him." He also clearly states his inability to perceive Subramaniam's importance and respect he draws from the crowd used to be present there:

"I should have noticed that the waiters brought his drinks to him without being asked, and that the others talked around his silence but always with their faces turned towards him..." (p.3)

The 'I-Narrator' in Dharma, after delineating the setting where he first met Subramaniam, represents the particular narrative situation that stimulates the later to narrate his story. The 'I-Narrator' whose name is mentioned nowhere in the text and who initiates the matrix narrative: just denies the theory of ghost in a haunted house, and pleads logically for family disputes over property matters that results in generating such gossips. The ongoing argument inspires Subramaniam, who has been listening to it so far without interference, to tell a story.

'He said, "some people meet their ghosts, and some don't. But we are all haunted by them'."

The remark makes the narrator curious and to pay attention to Subramaniam who then represents the embedded story. We are here introduced to one Major General Jago Antia who is famous for his 'ramrod straightness', 'metallic density of his discipline', 'for his stare, for the cold blackness of his anger, for his tactical skill and his ability to read ground, his whole career from the gold medal at Kharakvasla to the combat and medals in Leh and NEFA.'(p.5) But it was his missing leg that was 'the centre of legend and there was something terrible

about it, about the story, and so it was never talked about.' Subramaniam's lucid narration within a very brief text-space, clearly sketches out how the cadets of the academy as well as his colleagues have made a 'larger than life' image of him and also its inevitable impact '... the lapse made them believe in his strength all the more.'(p.6) Now this Jahangir Antia, who '...for thirty years in their stories had been Jago Antia' has almost ritually followed a habit during years, which according to Subramaniam's omniscient narration¹² '... he had been doing for as long as he could remember, long before para-school and long before the drop at Sylhet....'(p.6) This peculiar habit of 'thinking of falling endlessly through the night, slipping through the cold air' before sleeping, taps our senses and at once makes us aware of the obsessive nature of his subconscious mind. According to Freud, 'repressed thought' resulting from the constant conflict between the unconscious parts of psyche, 'id', and 'ego', the rational part of it, may manifest itself or 'emerge' in disguised forms : in dreams, in language, (so called Freudian slips) in creative activity that may produce art, (including literature) and in Neurotic behavior."¹³ So when the narration lets us know that the 'thought of falling endlessly through the night' and 'somewhere it became a dream and he was asleep, still falling' (p.6) it makes us to postulate the behavior as a 'neurotic' one that essentially takes its turn to 'dream' manifestation. Moreover, 'he knew where it (the leap) took him'—it is as if a part of his being, but it is the phantom pain that prevents him from experiencing this apparently comforting 'fall'. The omniscient narrator insinuates some subtle touches that help the reader to perceive the Major's character with much clarity. That the probability of deviating from the duty attributed to him, annoys him, and that he is ashamed of his fellowmen being sympathetic to his fault instead of being disappointed, justifies his '*swadharma*' from strictly professional point of view. But it is the phantom pain that gradually looms large and makes him to recognize "he had become the sort of commander he despised, a man who because of his rank

allowed himself to be careless." It is proved again that he is not deviated from the '*swadharma*' of a soldier when "without hesitation he called the AMC colonel and asked to be relieved of his command for medical reasons." (p.9) The narrator, very impartially and objectively draws our attention to the positive aspects of Jago Antia's character which can be counted among the *swadharma*, and in doing so by means of analepses,¹⁴ he offers subtle hints to that incident of Major's life which is infallibly related to this phantom pain.

"It was not that Jago Antia minded the defeat because he had learnt to accept defeat and casualties and loss, but it was that he had once defeated this flesh, it was he who had swung the kukri...." (p.8)

This technique is yet again traced in the lines that follow, where Subramaniam hints to the events of the life of his protagonist, those ones he (Jago Antia) continually renounces:

"...but the relief from immediate responsibility brought with it a rush of memory, and he found the unbidden recall of images from the past annoying...." (p.9).

Unlike the protagonists of the second-degree narrative of 'Shanti' who came to Bombay to settle down there, Jago Antia, the central figure of this second degree narrative of 'Dharma', reaches his house in Khar, Bombay, only to sell it out for 'he wanted not to think about the house any more.' (p.11)

The narrative technique employed in the embedded story of Dharma to unfold the chain of events that initiates the thought of 'falling' in Major's psyche, is that of double focalization.¹⁵ Subramaniam with the Internal focalizer's omniscience, continues his narration in which Jago Antia's psychic domain has been focalized through a narrated monologue¹⁶. But what immediately draws our attention and puts Subramaniam's status as the internal focalizer in question is that the narrator is not a character in his narrative, hence it is expected that his focalization should be restricted to what can be observed outwardly. Instead, the thoughts and feelings,

even reasoning, ideological traits of the protagonist, Jago Antia has been so minutely recorded that it pleads for the focalization to be an internal one, focused exclusively from the concerned character's point of view. If the text is examined carefully, it could be easily traced that a constant switchback runs through the entire narration – an alternation between the External Focalizer (EF) who is the narrator himself, and the Internal Focalizer who is the character of the fabula (CF) is perceived distinctly.

'... it had begun to rain with nightfall, and now the white illumination of lightning threw the whole room into sharp relief. He was thinking about the academy – about how he had been named Jago, two weeks after his arrival.' (p.12).

Or,

'He stodied himself and gripped it with both hands and shut his eyes for a moment, and there was impossibly the sound of the sea inside him, a sob rising in his throat. He opened his eyes and fought it, pulled against it with his shoulders as he raised the kukri above his head.' (p.20)

This criss-crossing focalization makes it possible for us to trace the protagonist's deviation from his 'dharma' by mapping the potential gaps between these two focalizations. Yet another objective can be traced for introducing such technique here – the progression of event or the narrative movement that is essential for the successful transmission of the message in a narrative text is ascertained by it. The External Focalizer, who is none but the narrator himself, insinuates subtle touches indicating the pivotal events of Jago Antia's life, whereas the Character Focalizer delineates those events lucidly allowing the readers deliberately to interpret them. Actually here three levels of focalization can clearly be distinguished. The Character Focalizer's (CF) accounts are really embedded within the all-encompassing vision of the External Focalizer (EF). These shifts in levels of focalization are indicated by some explicit attributive signs.¹⁷

'....and when he first heard the voice far away he thought it was a trick of the air, but then he heard it again'. (p.12)

'....then he felt the thing pause, and though there was nothing but the air he felt it coming at him....' (p.17)

Yet another level of focalization, rather a complex one it is, can be traced here, if we carefully examine the Character Focalizer's accounts that relate the past events of his life. It is the adult Character Focalizer (CF) "presents the vision of its younger alter ego" (Mieke Bal-Narratology, Introduction To The Theory Of Narrative, 2nd Edition, P. 158). The best example of this third level of focalization that the text provides us is the account of that sudorific experience of Soli's accidental death.

'He saw again Soli backing away, Jahangir reaching up trying to take his hand away from the string, Soli holding his hand far up, and Jahangir helpless against his strength. Then Soli smiling, standing and Jahangir shouting and running forward and jumping, the solid impact of his small body against Soli's legs, Soli's look of surprise, he's falling, reaching wildly...' (p.30)

The narrative technique employed here to distinguish this third level of focalization from that one of second level is retroversion or analepses, a jumping back in past to delineate an event set prior to the 'story – now' and thus classifies itself as an external analepses. And if we search for a justified reason behind Major General Jago Antia's obsessive dream of 'falling', we have to seek it in these external analepses'. The vista thus conforms to third level of focalization whereas the second level of focalization limits itself offering us the mental turbulence experienced by the Character Focalizer with the sudden attack of phantom pain. Here these analepses' are being considered as external for their extent (duration of the entire event) remain external to the extent of the 'first narrative'. According to Gerard Genette, 'first narrative' is that temporal level of narrative into which anachrony¹⁸ is inserted or grafted, thus making the later one temporally subordinate to the first

narrative in which it is embedded. These external analepses' function as fillers of the gaps those were pointed out in the immediate superior level of focalization.¹⁹ Thus the reference of 'the drop at Sylhet' that occurs in the CF's accounts (p.6) possibilizes the third level of focalization where such an analepses is introduced (p.17) to answer the question that has been raised in the previous level, or in other way round, fills the gap that was initiated in the second level. Curiously, this retroversion interrupts the narrative where Jago Antia experiences a 'fall' from the balcony, and it immediately makes him to recall that experience of falling, where he 'relished the leap into reality', (p.17) 'could feel the fight approaching a crisis, the keen whiplash of the carbines and the rattle of the submachine guns and the heavier Pakistani fire....' (p.19), that ultimately led him to experience 'all the sound in the world vanished, leaving a smooth silence, he had no recollection of being thrown, but now he was falling through the air, down, ..'. This retroversion also explains the mystery of the legendary story of his 'missing leg'. 'Below his right knee the flesh was white and twisted away from the bone. Below the ankle was a shapeless bulk of matter,,,' that needed immediate amputation, and 'he raised the kukri above his head, against darkness and mad sorrow, and then he brought the blade down below his knee', (p.20-21) for his subordinates were hesitating to follow his command to cut it off.

Again, it is through a series of retroversion that unfolds the events of his childhood, even the memories of those ones are considered 'poisonous seep' or 'unbidden recall of images from the past annoying' to adult Jago Antia. The exorcist, who was called in by Thapa to drive away the force occupying the house, declares the force to be the spirit of a child and opined that nobody can move a child unless one from it's family, who would have to confront it alone and naked. And his repeating these two words makes us mentally alert at once for the meaning of them might be extended to a deeper level to indicate that the protagonist should meet the spirit shedding off all repressions that he has been exercising since his

childhood days, or to be more precise, after Soli's accidental death. As Jago Antia prepares himself to face the spirit, as he '...walked slowly up the stairs, unbuttoning his shirt' (p.23) it becomes evident to us that both the mysteries, one that of the thought of 'falling' and the other, 'the unknown spirit' is going to be resolved soon, '...because now he knew who it was, who waited for him.' (p.24). Both second and third level of focalization intermingle to demystify the narrative situation, to bring out the truth that was buried for so many years and despite all repressions and restraints, managed to afloat in his subconscious only to come out at the first opportunity, when he is about to face that spirit. The exorcist advised Jago to ask the spirit what it seeks, and so, when he asks ('after kicking off his shoes and unbuckling his belt' (p.24) which stands for his turning point from the dilemma) 'what can you want from me?' he adds on 'I was a child too.' which sounds like an explanation—pending so long.

The sudden shifts in levels of focalization at this part of text is very much in keeping the track with the turbulent state of mind of the CF, Jago Antia. As he reaches the first floor, his entire childhood as if appears before him with subtle nuances. The huge mirror of his mother's dressing table evokes in him the memory of his dead brother Sohrab, who was fondly called 'Soli' by others. 'He shut his eyes.' At once the CF recalls the younger Jehangir's feelings, thoughts and experiences immediately after Soli's death, when the preparation for the funeral was going on and everyone present there, was bidding adieu to their loved one. By the end of the scene, Jehangir's thoughts were frankly conveyed to us through the CF's account '... after a while he thought he was waiting for something to happen, but it never did.' (p.25) Similarly the room which both of them used to share in their childhood days – evokes in him memories of those days, that their fights over trivial matters in which 'Soli always won.' (p.26), that their father's appreciation of Soli's batting style and mother's partial preference to him initiated a mixed sense of insecurity and jealousy in Jehangir's tender mind. He clearly

recalls the arrival of 'their favorite uncle' Burjor Mama, who was 'more precious for his profession of soldiering' but whom Jehangir liked for his 'unceasing whiplike energy...'. The focalization abruptly goes back to the superior level when 'he was at the bottom of a flight of stairs, he knew – he had to go up, because it had gone before him.', and reluctantly though, he has to succumb to its wish, 'All right you bastard, naked, naked.' So when he leaves his artificial leg behind and '..went up, hunching. On hands and knees', we may heuristically assume that he has made up his mind to reveal the 'truth'; the truth that was kept hidden so many years.

The narrative henceforth unfolds the events in a psychoanalytic way, when Jago Antia, the CF, ultimately faces the conflict he was long trying to escape from, and the conflict that emerged again and again in his dreams in a rather displaced way. The shifts in focalization doubly serve here by delineating the excruciating agony of CF's psychic realm to face the conflict at one hand and on the other it serves the purpose of catharsis of that dilemma by 'verbalizing' and 'substituting' it. If we scrutinize the text here with a psychoanalytic approach, it would be evident that it is this process of 'verbalization and substitution' used by the psychotherapists that has been exercised by the EF and CF responding to this cathartic treatment, that makes the conflict to be resolved by enabling Jago Antia to 'saw the boy clearly'(read his 'personified ego') and,

he saw his vicious and ravenous strength, his courage and his devotion, his silence and his pain, his whole misshapen and magnificent life, and Jago Antia said "Jehangir, Jehangir, you're already at home."

Now if we concentrate on the narrative describing Soli's accident, the process of 'verbalization and substitution' would be apparently clear to us. The External Focalizer's narration continues:

'Soli walked in front of him, his hands looping back the string, sending the kite fluttering strongly through the sky,

and Jehangir held the coil and took up the slack. It flew in circles above them. "Let me fly it," Jehangir said. "Let me fly it." But Soli said, "You can't hold this, it'll cut you." After a brief disagreement between brothers, 'Jehangir ran forward, Soli danced away, light and confident, backwards, and then for a moment his face was surprised, and then he was lying below, three feet below on the ground, and the string flew away from him.'

Thus the accident that caused Soli's immature death appeared before the eyes of the world and Jehangir's contribution to the mishap was hidden behind and it initiated afterwards that 'repressed' dream of 'falling'. If the EF's account of the accident is to be taken as the 'verbalization' of the conflict, it is 'substituted' by the description of the same event that followed with a slight 'refraction' from the previous one. EF here takes the stance of an omniscient narrator to describe actually what happened. But what draws our attention is that the process of 'substitution' is initiated by CF Jago Antia.

'...and finally he said, "Look, look," and he pushed himself up, leaned forward, and let himself go, and he fell: he saw again Soli backing away, Jehangir reaching up trying to take his hand away from the string, Soli holding his hand far up, and Jehangir helpless against his strength. Then Soli smiling, standing, and Jehangir shouting and running forward and jumping, the solid impact of his small body against Soli's legs, Soli's look of surprise, he's falling, reaching wildly, Jehangir's hand under the bottom of Soli's shorts, he holds on and tries, holds and pulls, but then he feels the weight taking him over, and he won't let go, but he hasn't the strength, he's falling with Soli,...'.

Thus the narration 'retrieves' the 'repression' buried on the text as well as in the 'unconscious' domain of Jago Antia's psyche by filling the 'possible' gaps in the text. Once the 'conflict' is resolved, the CF 'perceives' his 'ego' personified; for he is in a transient situation, when his 'unconscious' psyche first 'mirrors' his 'self' as an 'other'. This 'reframing' of the narrative from Freudian 'neurosis' to Lacanian 'mirroring' initiates a 're-reading' of the text bringing in fore the formation, or to be

more precise, 'misrecognition' of 'self'. The narrative unfolds itself thus:

'As Jago Antia watched, the boy turned slowly, and in the weak light he saw that the boy was wearing a uniform of olive green..' (p.30) and 'as he (the boy) came closer, and he saw the small letters above the pocket, J.ANTIA..'

The text indicates if it is the 'uniform' that identifies 'the boy' as Jago Antia, then this is to be counted that the 'uniform' is a 'present' from his parents, in other words, from them who first evokes the sense of difference between 'self and other' in a child. In Lacanian theory of a child's development, the 'identification' of 'self' is always possible in terms of 'others'. So, as soon as Jago Antia visualizes his 'image' (and by 'imaginary' Lacan indicates to a psychic phase where the child projects its ideas of 'self' onto the 'mirror' image it sees) and '(mis)identifies' it with 'self', the sense of 'Otherness' in him reassures, 'Jehangir, Jehangir, you are already at home.' On being asked by Thapa, he does not hesitate to state, 'Someone I didn't know before' and that 'he was lost.' Thus the Psychoanalytic stance towards the narrative technique initiates 're-thinking' and finally makes us to 're-frame' the narrative of 'Dharma' as an inward exploration of 'self as Other' instead of a mere 'Ghost story' as taken collectively.

Notes & References

1. According to Mieke Bal, 'story' is a 'fabula' presented in a certain manner.
2. "Theoretically any persona who utters the discourse on his or her own behalf may be called a narrator." (Susan Sniader Lanser, p.137) and this persona is introduced by the extrafictional voice
- 3.
4. Susan Sniader Lanser: *The Narrative Act: Point of View In Prose Fiction*., New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1981, p-4 introduction
5. S.S.Lanser, p-4
6. A Framework for Representing Knowledge" (1979[1975]) (p.1-2)

7. Frames, Preferences, and the Reading of Third-Person Narratives: Towards a Cognitive Narratology" (Poetics Today: 18.4: pp-442)
8. Lakoff—1987:450.
9. William Edmiston: 'Focalization and The First-Person Narrator: A Revision of The Theory', Poetics Today: 10(4) pp 738-739
10. The narrator's presence can be signaled not only by discursive elements but also by lexical items that the hero would not have used, and by grammatical elements that establish a present-past polarity."(Edmiston pp.739)
11. Omniscient narration: 'Conventionally, the Third Person Narrator has the authority to be omniscient which means s/he may have access to every character's mind. Such a narrator does not need to account for any information and is permitted to have the foreknowledge of the story's outcome.' Susan Sniader Lanser: The Narrative Act: Point Of View In Prose Fiction, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1981, p.161.
12. Psychoanalytic Criticism and Jane Eyre: Ross C.Murfin, p-513
13. Analepses: An anachrony can reach into the past or the future, either more or less far from the 'present' moment, i.e. from the moment in the story when the narrative was interrupted to make room for the anachrony, and the first category is termed as 'analepses' by Genette.: Narrative Discourse: p.48
14. Double focalization: 'When the text brings a level of focalization into existence, one voice is narrating while another consciousness is responsible for the perceptions, thoughts, feelings or orientation to the scene that the narrator, in turn, relays. This technique is known as dual perspective or style indirect libre. (Susan Sniader Lanser, The Narrative Act: Point Of View In Prose Fiction, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1981p.142
15. Narrated Monologue: 'If the narration includes an indirect quotation of the character's own thoughts or verbalization of feeling, then it is narrated monologue.' Terence Hawkes : Telling Stories
16. Explicit attributive signs: According to Mieke Bal, when the focalization is transferred from the first to the second level, sometimes it is possible to trace some 'marker's those indicate this shift. These markers are called attributive signs. All verbs that communicate perception like 'see', 'hear' etc. can function as explicit attributive signs for they indicate that the Internal Focalizer is now going to give its own accounts. Mieke Bal: Narratology: Introduction to The Theory Of Narrative, Toronto, University Of Toronto Press, 1985,p. 158-159.

17. Anachrony: The general term to designate all forms of discordance between the two temporal orders of story and narrative. Gerard Genette: *Narrative Discourse: An Essay In Method*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1980, p.40
18. According to Genette, '...their only function is to fill out the first narrative by enlightening the reader on one or another "antecedent."' (Narrative Discourse: An Essay In Method, p. 50)

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**Replication of Culture and Identity in
Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and
Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat***

S.G. PURI

The focus of this paper is to look into the various aspects of life in which a person wants to leave a place where he/she had spent unforgettable moments of his/her life. The present paper underscores the phases of life in which the character decides to accept new challenges in life and he/she wishes to move to that place but still feels suffocated/overwhelmed sometimes and behaves like an alien person for the cause of their longings that are lying with the home land. I have chosen two books to prove my arguments here and that is Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*.

There is a similarity between both of the books on the level of the protagonists' dissatisfaction towards their own land. Both of the protagonists want to send their children to America, a multicultural space, where no 'ism' exists in itself. We do receive and accept a culture of cosmopolitan bent of mind. Here Zareen sends her daughter, Feroza to the USA for the development of her mental abilities. Her mother observes that her daughter is disciplined with the custom of fundamentalists. They are very strict about their culture and want to impose their fundamental views on the people of other faiths and this is the cause of conflict, especially in the case of Parsees. They are disciplined with their own cultural domain where there is no restriction in one's life. Once upon a time Zareen visits the school of her daughter, Feroza, in a sleeveless dress and feels herself ill-respected to on the turn of dress-

code. She took it very seriously when her daughter reminds her mother that she should not come to school in this dress. It seems awkward to her. Zareen is overwhelmed by the words of a small kid and decides that she would send her daughter abroad to broaden her mind. She thinks that the U.S.A. is a right place for her daughter to be exposed to a more broad-minded culture as there is no 'ISMS' 'SCAR' at this place.

She convinces her husband and daughter as well to send Feroza to the new land for broadening the mind from the sandwiched culture. She says:

"In the car she said: 'Mummy, please don't come to school dressed like that.' She objected to my sleeveless sari-blouse! Really, this narrow-minded attitude touted by General Zia is infecting her, too. I told her: 'Look, we're Parsee, everybody knows we dress differently.'...Girls mustn't play hockey or sing or dance! If everything corrupts their pious little minds so easily, then the mullahs should wear burqas and stay within the four walls of their houses!" (10)

Zareen gives her argument in the reaction of dissatisfaction with the Pakistani culture and reminds her family that they are Parsees and do not have any restriction as such of the kind that were being imposed upon by fundamentalists in Pakistan. 'Parsee' is the second name of cultural togetherness and brotherhood. Zareen might have been right but the milieu with which she is surrounded also plays a vital role to decide one's own freedom. Pakistan is a country of fundamentalists and they have constructed their own specific codes of conduct for all those people who wish to live in the country of Pakistan. Every person has to follow the words and disciplines made by the fundamentalists. country person are bound to do so.

Similarly Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* also articulates similar views on migration from China to the USA. Suyuan is a mother from Chinese background who decides to move with her daughter to the USA and train her in the language and language of native America. Her daughter becomes trained in the American culture but now she has no intention of returning

back to her homeland. She feels herself advanced from the Chinese people as well as her own mother's cultural background. Here, the mother feels remained scared in between the ghettos of the two cultures and reminds her daughter that she is now changed to the semi-Chinese and semi-American identity so that she should not forget her roots. She further reminds her daughter Jing-mei that there is a blood of her own mother which running in her veins. 'So skin can be hers but the bone is mine': she becomes overwhelmed with the clash of the adjustment between the two people from different continents.

The life of a woman in China is very restricted. The model of life for a woman is to be obedient, bring up the children, never complain, and hide her own unhappiness. It means a woman should play a submissive role only. A woman has to be a role player. In Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* Jing-mei-woo submits her view towards the predicament of a woman "My mother did not love Wu Tsing. A girl in China did not marry for love. She married for position and my mother's position, I later learned, was the worst" (228). The woman wants to change herself from the existing position where she just struggles for her existence. She has various roles assigned to her in her life from time to time. Thus, she portrays the life of a woman, "I saw a woman wearing a long black fur coat and dark western clothes, very fancy. And in her arms she held a little boy with fat rosy cheeks who looked to be two years old" (230). Here Amy Tan has reminded us that Jing mei's mother wants to migrate from China to the USA in search of broader perspectives of life. She wants to grab the prospective dreams of life. She thinks that all the unfulfilled dreams and hopes can be fulfilled in the USA only.

She wants to process a new way of life in the prospective horizon of the USA. This is the case for all alien people, the USA attracts them for its cosmopolitan identity. The place where is no caste, no community, no race at all. Every individual will be known through his/her personal

contribution to the society. This archetypal character tempts her to take the new initiative in life. But what happens when she immigrated to the new land? She gave birth to a child who is disciplined in the new land so her views are more advanced in the comparison to her mother's. She looks ahead from her mother. It is very difficult for a person to accept both of the characters/roles so she feels herself in a dilemma. The mother speaks, "I think about our two faces. I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other." (266)

Here, it is very difficult to distinguish which culture is more powerful than the other as every culture has its own relative pros and cons that we cannot look down on the verge of the other. Every new thing is reciprocal in nature and it depends upon our choice, one fits for.

There are some of the other views which have been expressed in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* where Feroza is sent to the USA in the quest for broader perspectives of life. She stayed there for quite a long time and adopted every nuance of the life of the native countrymen. She was well-established there and decided to accept every challenges of life. She got fascinated with a Jew, Mr. Manek. Both liked each other and further they decided to live together and wished to get married very soon. As soon as she came to know this news, Zareen became very offended and warned her daughter not to get married with a person who does not belong to their community, i.e. the Parsees. She took all the precautions that she could take to dissuade her from doing this act. At first, Feroza was adamant about her decision but later on decided to follow the words/instructions of her mother. Now I want to submit here my view is that country and culture is a relative construct to each other which cannot be nullified in the matrix of border and race.

Nilufer Bharucha reveals the reason behind for Parsee's migration to the west for the cause of 'enjoying the freedom

of life' in *Reflections in Broken Mirrors: Diverse Diasporas in Recent Parsi Fiction*:

It is this distance between the Parsis elite consciousness and their downgraded position and postcolonial India that the migrant Parsi is trying to escape. This end-of-empire unease in the Indian Diaspora is a reason for the westward movement by many Parsis in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. However, there is a certain degree of guilt connected with this Western Diaspora, which is a voluntary one, unlike the feeling of self-esteem generated by the forced Diaspora from Iran. (*Wasafiri*, 34-35)

Feroza was in overjoyous mood when her trip to the USA was finalized:

Feroza slipped under her quilt full dressed, her eyes wide open, her mind throbbing with elation. She was going to America! She found it difficult to believe. She repeated to herself, "I'm going to America, I'm going to America!" America means to her at the moment the lands of glossy magazines, of 'bewitched' and, 'star trek' of rock stars and Jeans....(27)

Feroza did every effort to adjust herself with the new life-style of Americans and the new Challenges of the time. She went through a number of difficulties, faced them here and there. But, she realized, this is the new world for her to experience and relate with.

Similarly, Amy Tan has also attempted to underscore the same kind of problem in *The Joy Luck Club* where the mothers struggle to put their Chinese heritage into their daughter's lives. The daughter of the mothers have adopted all the nuances of the USA and accepted the very culture of the land. Now, the mothers want to teach them that they belong to China as their origin/native place which is their root. But the teaching they put upon the life of the daughters do not work; they do not wish to have any connection with their past life. They have been detached from their mother's land. The mothers respond: "your mother is in your bones!" (Tan 31). Daughters want to suggest their mothers to let them be

independent and enjoy at their own pace. Life cannot be changed at will and has its own dynamics. Daughter's say, "I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not," says an angry Jing-mei. (Tan 144)

Jing-mei realizes the loss what she had never considered but when her mother expired. Really, she could understand what her mother had longed for, her expectations from her daughter that were never come to fulfilled. "My Mother's long-cherished with me, the younger sister who was supposed to be the essence of the others." (Tan 323) The first time it comes to the notice of Jing-mei that her mother had brought her into the world. The other three daughters also feel the spirit present, but not seen. The blood of the mother is running in their veins so they are still connected to their mothers even after the death. "And now I also see what part of me is Chinese, it is so obvious. It is my family, it is our blood. After all these years, it can finally be let go." (Tan 331) Now, Jing Mei would have known the meaning of mother after a long time following the death of her mother. It is assumed that the rest of the women of *The Joy Luck Club* hope that their daughters will find their mother's meaning as well before they are gone to the next world.

The gap of communication and generation is one of the factors for the strained relationship of mothers and daughter in the new land of the USA. They did not give space to understand each other. This problem mainly arises in the life of mother and daughter on the cause of hierarchy of high and low culture. "My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more." (Tan 27)

To conclude, Bapsi Sidhwa's Feroza and Zareen could not understand one another on the verge of hierarchy of high and low culture where people are free from all man-made imagined boundary. They get convinced to live with one image that is the cosmopolitan identity and the image of

'melting pot' where all the relative identity dissolves with one identity of Man and Woman. Thus, my purpose lies here to present a dilemma in the life of a daughter who is sent away to the USA for the broadening of her mind and when she immerses herself with all that the new land has to offer, her mother asks her to repeat the same backwardness what she had left at the native land.

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Demystifying Womanhood in *Her Stories*: 20th Century Bengali Women Writers

SAURABH KUMAR

The traditional Indian society has, more or less, always been patriarchal resulting into the subordination, marginalization and commodification of women. Even the Indian epics like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* bear witness to this. Women are enjoined by the Indian scriptures to play a certain role and not to transcend it. Women have always been supposed to be subordinate to men, and even subjected to inhuman injunctions. Women in the society are assigned only two jobs: making chapati and begetting progeny. In this respect *Her Stories: 20th Century Bengali Women Writers* (2002) which is a collection of short stories written by women in post-independence and post-colonial India, demystifies these stereotyped notions of womanhood.

The process of transforming one's status from a powerless entity to empowered identity involves lots of endeavours and energy. This transformation, more or less, involves a search for flicker of light; a ray of hope in the long dark tunnel manufactured by hard crushing patriarchal ideologies. In this connection *Her Stories* is a collection of those stories where the women protagonists fight to taste this flickering light to brighten and enlighten their dark lives. These stories, therefore, narrate the well being rather than ill being of women in varying degrees. All these narratives record the voice of those women who resonates with power to express resistance, thus problematizing their gendered identities. All these short stories critique the subject – position of the represented women, sometimes conforming to stereotypes and

sometimes deconstructing myths and traditions as singular agents of power. These texts contain the traces of gendered presence and presence, women's identity, subjectivity and agency, the sameness and difference, the silences, the sensitivity, the resistance and the courage in the face of systematic exploitation, oppression and marginalization. These narratives also explore the violence against women, their victimization, the humiliation suffered by both educated and cultured middle class women with economic security, and women from the disadvantaged class with little or no education and economic freedom at all. Out of eight stories I have selected only two stories Bani Basu's *Quintuples* and Suchitra Bhattacharya's *Good Woman, Bad Woman* to prove these aforesaid arguments.

Through the narrative of five bosom female friends: Krishnakshi Chatteerjee, Chitrlekha Roy, Sita Mukherjee, Lopa, and Bhadra, who once, in the days of school and college, were very close to one another, Bani Basu's story *Quintuples* seems to prioritize the sisterhood of women and also the failure of heterosexual relationships and patriarchal culture. Their lives were knitted in a romantic bondage far from the shackles of any sort. They lived their life freely, with full liberty, and most importantly, on their own conditions. Sunetra Di, Bengali professor used to call them Panchali. But the hardships of life; the demands of patriarchal system forced them to separate and fall apart.

The narrator of the story Krishnakshi Chatterjee fell into wrong hands. Her husband was an impotent. He used her as a bait for his underworld activities. Right now she is husbandless as well as childless. Chitrlekha Roy's husband is a lecherous man. His wife is not enough to satisfy his carnal desires therefore he has no grudge to live in the company of other women. Due to this Sita has to send her only girl child to live in girls' hostel. Sita Mukherjee's husband is a jobless man and sits idly at home doing nothing except proving his biological virility by making his wife a child bearing machine.

Sita, in total, had seven children. Out of seven, four are dead. She has no money to feed her twin babies. They were abnormally small, thin and bony. That's why she is frustrated and painfully remorseful on their fortune: "You won't survive, but you'll do me in too! Well, do just that and save me!" (Her Stories 79) And while talking to Krishna she bluntly utters, "This time too I don't think they'll live. And that's the best thing to happen" (80). These words are not the words of a mother but of one who is disenchanted with the patriarchal heterosexist relationship. Lopa Dutta, the college professor, has been engaged to a married man, and the father of children. He had played the fool with her, made her work out his thesis and then took no time to dump her. Due to this bitter experience she has shut the doors of her house to the outside world and writhes and cries all alone. She thinks herself to be a corpse:

Yes, that's what is left now. Any day now they'll throw this corpse under some tree. There's no hope of any funeral rites being performed either. No, no. There are some charitable societies that conduct social work by cremating unclaimed bodies. (86)

Bhadra 'sitting like a worn out picture', 'sunken cheeks', 'pale face' had to face a horrible scenario when her only son was abducted for ransom and murdered at last. Her husband sought his relief in the feet of Guru at Deoghar, but where would Bhadra go. How would she be relieved?

The life stories of these five friends have a chilling effect; they are living graves and the writer writes it in vivid words:

Like an abandoned graveyard, the room grew cold, calm and absolutely silent. It seemed that we were entering hell.... We would be raped now. All five of us joined our palms and prayed, "Who's there, wherever you may be, please save us." (90-91)

But their urge to keep them safe won't come from any outside. They will have to seek it within themselves, among themselves. They need to be united physically and spiritually

both. They will have to be their own safeguards. This is what Krishna says, "What more, Chitra, Sita, Bhadra, Lopa, what else? Look in front of us lies our freedom. Come let's grab these." (91) And they grab it. Bhadra and Krishna are ready to share the twins of Sita as their own. Now they can hope to have love, hope, shelter, and respect in their lives. Their story is no more about regrets, loss, and losers. The sisterhood of these women work out as the model to discard off the oppressive ideology of patriarchy. This is the panacea for their survival and resurrection from the morass of ennui. This is what we find at the very beginning of Charlotte Bunch's essay entitled "Lesbians in Revolt," one could clearly see the echoing of anger against the current system of patriarchy, and how she found hope by idealizing the lesbian:

To be a lesbian is to love oneself, woman, in a culture that denigrates and despises women ... lesbianism puts women first while society declares the male supreme. Lesbianism threatens male supremacy at its core. When politically conscious and organized, it is central to destroying our sexist, racist, capitalist, imperialist system... lesbians must become feminists and fight against oppression, just as feminists must become lesbians if they hope to fight male supremacy.(30)

In short, lesbianism/female to female bonding should be regarded as a "choice" the women should take in order to liberate themselves from the clutches of male domination. This should be promoted as the exercise of absolute freedom.

Suchitra Bhattacharya's story *Bhalo Meye Kharap Meye* (The Good Woman, the Bad Woman) story is actually based on real incident, published in the newspaper that a bar singer was gang raped. The writer here fictionalizes the family life of the lawyer who was handling the cases of rape victims. Here in this story she problematizes the cozy and nonchalant status of lawyer's wife and gives her new vantage points to reconsider her position. Ultimately it turns out to be a simple but complex exploration of gender and class issues including the silent oppressiveness of marital rape and unequal relationship within a family.

Actually this story addresses a very relevant and contemporary discourse of our times. The powerful issues like rape and marital rape are at the heart of every newspaper and news channel. As far as marital rape is concerned it is yet to be recognized as a crime by Indian Penal Code and society at large. In fact Section 375 of Indian Penal Code does not recognize marital rape if the wife is above 16 years of age. The marital rape victims have to take recourse to Section 498-A of the IPC which is perverse sexual conduct by the husband or to the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 (PWDVA). Even the PWDVA, which came into force in 2006, outlaws marital rape. It offers only a civil remedy for the offence. Suchitra Bhattacharya pens down the plight of two women on either extremes of the social scale. Umi, the “good” woman is the wife of a successful lawyer. She gets delight and derives happiness in patriarchal commands either of her husband or even son. She seems to be happy among the worldly pleasures stored in various kinds of commodities like AC, TV, and Car etc.. In a way she is trapped in the splendour of material power, where she is equally living a life of unreal happiness. When husband goes to the Court and son goes to school she keeps herself busy by reading newspapers, visiting beauty parlours, and shopping. Apparently she is living a comfortable and happy life and very pleased to see the popularity of her lawyer husband. Ria, the “bad” woman is a bar singer who uses her sexuality, as she has no other option left, to earn money to make a living.

Ria is raped by two men while offering lift in a car. The case is in the court being handled by none other than a successful criminal lawyer Samiran who happens to be the husband of the good woman Umi. The tremendous sense of female to female bonding brings them together despite the deep cleft in their social standards. The words of the so called the “bad” woman Ria makes the “good” woman realize her fake sense of superiority and living a comfortable and secured life. Ria says, “Sometimes I have a thought, Madam, what would I have gained if I had been a happy housewife?...

Someone's elder brother. Someone's father. Someone's son" (147). Umi is taken aback and while trembling she asks, "Do you know what's love? Do you know how much husbands can love their wives?" (ibid) Ria while shutting her eyes says, "I know, Madam. I can understand too. That man, whom I was calling names so long, my husband, if I give him up, he'll die of a broken heart" (ibid).

And her further revelation that those who raped her were her childhood friends. They grew up together, held hands and danced. They had sung together in *para* functions. She questions their sincerity by saying, "Even they looked upon me as a woman! Is there just one meaning relating to the birth of a woman? A mould of flesh? Can't there be any relationship between an unrelated man and woman except this one?" (148)

The words of "bad" woman are like pebbles in the calm and serene water of a pond where things are not good beneath the surface of water. Ria shocks and startles Umi. She makes her realize her artificiality and her hidden transformation into a commodity of desire; a sexed object. At least the "bad" woman has the freedom of agency and embodies resistance as power. But the "good" woman is crippled and trapped in a cage of voluntary imprisonment and her secret tears are never noticed. (Her Stories Preface)

Daniel Defoe, one of the first novelists of English Literature and the writer of novels like *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*, wrote in his essay "Conjugal Lewdness or, Matrimonial Whoredom" that "He or She who, with that slight and superficial Affection, Ventures into the Matrimonial Vow, are to me little more than legal Prostitutes" (32). This statement further casts a new light on the condition of Umi. Even Bertrand Russell writes, "Marriage is for women the commonest mode of livelihood, and the total amount of undesired sex endured by women is probably greater in marriage than in prostitution." And Angela Carter writes, "What is marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many?" These statements simply strengthen the views of Ria

regarding the condition of Umi. The good point is umi is awakened and is no longer going to live in the manoeuvrings of patriarchy. She is not going to behave merely like a bundle of flesh. She is not going to acquiesce to the desires of her husband. She is going to resist and hopefully she does it by stating that forcible cohabitation is rape. Though she is unlike Ria the "bad" woman who can go and knock the door of court while Umi being the "good" woman does not have the spirit to do so.

These small mutinies against the deep rooted patriarchal mindset may not sound big and bold yet none can deny the long lasting effect and affect of these small beginnings. The stories discussed here employ women characters not from one set up or class but from different set ups and classes. *Quintuples*, to address the issue, centres around five college educated women; It shows how useless is patriarchal system without giving equal rights to its female counterpart. It shows that women, if determined, need not to have any male for their safety and security. They are no longer dependant on their male counterparts. They emit the message: BEAWARE MEN. *From the Heart of Darkness* centres on a *bildungsroman* like rural and illiterate woman who really pays too much to obtain a ray of light that will guide her coming generations. From the heart of darkness emerges a dim light which has the capacity to enlighten the whole society if followed sincerely and seriously. *Good Woman, Bad Woman* systematically layers off the sinister design of men to entrap the women through various material commodities and thus making them one of the kinds of commodities. It simply blurs and problematizes the crude and insensitive definition and labelling of good and bad woman. These stories critique the subject-positions of women; break the received subject positions; and throw into the winds deep rooted myths and traditions regarding women. In a nutshell they all seem to demystify the concept of womanhood deeply ridden with heterosexist ideologies.

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PLAY

The Peril of Marketing (An One Act Play)

C.D.NORMAN

Characters : *He, She*

Locale : *Home Situation (He is back from the market bringing bagsful of things)*

He : Hi, Where are you, I am back from the market. Come, see what I have bought.

She : *(from behind the stage)* I heard you coming in. Have you brought all that I wanted?

He : Well, I kept on repeating your list of purchases, in my mind until I was nearly knocked down by a auto while crossing the road.

She : *(comes into the scene)* I know, you always have been careless, walking on the road.

He : Wouldn't you like to see what I have brought?

She : *(goes through the articles displayed on the kitchen table; picks up a transparent plastic packet stuffed with something.)* What is this?

He : Mutton, of course.

She : Looks like all bones and fat. Are you sure you asked for mutton and not bones?

He : Oh! Dear. I saw him cutting out a chunk from the leg of mutton.

She : And added bones for good measure? And who asked you to buy potatoes? We already have enough here, rotting.

He : I'm sorry I mixed up onion and potato in my mind.

She : So you haven't bought onions, you may have to go again. No onions in the basket here.

He : Well, if I have to, I will. I am a retired person. No hurry to office or anywhere.

She : You were the same even when you were working. Now, where did you find these sparrow's eggs?

He : Oh! Dear. They are hen's eggs, no doubt. They may be a bit small in size. They are not sparrow's eggs, surely.

She : I suppose they keep them specially for retired men who cannot see the difference between a pebble and a boulder.

He : You always blame me for what I purchase. Then why don't you go to the market, yourself?

She : What? Do the marketing, do the cooking, do the swabbing, do the washing, dusting and do everything. What do you do at home to help me, may I ask? *(she picks up a bunch of bananas)* Why are they black on the underside?

He : See they are yellow on the front side. He said they are just ripe to be eaten.

She : And you believed him! He has got rid of a dozen of his over ripe bananas.

He : No. He is a nice fellow. He smiles whenever he sees me in the market place and says "salam."

She : And pushes the rotten bananas with a smile and a "salam" ? *(she picks up a bunch of green coriander)* They resemble coriander don't they?

He : Yes, dear. They are the fresh ones I could find in Hutchins Road. Any question?

She : Of course, they were fresh, a week ago.

He : Now, if you are going to pick on me for everything I purchase...

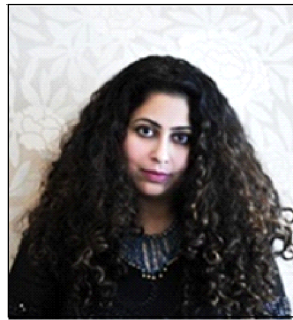
*(He dashes out of the house, for a breath of fresh air.
And bangs the door shut)*

Curtain

INTERVIEWS

Interview with Anita Nair

DR. SMITA JHA & NIYATHI R. KRISHNA



Anita Nair is a famous writing of Indian English Novelist. She is from Kerala and is a prolific writer of fiction mainly on Feminism. Nair's novels have been translated into several languages. She is the author of *Cut like Wound* (2012), *Lessons in Forgetting* (2010), *Mistress* (2005), *The Better Man* (2000), *Puffin Book of World Myths and Legends* (2004), *Magical Indian Myths* (2008).

NK : Ma'am, I am taking your first three novels namely *The better man*, *Ladies coupe* and *Mistress* for my research. *Ladies Coupe* is usually referred as a woman centric novel, but not essentially a feminist one. But while reading, I have felt the feminist agenda of the concept of 'universal sisterhood' throughout the novel. What is your take on this?

AN : See, if I would have decided to write a feminist novel, it would have been a different kind of a novel. I am not who somebody is very loud about feminism or something. But if you look at the novels of an American writer called Marilyn French like 'The women's room' which is considered as a feminist classic and 'The bleeding hearts', they are all very strong feminist novels. But just because the novel is woman centric, doesn't become feminist in the sense it is not taking a stand on ideal female lives or discussing various issues to that extend. In *ladies coupe*, I have explored the lives of various women, so it is very much woman centric as it looks at the lives of women and the various angles. But I am not taking any political stands or framing a political platform of feminism in it, yet there can be feminist tendencies in it.

NK : **But the novel talks about women empowerment and it is empowering. The six female characters in the novel are in the journey of seeking or reaching empowerment in their own terms. When they share their life situations and experiences, a kind of sisterhood is knit through them.**

AN : Yes, it is empowering. But I think empowerment shouldn't have to be restricted to women alone. Both men and women should take control over their lives. And yes, it is a novel that talks about sisterhood. It doesn't matter where you belong to, how educated you are or what is your career, the way you look at life is a female point of view. That is what I was trying to talk about. Whatever the external layer is, internally all women are the same. *Ladies Coupe* is been published/translated in most of the countries/languages and is a very successful novel. Women all over the world are

somehow feeling a bonding with the novel, they say. Whether they live in America or India, there is some cord inside them that is struck. It is only because of this, it is so popular.

NK : In *Mistress* also, there are three major female characters namely Radha, Angela and Saadiya who belong to different time and space, yet they bear so many similarities. How you have created these characters? The other notable thing is there is questioning of paternity in the novel, whether it is Radha's or Chris's or Radha's child's. How do you arrive at that?

AN : I think, one thing always of course is that there is a lot stress laid out on biological fatherhood aspect. But ideologically, fatherhood should be counted on the relationship between father and the child. According to me, a person fulfils the duty and responsibilities of fatherhood should be given priority rather than biology. But society is keen investigating the biological father giving so much importance to it. That way it becomes rigid. In *Mistress*, I wanted to say that one becomes a father when he influences the child's mind and character rather than the DNA.

NK : When you create a character, u create the character first or the environment?

AN : The character comes to me first. Then according to that, I have to create the environment or background around them. Usually a fully formed character appears to me, so I create the background accordingly.

NK : In your latest novel *Cut like Wound*, u have created Gowda or Chikka first?

AN : To be honest, I created Chikka first. He is a transgender. Usually my novels take place in

Kerala or villages of Tamil Nadu. But I placed Chikka in Bangalore, because transgenders are very common and visible here. In Kerala, I cannot place this story. In Chennai also, I cannot see them as frequently I see them in Bangalore.

NK : *The Better Man* was your first novel. There also I see that all the female characters are very much connected to each other. There are some characters overlapping in *Mistress* and *the better man* like a duology. What made you write a novel for the first time rather than short story or poetry that you used to write those days?

AN : I wrote poetry first. When I started writing a novel, I found it an entirely different process. Poetry is very spontaneous or instantaneous. But novel writing is carefully done. I usually take 2-3 years to finish a novel. A lot of research and a great amount of introspection are required for it. But in poetry, instead of introspection, intuition is required. With that I think no kind of jerkiness in the transition from writing poetry to writing fiction.

NK : **How you balance spontaneity and research in creative writing and how they are connected?**

AN : When I write, I write with spontaneity. But at times I reach certain points where I actually don't know about certain things. Then I refer or research on that particular thing to validate my spontaneity.

NK : **You must have done ample research on Kathakali, the traditional art of Kerala, to write *Mistress*.**

AN : Yes. I was working that time as a copy writer. Once I have seen a Kathakali artist with full costume kept for receiving guests. I was very

much annoyed about that. You need minimum nine years of study to become a Kathakali artist, but for a livelihood you are forced to compromise your art. The people are exploiting that artist for his need for livelihood. That compelled me to write about Kathakali than anything else. Then I came to know about what is it to be an artist and his/her world.

NK : Ma'am, what is your stand on this concept of man vs culture and woman vs nature? Don't you think this classification, in a way, alienate women from the mainstream culture?

AN : I really do not like these kinds of ideas and rigid compartmentalisations. To me, there are a lot of flow between man and nature and women and culture too. The thing is, to be able to find out the connection. People who create these compartmentalisations may have their own justifications and explanations. But I, as an individual do not find any such connection.

NK : How do you see any kind of binary like this? Equating women with emotion, notions of to be looked after or to be explored and man with rationale, looking after and explorer?

AN : How do you define culture then? It is emotional at times. It has to be looked after or explored. These kinds of gender segregations do not make sense to me. I do not understand.

NK : Ma'am, don't you think when environment is destructed, women are worst affected? As they are traditionally assigned the duties of cooking, collecting water and fodders, aren't they suffering more? Should they be agents of change for environmental protection?

AN : See, generally I feel, whether it is environmental protection or anything, women are the primary agents of change. Whatever rules are made, ultimately, women are the practitioners of change as they are engaged with the daily aspects of life in a daily basis. For instance, a group of men may dig the well, but it is women who fetch water from it daily. So she is going to maintain the well. Similarly, a man may chop off a tree, but a woman could understand the loss better, as she collects firewood for making food. Without firewood, it will be difficult for her to feed the family. It is a simple example, but women, whether they belong to rural or urban areas, they can initiate change.

Comment: This interview is highly meaningful for the study of ecofeminism and gender discrepancies in India society. Students working on the aspect of gender studies may consult this to get right view of the novelist.

Interview with Brent Wofingbarger

SHANA SUSAN NINAN

Author of *The Dirty Secret* Brent Wofingbarger talks to IBR-Indian Book Reviews (Shana Susan Ninan) about his book, the research that went into writing it and give writing and editing tips to aspiring authors.

Shana : First off, what's the "secret" you had in mind when you framed the title, *The Dirty Secret*?

Brent : It was intended to refer to the fact that the Electoral College is the "dirty little secret" in America's constitutional system. Until the close election between George W. Bush and Al Gore in 2000, most people had only a vague perception that Americans do not directly elect their President. The ensuing legal battle that year over Florida's decisive electoral votes unquestionably heightened the public's awareness of the Electoral College, but I think the overwhelming majority of people still don't understand exactly how it works in the real world. Part of my motivation in writing the book was to cast some light on the way it operates at a nuts-and-bolts level, and also to demonstrate how easily the whole thing could be corruptly derailed.

IBR : How did you manage to merge politics and romance and some thrilling events into one book, that, too, your debut work?

Brent : By carefully and ruthlessly sketching out the plot before I wrote a single word of the story.

In all seriousness, I find it disheartening that our country (America) is so bitterly divided right now, politically speaking. Not too long ago, even when people disagreed about certain political issues, they would still typically treat one another with mutual respect and “agree to disagree” on those political issues without poisoning their overall relationship. So as I was crafting the plot for *The Dirty Secret*, I found the notion of two fundamentally decent human beings from opposite sides of the political fence cooperating with one another, while slowly healing the rifts in their personal relationship, inherently satisfying. I thought having those two characters’ personal journey unfold in the context of the larger political battle would make the overall story a more enjoyable read. And judging from the feedback I’ve received from reviewers like you, it seems many readers agree.

IBR : That I totally did! Now tell us, what was the research that went into the story and the characterisation?

Brent : I was blessed to have a lot of election law experience before I started writing the book, but I definitely needed to research how the more modern, computerised voting systems operate to make the story more believable. I also had to dig a little deeper to make sure my understanding of the state and federal laws governing presidential elections was accurate. In fact, I was shocked to learn about the loophole in West Virginia law that is revealed in Chapter 55 of *The Dirty Secret*, and that discovery required me to adjust the plot’s trajectory somewhat.

IBR : If there are other genres you'd experiment writing in, what would they be?

Brent : Humor. I enjoy making people laugh, and I have thought about writing a collection of short stories about some of the humorous adventures my circle of friends has experienced. But I will definitely have to change the names of those involved, to protect both the innocent and the guilty. LOL.

IBR : Your reading and writing influences...

Brent : One would be John Grisham, of course. He was one of the first to transform legal conflicts into riveting entertainment. I love Stephen Ambrose, and how his passion for history helped him transform some old, dusty subjects like Lewis & Clark's Voyage of Discovery and the construction of the transcontinental railroad into real page-turners. I enjoy the way John Scalzi and Eric Flint (in his *Ring of Fire* series) use regular guys with common sense and virtue as their action/adventure protagonists instead of hyper-macho dudes who just kill everything in sight. I love how Neal Stephenson allows his sense of humor to shine through his writing, a trait he shares with Scalzi. I also like how Nicholas Sparks develops an intimate bond between his readers and his characters, because I honestly believe it's the emotional reaction readers experience when reading a story that separates the good books from the truly great ones. A good book can keep us entertained for hours, but we tend to cherish and remember books that tug at our heartstrings or evoke other strong emotions.

IBR : What was the experience like for you to draw from your experience as a law practitioner into fancying a story so similar to your work/career?

Brent : Very rewarding. Stephen Coonts is another lawyer from West Virginia who has enjoyed an unbelievably successful career writing thrillers, and he got his start in the business when he wrote *Flight of The Intruder*, a tale of a U.S. Navy fighter pilot flying missions over Vietnam. Not coincidentally, Mr. Coonts spent eight years in the cockpit as a fighter pilot before going to law school, so he was able to draw upon that experience in crafting his story.

Mr. Coonts was kind enough to share some of his insights with aspiring authors on his website, which I took to heart. And in preaching about the importance of a story's originality, he offered this advice: *"Beginning [sic] writers are well advised to write about something they know. Many beginners try to write about people and places and events that they know absolutely nothing about, and consequently expend vast quantities of time and effort but cannot get the story to read right."*

IBR : Why did you choose an Asian female protagonist for the story?

Brent : Because I wanted my story to be different than all the other thrillers on the market, and it sadly seems there is a real shortage of Asian female protagonists out there. Waves of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent have been successfully chasing the American dream and carving a place for themselves in our country for years, but it seems like their story

is being given short shrift when you look at the commercial fiction shelves today.

For some reason, I was drawn to the concept of a strong, intelligent woman with exotic beauty playing the central role in my book. She had to be comfortable in her own skin, yet simultaneously be accepted as part of the community in an area of rural West Virginia that is exceptionally close-knit and is traditionally quite suspicious of outsiders. Casting Rikki as the daughter of the town's pediatrician – an Indian immigrant who was universally respected for his competence, care and compassion – allowed her to be accepted by the community as “one of its own,” while simultaneously retaining her unique cultural heritage.

Moreover, I liked telling the story of two people who fell in love despite their different ethnic backgrounds and political beliefs. I think many people want to believe that love can conquer all, even though that idealised vision doesn't always pan out in the real world. When my book begins and readers learn what transpired to cause Dave and Rikki's relationship to fall apart, and they see the huge gulf that exists between them 15 years later, I like to think readers secretly start rooting for them to get back together. And the latent tension over whether that reconciliation will occur helps move the plot forward and keep readers wondering what will happen next.

IBR : Do you prefer to read single plot stories or have multiple or simultaneous plots in a story?

Brent : I personally prefer reading books where multiple plots unfold at the same time. A prime example would be the three books from Neal Stephenson's *The Baroque Cycle*, which I absolutely loved. I think Jack Shaftoe from that trilogy is one of the most unique, compelling, flawed, and utterly hysterical characters I've ever had the pleasure to encounter, and I love the way Stephenson weaved together multiple plots in those books. Reading books like that, it feels like you're in a chess match with the author, trying to figure out how he's going to tie all these seemingly unrelated threads together in the end. And if the author can pull it off, that makes the whole reading experience even more satisfying to me.

IBR : When are you visiting India?

Brent : It depends on whether *The Dirty Secret* hits the best-seller list! LOLI definitely want to visit India so I can personally experience its rich culture, its architectural wonders like the Taj Mahal, and to see for myself some of its vibrant, bustling cities. However, my children are still quite young (I have a three-year-old daughter and a two-year-old son), and I'm pretty sure they would find it challenging to tolerate the 20+ hour long plane ride to India. So my wife and I will probably have to start training them by taking a shorter trip to her Caribbean homeland (Trinidad & Tobago) in order to build up their endurance for the longer pilgrimage to India.

IBR : Any lines for those debut authors trying their hands at political thrillers?

Brent : Life is too short. Stop thinking about it and just do it! Sit down, think through and outline your plot, and draw up paragraph-length portraits of your characters to help you understand who they are and how they think. Research the story's aspects you aren't personally knowledgeable about to make sure your story is as factually accurate as possible. Review *The Elements of Style* by Strunk & White. Then start writing. Remember that Rome was not built in a day, but in order to begin your journey, you have to take that first step and begin writing. Establish reasonable writing goals and try to put aside a set amount of time at least a few days each week (if not every day) to work on your book. Consider using Dragon NaturallySpeaking to maximize your efficiency (but use a high-quality microphone to capture your dictation if you do.)

After you "finish" writing the book, put it aside and don't even look at it for at least 30 days. Then take it back out and edit it ruthlessly. Cut out every scene that is not crucial to moving the plot forward, and cut out every surplus word that is not truly necessary. For instance, my first draft of *The Dirty Secret* was over 1,79,000 words, but the final version ended up at just a little over 1.13,000 words! Writers view their books like their babies. But even though we love our children, we realise they need discipline to become the best they can be, and the editing process is just like disciplining your children – painful, but necessary!

Ask a few avid readers whose judgment you trust to read the book and offer their feedback

as “beta readers.” Implement those suggestions you feel have merit and revise the book accordingly. Ruthlessly edit it again and again until you are convinced that you have written the best book you are capable of writing on your own, and then find (and pay) a professional editor to go over it with a fine-toothed comb. I used Rob Bignell and found him extremely competent, extremely affordable, and his suggested changes were great ones.

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