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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

*A Global Journal Devoted to
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Phyllis Johnson has been writing for over twenty years. His publications include newspapers and magazines and six books. Four of which are poetry, among them is *Being Frank with Anne*: www.beingfrankwithanne.com. More can be found at his website: www.phyllisjohnson.net.

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Ron Singer's Short stories have appeared at many venues (e.g. *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Defenestration*, *diagram*, *Drunken Boat*, *Evergreen Review*, *The Journal of Microliterature*, *Mad Hatters' Review*, and *Word Riot*). Singer's work has twice been nominated for Pushcart Prizes, and his eighth book has just been published: *Uhuru Revisited: Interviews with African Pro-Democracy Leaders* (Africa World Press/Red Sea Press). www.ronsinger.net

Mala Janardhan has been writing for over three decades now. Her short stories have been published in magazines like *Alive* (Sept 1991 issue) and *Femina* (8th Sept,1995). Her *Children's Stories* have won prizes in the Competitions for Writers of Children's Books held by CBT, New Delhi and have been brought out in Picture Book form by them. A collection of thirty poems “*Between the Shadows and Light*” was printed by Writers' Forum, University of Ranchi in 1994. Her poems are also currently available on poetry groups of the website LinkedIn on the Internet.

Patty Somlo has received four Pushcart Prize nominations and has been nominated for storySouth's Million Writers Award. Her essay, “If We Took a Deep Breath,” was

selected as a Notable Essay of 2013 for Best American Essays 2014. She is the author of *From Here to There and Other Stories*. Her second book, *Hairway to Heaven Stories*, is forthcoming in January 2017 from Cherry Castle Publishing. Her work has appeared in numerous journals, including the *Los Angeles Review*, *the Santa Clara Review*, *Under the Sun*, *Guernica*, *The Flagler Review*, and *WomenArts Quarterly*, among others, and in fifteen anthologies. www.pattysomlo.com.

Rev. Robert P. Mitchell, originally from Pennsylvania, earned a B.S. in voice and opera at the Mannes College of Music in NYC. For the next thirty years he pursued a business career with Scholastic Inc., working his way up the Manager of Marketing Information. In the meantime he sang opera at night and on weekends, singing over forty leading tenor roles from Mozart to Menotti. He partnered with his wife Joan in singing and parenting two boys. After retiring, the couple entered seminary and became ordained ministers and served their first church as co-pastors. Later Bob wrote *Tales of a Tenacious Tenor*, the story of his opera career, released in 2014. The Mitchells now live in PA and enjoy three grandchildren.

Frank Cavano is retired physician whose writings often focus on the spiritual/inspirational/metaphysical realm. Over the last 5-6 years about 100 pieces have been published online and/or in print. He is always grateful when a poem or story stimulates thought, provides comfort or depicts the human condition in a compelling way.

Ushnav Shroff is a freelance writer whose work has featured in *The Hindu*, *eFiction India*, and *Reading Hour*, among others. He began to put pen to paper from the age of nine and since then his love of creating something out of

nothing has not left him. Apart from short stories, he delves in poems and book reviews. He is currently working on his first novella.

Late S. K. Pottekkat, who won the Gyanpeeth award in 1980, is best known for his voluminous collection of travelogues in Malayalam. He had also written a number of poetic short stories as well as some novels. Hailing from Kozhikode, Pottekkat had worked in various parts of India as well as in a school in Kozhikode before being elected to the Lok Sabha as a CPM candidate in 1965. He passed away in 1982.

Dr. K. Parameswaran holds a PhD in Linguistics and is presently employed as Deputy Director, Press Information Bureau, Madurai, Tamil Nadu. He hails from Kozhikode and has Master's degrees in Linguistics as well as English Language and Literature. He has also completed a P.G. Diploma in Translating Studies from the University of Hyderabad as well as a Diploma in Journalism and a Certificate in Sanskrit. A child of the sixties, Dr. Parameswaran is deeply interested in Carnatic music, reading and in setting and solving cross word puzzles.

Ashok Patwari is a Pediatrician and Public Health Researcher. Earlier he was Professor of Pediatrics at Lady Hardinge Medical College, New Delhi and WHO Consultant in Child Health. His short stories have been published in leading Urdu journals since 1968. His compilation of Urdu short stories, *Kuch Lamhe Kuch Sayey* won him the Delhi Urdu Academy award in 2005. He has also published a compilation of Hindi short stories, *Behta Paani*. His short stories in English regularly appear in

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Larry Smith lives and works in New Jersey. His story "Tight Like That" appeared in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* (print edition), #27. "The Shield of Paris," published in *Low Rent*, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Other stories were published in *Exquisite Corpse, Curbside Splendor, Pank, The Bicycle Review, Union Station Magazine*, and numerous others. His poetry was in *Descant* (Canada), *Write This*, and *Elimae*, among others, and his articles and essays in *Modern Fiction Studies, Social Text, The Boston Phoenix*, and others.

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POETRY

1

The Value of Shadows

BILL BROWN

...Small journeys serve best—
A walk along the creek, bike
Ride in the country—places
Where dirt and rocks live with
Animals and dung, labor means
Life—heart, a word seldom used
But always present—roads
Where trucks slow down for
Squirrels, dogs sleep in the sun
At the edge of driveways.
A day to walk the fences,
Papa would say, ribbon wire
That needs mending. Something
Always needs tending as self
Becomes one with the landscape,
The chittering of life as a kestrel
Rocks a sumac limb, an earth
Song for the sky. Nothing so
Romantic when all living

Must die and that knowledge,
Another lens to peek through,
A voice in an ancient tongue,
 Watch your shadow, it will
 Soon be gone...allowing
The sun to brighten where
Your soles once tread. But
Not today, please, not today.
I need to see the sky reflect
In a hilltop pond, where a
Flock of green-winged teal
Have stopped to rest and feed.
December brings the solstice,
Sky's blue fades, and a heart
In transit opens a different way...



2

In The Beginning

BURGESS NEEDLE

when I was a boy the elders said
the old days allowed a hundred-fold more stars
could be seen looking up from any arroyo
now I have heard the city bows to astronomers' will
street lights all point down to asphalt
truth is if the others believe they may kill
or save stars at will that alone should have
been enough to warn me of what awaited
at the place glowing so deep on my horizon
so i was not shocked when my driver passed
men with rifles standing by the road and when
i looked in the rear view mirror and saw the arc
of wounded doves falling without grace upon cholla
greasewood jojoba and creosote all soon to be blessed
with the holy water of rain the desert's first miracle



3

Smaller Circles

BURGESS NEEDLE

turning in a smaller circle I found myself alone
hearing my own muttered whispers
what to do what to do
drew me up from sleep to walk and walk
until slinking byseneca street I saw the last of curled ash leaves
fall on ramadassticking to tombstone roses not a green bud in sight
be careful of learning new things i thought
now i am the desperate man
toe holds in two worlds
neither love nor acceptance anywhere between



4

Angels Around My Shoulders

ANDREW SCOTT

There are angels around my shoulders.
I can feel them each and every day.
Their gentile, precious presence
unselfishly caring when not asked.

There are times when sadness overtakes
and life seems to have many forks.

Mixed, confused emotions
that lead to unbearable anger.

Highs created and floating spirits
that may expect too much from life.

Experiences that enrich through
outside whispers of calmness.
Emotions that are worth every moment
that are given and shared
by the angels around my shoulders.



5

Encouragement from the Spinnet

DR. ERNEST WILLIAMSON

stoked books coated in sulfuric residue
broken lanterns rocking on marble foundations;
as the landlord summarized my living room with wry laughter
catering to poking fun of my empty space;
Chopin's music filled the room.
After the shame of poverty and jest leaves;
tacit moments in night find me welcomed
where moonlight clothes my bare frame
while heat between me and tune
climbs above the stay of my landlord's reproach.
Nirvana is reached by not knowing too much
other than knowing how to know little things
insignificantly.



6

When You Grow Up

DR. ERNEST WILLIAMSON

I'd rather be a collapsed flower
drenched in rainwater;
succumbed to the well
where wishes weld
winning whims.

Though not alone
as the barren heart
of anti-democratic men
but with a plenitude
of carbon based efforts
trying to truncate
all that besmirches goodness;
in the nests of the good above our heads,
and the insufferable loss beneath the silent dirt.



7

The Baptists of West Wales

ROBERT NISBET

Theirs was a world of hedgerows,
cliff tops and the hectic movement of
the nests and burrows in the spring.

I'm sure that most were basically
decent men, in their meetings and
prayer groups, and decent women.

But when the children came, in spring,
in generations, to that new pubescence
and the joy it shouted for (in burrows,
nests and in their own wild hearts),

the elders felt such a shiver
of fear and shame, they denied the song
of the heady blackbird, the pigeon's croon
and the whole hedgerow singing of what it is
to know the passions of the young.



8

Rose Water

BRANDON MARLON

Red petals of colorful flora swim,
mingling with mint leaves fluidly;
I lower the Mistress' feet slowly,
immersing limbs in cool moisture.

She gives me a look of desperation,
her eyes aching with latent desire;
I tenderly palm ankles and heels,
hearing her gasp with gratification.

She breathes her yearning on me;
I imbibe her craving with grace,
sympathizing with her sore heart
even as I massage tense muscle.

I tongue the camber of her foot,
licking off the salt of perspiration,
sucking patiently on excited toes
wiggling with shameless abandon.

Playfully savoring carnose morsels
then nibbling unattended scars
leads me within view of sinewy thighs
blooming with restless anticipation.



9

You are Such a Beauty

G DAVID SCHWARTZ

You are such a beauty
I tell to your face
because I don't wish to be looking
at any other place
You are so gorgeous
I'd like to see some more of us
Walking up the road
And I would be bragging
without even using words
Everyone would be looking
A few maybe giving curse
to know that a guy like me
is haggling up you
And then they think of your beauty
And wonder how it could be
that you are such a beauty
and then just look at me
I ought to be a wanderer
Out there on the sea
where the fish would even get jealous
Those stinky morose fellas



10

You

PHYLLIS JOHNSON

Driving past houses that time forgot
Gazing down historic streets
Feeling the warmth of your smile
Listening to the radio,
Talking, laughing
And time slows down.

Maybe memories of
Another life
Spill over,
Make a Venn diagram
Of the old and new
Fusing together a tapestry
Of feelings.
Some familiar,
Others fresh, new and vibrant.
Not knowing what tomorrow will bring
Thanking God
Being grateful
For every day
Every blessing
Every minute spent with you.



11

Love

PHYLLIS JOHNSON

In the morning,
things seem a shade of gray
the grass, water and sky
and then bursts forth
orange, purple and pink
glistening across the water
like your smile,
carrying me down the river
and around the bend
for a mile
or two,
Who knew
that sending a card
could bring such joy...
I love you.



12

Eternity

ALISA VELAJ

Striking against stones, even ice
Crumbled into countless crystal chips.

Mythic stubbornness
With Sisyphus' lymph in bones
Always swims in cold sweat.

Might Helios' chariot have passed by here?



13
The Square
ALISA VELAJ

Taking shape after shape,
Matter translates into different selves
At the speed of light.

Paralysis shines in human eyes.



14

Anti-Narcissus

ALISA VELAJ

Rebelling
Often fits
With a profligate lad
My cactus flower!

None allowed
The theft of elixir
Furiously rolled
Down scorching droughts!

Your thorns are the camels of a time
When oases fled from the desert...



15

Cursing

RUTH SABATH ROSENTHAL

In the privacy of home,
in the republic of mind.

Yes, I so love cursing.
I find it elevating, invigorating;
each word leaves me feeling
somehow righteous. Delighted.

I owe this love of cursing to
my mother: she forbade cursing
in the house I grew up in, and
I'd accommodated her with
a bevy of curse words in my head
that rivaled any sailor's.

Why I'd complied with Mother's
demand for curse-word-silence
was, simply, I must've been afraid
to speak my mind, what was
in my heart, believing I'd incite her
to wrath, even frighten myself.

I didn't question mother's cursing
crazies till she was long-gone.
And even if I'd been inclined to,

I don't think she could've articulated
the reason why — that, more than
likely, repressed. It seems

her father needed little cause to beat her
regularly, and he did that with a strap
and cursed her with every whack,
she looking so much like her mother —
the wife who'd died of rheumatic fever,
or so he told everyone.



16

Now Voyeur

RUTH SABATH ROSENTHAL

This old heart of mine no longer beats
down the doldrums, nor turns humdrum
bright as gold, as it did in my prime;

and nightly, in dreams high in my vessel
of wanting delight, it's strangers acting
out *my* desires! Imagine that! Intruders

beating me to the punch in the quest for
hot sex: Moist bodies embrace, legs, twixt
& twain, heighten each twist & turn

of a lusty mind. And this morning I wake
far from alright, vowing to lotion my loins
daily, perfume my skin and, if my old man

again says, *Not tonight*, I'll write this
craft of mine, shove it in his face, and ride
out the current into the sunset
with as much grace as I can muster.



SHORT STORY

1

A Game of Lies

RON SINGER

The night after my first meeting with my cousin Martha, I had a double-dream. First, I was in bed with a group of strangers, all of them women. Nothing, however, was happening, sexual or otherwise. The scene shifted to a dark street, where a small man I assumed was a gypsy –or more correctly, a Roma or Sinti—was stalking me. On my way to Pannonia, I had stopped in Berlin where, in the sprawling park known as *Tiergarten*, I came upon a memorial to “gypsies” killed by the Nazis and their allies, including Pannonian Fascists. As in the first dream, nothing really happened on the dark street. Both dreams were silent.

Since my retirement six or seven years back, I had already traveled to Italy, France, and the British Isles. I will not use the real name of the central European country I was now visiting, not from coyness or from fear that I don’t know enough to describe it accurately, but from delicacy. Since this country’s problems are legion and I bear it no special grudge, I have borrowed the name of the Roman province, “Pannonia.”

I woke from my double-dream thinking about my favorite stalking incident. It featured my father's younger brother, Aaron. A short man, Aaron had once mimicked the swaggering gait of a huge, shirtless "Negro," who was striding through Washington Square Park looking as if he would welcome a confrontation. As a boy of six or seven, I was shadowing my uncle, and, like many of the onlookers, laughing hysterically. But I also dreaded that, at any moment, the giant might whirl around and catch us in the act. This was during the 1950's, the heyday of American racist mythology.

Why did I come to Pannonia? Perhaps, the trip was an old man's way of acknowledging his own past, of reconnecting with a generation of despised, now mostly dead relatives. These were the same people Martha had abandoned, but for her own reasons. As a child, I had felt so different from my parents that I often entertained the commonplace notion that they were not my real parents. By the time I was in high school, I was terrified of being sucked into the quicksand of my family's lugubrious sensibilities. You might even say I was a coldhearted proto-snob. When I went off to college in 1961, I left the family behind—forever, I hoped.

Aaron and Martha were the exceptions. Aaron was hilarious, kind-hearted, and totally disreputable, but by the time I visited Pannonia, he was long since dead. I think I sought out Martha because she, too, had been nothing like the rest of the family. For one thing, she was not a blood relation. Also, like Aaron, she loved jokes—funny ones, not the "ho ho" variety in which several family members specialized. She also enjoyed serious conversation, which even we older children got from her straight up, not ruined by

condescension or fulsome praise. Martha embodied the adage that, to get respect, you must give respect.

Was Pannonia also a furlough from my present life, the centerpiece of which is frequent contact with my daughter, her husband, and their two children? Although I love these people dearly, I confess that I often find them wearing. Finally, I may have been trying to escape from my old man's semi-isolation and fears. Am I suffering from memory lock, or did Baudelaire or Rimbaud (or someone) write:

My immortal soul, redeem yourself,
in spite of the day alone and the night on fire?

Who am I, then? A sixty-eight year old widower and former high-school Social Studies teacher, in generally good health, and lucky enough to possess a modest amount of what is called "disposable income." That about sums me up.

My first day in Pannonia, the day before the meeting with Martha, I visited the Jewish cemetery, where I was stunned to come upon the gravestones of three people with the same surname as mine: "Shepherd." All three had died in 1945, presumably among the Jews who were deported, then slaughtered, at the war's eleventh hour. I have never felt a personal connection with the Holocaust. So far as I knew, although we had a few ne'er-do-well Pannonian relatives-by-marriage, there were no blood relatives. As for Holocaust victims in other European countries, if we had any of those, they were never mentioned. Like me, the people of my parents' generation may have preferred to burn their bridges. Irrationally, however, even though my surname is fairly common, I identified the corpses in the cemetery with the relatives I had forsaken.

"Mind the gap! You must have heard that announcement in the Berlin Metro, right, Cousin Jerome?"

“Yes, I did hear it, Martha, all the time, both in English and German. But please call me ‘Jerry.’ No one has called me ‘Jerome’ in over forty years.”

I sipped my lemonade. The day was sunny and hot, about 28 degrees Celsius. Martha, who had ordered an Espresso, chuckled, and it struck me that she still chuckled the same way she used to, at the childish antics of the gaggle of children in her crowded kitchen. The gaggle had comprised her, several other cousins and I. This was about sixty years ago, and she had changed so much, otherwise, that the old chuckle startled me.

In those days, Martha had been so fat that, when she chuckled (or did anything else), her chins shook and the plastic apron she wore over her housecoat rustled. She also had to keep pushing her black-rimmed glasses back up on her nose, because she sweated so much. Now she was a tall, bony, threadbare, but spry, old woman (about 85, I think). She still wore glasses, but the current ones had clear plastic frames. She also still had a big mole on her left cheek.

“Sorry ‘Jerry,’ it is. Well, anyway,” she explained, “I guess you could say that I ‘minded the gap.’”

I thought I understood this cryptic utterance. Martha had moved to Pannonia shortly after the Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964). Already a leftist, she must have been further radicalized by this seminal lie. By now, most Americans assume their politicians are liars, and there is probably a rock group called “Mind the Gap.”

By the time she left the U.S., Martha’s children were all in their teens. By then, too, she and my cousin Ben, her sententious academic husband, must have been sick of each other. Ben was the kind of man who enjoyed pulling nickels from our ears, then giving them to us. I think Martha

divorced him before she left, but maybe he divorced her, for desertion. Through the fragile, but still extant, family grapevine, I do know that Ben has long since remarried. But I have no idea to whom; nor do I care.

The rest of that first meeting with Martha was spent reminiscing. She listened with a tired smile to my account of another well-worn story about Aaron. In this one, also from the 1950's, he had chaperoned two of his nephews, Ben (already Martha's husband) and his younger brother, Willy, to a lecture in New Jersey. The plan was to find a place to eat supper first. But, when their bus dropped them near the site of the lecture, they discovered that there was only one option, a small, upscale place. They went in, anyway, and, while they were waiting to be seated, Aaron looked over the fancy menu.

Knowing him, at this point, he probably winked at his nephews. Then, turning his winning smile on the Maitre d', without preamble he said, in his most posh accent, "Well, then, my good man, you do serve terrapin soup here, don't you?" As he knew, they did not. "Pity, in that case, I guess we'll just have to look elsewhere." And I imagine him shepherding his nephews back outside while the man stood there, open-mouthed.

Although she must have heard this story many times, Martha laughed. "That's right, Jerry," she said, "Aaron was a real wag." Neither of us mentioned that his wife had divorced him when he drew all their money from a joint savings account one day and lost it at the track.

As she had already told me, Martha was a freelance translator. After about an hour's conversation, she announced that she had to return to work. But first she invited me to a gathering of "a few friends" at one of their homes the next

evening, specifying that drinks and dessert would be served (which implied that dinner would not).

"You'll get to meet some specimens of the Pannonian intelligentsia, Cousin Jerry," she said. "My friends: a bunch of characters!"

I accepted the invitation readily, not only because I am always interested in meeting new people, but because I was curious about the kind of friends Martha would have. She gave me the address of her friend's place, and directions from my two-star hotel, which was in the hills just outside of town on one of the main tramlines. I had already ridden the tram, the screeching of which happily evoked the trolley cars of my Bronx childhood.

The next evening, the weather was still hot and humid. (When I got home a week later, I would read about severe rainstorms and flooding across central Europe, including Pannonia. There were pictures of people rowing down the streets in the cities and towns.) Arriving a few fashionable minutes late, I was handed a small plate of cookies and a glass of the local sweet wine. Martha brought me over to a group of five who were seated on a couch and straight chairs. Like her, three of them were wearing old-fashioned, well-worn clothes, but the other two were conspicuously chic. The woman wore garish make-up and a black-and-white art deco outfit, and the man sported a sort of modified toreador suit. One of the un-chic women was strikingly beautiful.

"This is my cousin Jerry from New York, everyone." They made room for me on the couch, and Martha introduced them, one by one. The women were both journalists. One of the men was a colleague of Martha's. The toreador was a playwright, and the last man was a poet and the night

manager of a small hotel. Introductions completed, Martha left us for another group.

After some pleasantries, they asked me what I had done in Pannonia so far. I told them about the cemetery and about my visit to the excellent art museum that afternoon. I mentioned that a guard whom I had chatted up had told me that, even on the streets of her hometown, Sarajevo, smoking was now banned.

"The wave of the future," remarked the stylish woman, sounding disgusted. She took a long drag on her cigarette, which she smoked through a holder. "No one in the whole world will be permitted to smoke anymore. There will be a pandemic of suicides." Everyone laughed. About half the other people in the room were smoking, two or three, pipes; the rest, cigarettes.

"Were there any paintings you particularly admired, Mr. Shepherd?" asked the tall angular beauty, whom I had already mentally undressed.

"Well, there were so many ... it's hard to say. But I certainly won't forget Jan Steen's 'The Pregnant Bride.'" There were several knowing nods. This painting depicts an old man leading his obviously pregnant bride away from a party, while a wag makes the "cuckoo" sign behind his back.

"Have you visited our celebrated Cathedral yet, Jerry?" asked the toreador. I said that I had. "Did you happen to encounter the toothache statue?" Since I had not, he enlightened me.

Apparently, in the Apostles' Nave of the Cathedral, visitors come upon a statue of the Gothic Man of Sorrows, or "Toothache Lord." The soubriquet stems from a legend. A group of drunken fools were stumbling around the church

one night when they came upon the statue and mocked it, claiming it looked as if our Lord were suffering from toothache. They even went so far as to tie a cloth around the statue's head. Immediately, every one of the drunks was stricken with severe toothache, from which they did not recover until they had abased themselves before the statue.

As the story was being told, my fellow-listeners wore knowing smiles, and when I laughed at the punch line, they all joined in. At this point, predictably, our talk turned to politics. The beauty referred to what was called "The Big Lie."

"The Big Lie is that Pannonia is now a democracy."

The others nodded knowingly, and the night manager explained. Speaking in heavily accented English, and looking over his shoulder from time to time, which I surmised was a vestige of the Soviet era, which had only ended in the early 1990's, he repeatedly apologized.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jerry," he said, "I don't want to spoil your visit, but..." and "I don't want to interrupt the conversation, but..." "Sixty-six percent of our population voted for this right-wing government of ours. And every month, they are enacting terrible new laws, such as media censorship with severe penalties, including prison, for even the most trivial offenses. Their latest one, would you believe it, is straight from Franz Kafka. It imposes fines on people for being homeless!"

"That's ridiculous!" I said. "How are they supposed to pay?"

"Exactly," said the beauty.

I did not have to ask the hotel manager how the right-wing party had managed to wrest two-thirds of the vote from

the incumbents. The general shabbiness and sense of deprivation in what I had seen of Pannonia confirmed what I had read before the trip: in six years, the previous party had ruined what had already been a weak economy.

As is often the case, politics, which fueled the conversation for a while, killed it. As our group dispersed, to my regret I noticed that the beauty appeared to be attached to the toreador. The party quickly wound down.

Martha and I agreed to meet again at our café, this time for lunch two days later, just before I was scheduled to decamp for Vienna. As she showed me out, since no one asked me for contact information, I just uttered a general goodbye to the room. It was only about ten-thirty, and the trams were still running, so I declined her offer to escort me back to my hotel, and easily found my own way. Back in the large, comfortable room, I read myself to sleep over the memoirs of a heroic policeman during Pannonia's abortive rising against the Russians during the 1970's. By the time he wrote the book, the man was working as a janitor in Toronto.

I spent most of the next day on two long boat rides along the Danube, disembarking from the first one at the celebrated Castle for an hour or two. When both ferryboat conductors glanced at my transportation pass and waved me aboard without asking for additional fares, I wondered if their largesse was a vestige of the Communist era. As the boat meandered through the city, stopping along both banks, the fresh river breezes were a welcome relief from the heat and humidity. My day ended with dinner at a small, quiet place Martha had recommended. The food was fair.

When we met again the next day, it felt as though the ice had been broken at the party, as if I had passed some sort of test. Ordering beer and sandwiches, which I insisted I would

pay for, we settled down for what I hoped would be a long talk. The first few sips of beer quickly turned the café into a confessional.

I began by bluntly asking her, "Tell me again, Martha, exactly what made you come to Pannonia? Of course, I heard stories, mostly from my father, when he was alive, but ..." I shrugged. My father had been a notoriously unreliable narrator.

"As you know, Cousin Jerry," she began, "many people in our family were Socialists or Anarchists. In 1965, I fled the United States, in particular the military-industrial complex." She sounded as if as if she were reading from a prepared text. I had served in the Vietnam War, myself, as a clerk at a naval base in California, but I did not think it would be wise to mention that now. After another sip of beer, she continued.

"So. I came to Pannonia with the notion that my skills as a translator could serve the Party." She shook her head in disgust. "Ha! Almost from the start, I was subjected to constant political harassment." She mimicked her harassers. "'Are you an American spy, Martha? Why did you really come here, Martha?' So. At regular intervals, I was thrown in jail. I was banned from all but the worst jobs, etc. etc." She shook her head again.

"Then, in 1993, Mr. Gorbachev 'tore down that wall.' "She mimicked Reagan poorly. "No more Russians! Wasn't that wonderful? Of course, ever since that 'seminal event,' after which our 'Communist oppressors' fled back to Russia with their tails between their legs, capitalism has been creeping and roaring across central Europe."

She paused to take a few bites from her sandwich and another sip of beer, which appeared to calm her down. "Now I work as a translator again, but I'm really just a poor old

woman who has been left behind by history. So. Is Socialism even possible in the world, anymore? Where should I go now, Cousin Jerry?" She sighed deeply, looking so sad I felt like weeping, myself.

"Do you want to return to the States, Martha?" I asked. "I'm sure you've thought of it."

She produced a tired smile. "Of course I have. Hundreds of times. But no, I don't want to go back. Has anything really changed since Viet Nam? Only for the worse, I'm afraid." She shook her head in disgust. "Anyway, who would be glad to see me? Oh, I know everyone would be polite, and they would make sure I wasn't thrown out on the streets. But going back would be horrible. So. For better or worse, Pannonia is my home now. And the people you met the other night are my only 'family.'"

We lapsed into silence, and I thought of Henry James' dichotomy between American innocents and European sophisticates. Which was Martha?

Suddenly, my memory was flooded by horrible images of my family: all those sick people, the diabetics with amputated limbs, the sufferers from cardiac and other diseases, the schizophrenics and bi-polars. I forced myself to remember that there had also been people in the family who were relatively normal—like Martha's children, who, I had heard, were now an English professor, a psychoanalyst, and a successful something else. But this hopeful thought was driven off by a vivid memory of the day I had loaded my sister into an ambulance and shepherded her to a mental hospital, where, three years later, aged 29, she had died under "uncertain circumstances"—suicide, presumably. I also remembered the account my mother had given me, when I was "old enough," of the marriage of two first cousins from

the Canadian branch, who had produced a handicapped child, after which the man had turned the gas on his little family.

For the minute or two during which I revisited these terrible memories, Martha and I sat in silence beneath our umbrella on the hot plaza. We picked at our food, twirled our beer glasses, and watched the trams and people come and go. Pannonians, I noticed, had a distinctive way of walking. They took stiff steps that caused a tremor in their whole bodies, and held their arms stiffly against their sides. When the silence grew oppressive, I called for the bill and paid. Martha thanked me. We got up and embraced (kisses on both cheeks, Pannonian style). Then, we stood on the pavement for another moment or two. She looked at me sympathetically.

“I’m sorry, Cousin Jerome. You should have stayed at home, or just skipped Pannonia.” That was her valediction. We walked off in opposite directions, and I anticipated that I would never see her again. Would I even hear the news of her death—or vice-versa?



2

It's All God's Will

MALA JANARDHAN

The old man sighed...

He sat in the big armchair, waiting for his friend of twenty years to join him. His wife, her arthritic fingers still able to do her needlework nimbly, glanced at him curiously. She wondered why he had called up their family friend at this late hour after dinner.

The old man thought of his wife with affection. She had been a staunch partner in his journey through life and had borne him two fine sons. The younger son had initially been his favourite with his extroverted and jovial temperament. The elder one had been of a more sombre disposition and quieter by nature.

If only his rebellious second son hadn't fallen in love with that tribal girl at twentyfive and defied his father's stern refusal to get them married. The young man had eloped with his ladylove and married her nevertheless, incurring his father's deep wrath. He had cut all ties with his younger son and had, after due thought, made a will leaving all his vast property to his sedate elder boy. Five years had passed by without lessening the unrest and pain in his heart...

He had come to love his elder son more as the years rolled by. To his chagrin, this son of his never got married but devoted all his time to managing his father's vast tea estate in

eastern India. He spent long hours poring over the accounts and driving his jeep to the remote corners of the estate in order to supervise the workers. It was on one such evening that the jeep overturned with a loud explosion while trying to avoid a passing worker and threw him into a ravine, killing him instantly.

The servants in the big bungalow were so quiet that the elderly father's suspicions were aroused. One of them had at last dared to convey the news of his son's death to him and he had collapsed utterly, unable to even comfort his equally grief-stricken wife...

Four years had passed after the tragedy and he was now nearer eighty than seventy. He had lived through these lonely years with his also aging wife, leaving the running of the estate in the hands of his capable manager. Life had lost any meaning for him. Until yesterday...

Until just yesterday, when his younger son had returned home with his wife and a six year old grandchild to mend fences and had wiped away all the bitterness from his heart. Watching the small boy playing innocently with his grandmother, something within him melted...

His second son and family had retired early after dinner tonight, leaving him alone with his wife. The tinkling of the doorbell sounded faintly in their ears and his old friend and lawyer entered the room.

Greeting him as he sat down, the old man spoke softly. "Years ago I had instructed you to make a will, which is quite meaningless now. I request you to destroy it. For my elder son is dead and after I am gone, it will only be my younger boy and his family who will manage the estate and look after his old mother. Times have changed and I am an old man

now. What is my will after all? It is all God's will. Yes, ultimately, it's all God's will. "

His friend nodded his head in silence. His wife watched as her husband sank back into the depths of the armchair, his face untroubled at last.



3

Where Waves Left Small Shells

PATTY SOMLO

Magdalena slipped out the front door, slapping her sandals against the dusty lane. Dressed in a tight blue tee-shirt and jeans just as snug, narrow-heeled bright pink sandals and toenails painted dark, she headed straight for the water.

She was sixteen or thereabouts, but lacking a birth certificate, her age could not be precisely determined. The Indian blood coursing through her veins was evident in her high cheekbones, wide dark eyes, prominent nose and brown skin brushed with copper. Of course, Magdalena also had Spanish roots and something unexpected that appeared in her face's most surprising trait—a most unforgettable pair of pale gray-green eyes.

The broken concrete path Magdalena hurried along after stepping off the dirt lane had split apart in a massive earthquake two decades before she was born. That walkway led to a set of rotting wooden steps. At the bottom, Magdalena slid her pink sandals off and felt the loose dry sand sink under her toes.

Magdalena strode across the wide beach and stopped, at the point where waves left small shells in quiet arcs. The breeze coming in from the sea was warm. She gazed out toward the horizon but nothing broke the flat monotony of that blue line.

Whispering to herself, Magdalena let out the first hint of what was on her mind.

“It will come,” she said, the words carried on her breath.

Magdalena wasn't sure what the ship would look like. If asked, she would have shrugged.

Unbeknownst to Magdalena, people in *barrios* throughout the capitol were heading toward the beach to join her. At about the same time, without anyone coordinating or leading or trying to convince them to act, they let out a collective sigh. Like Magdalena, some hadn't been born when the young guerrillas with their long hair and beards marched into the capitol, promising the sort of life few dared to dream of—enough food to eat, doctors to treat them when they were sick, and the ability to read and write. But they had been brought up hearing stories about the time when hope sprouted like the bright red coffee beans that appeared each spring on the volcanic hillsides where guerrillas trained and fought.

For most, the walk to the beach meant missing work or failing to make breakfast for their children. Each in their separate ways, experienced feelings they only had in church or while making love. Or sadly, after downing one too many shots of the local rum.

Several minutes after reaching the beach, Magdalena turned her gaze away from the horizon. She watched as Alejandro Sanchez inched his way across the soft sand. The old man moved like a seesaw, the cane in his left hand acting as a lever pushing him up, while a few seconds later his shoulders and torso seesawed back down.

“*Buenos dias,*” Sanchez said when he reached Magdalena's side. He was out of breath.

“Are you here for....” Sanchez hesitated, not sure whether to go on.

“Yes,” Magdalena said, as if she knew exactly what Sanchez intended.

“That is good,” he assured her. “Then we will wait together.”

Up until today, the old guerrilla commander had barely left the house, since the morning two years before when a stroke caused his right cheek to drop, his pistol arm to hang useless at his side and his foot to feel too heavy to lift and set down. Thirty years ago to the day, Sanchez, a young man then, had marched into the capitol at the front of a column of victorious rebels. It had been years now since the government or the people had celebrated that day, when the brutal dictator was overthrown, and few could recall the hope they had felt or the dreams they’d had for a better life.

Sanchez had no uniform to put on, except for a faded black beret tacked to his bedroom wall and a pin bearing the letters *FRL* for Revolutionary Front for Liberation. Using his good left hand, Sanchez pulled the tack out from the beret’s soft center, letting it drop to the floor, as he grasped the hat’s edges in his palm.

After setting the beret atop his head, a fringe of white hair peaking out, Commander Sanchez slowly opened a wooden door in the center of the purple bougainvillea-draped wall at the front of his house. Using his cane, he stepped cautiously down the lane, the bottom tip of his cane picking up dust as he walked.

A few minutes passed before Sanchez and Magdalena were joined on the beach by Alicia Mendoza. As Alicia made her way to the water’s edge, she recognized Sanchez, even

though she hadn't seen him for nearly a decade. She looked out toward the horizon, assuring herself that she hadn't arrived too late. There wasn't a single vessel or anything breaking the water's aquamarine monotony.

Alicia Mendoza had once been in love with Commander Sanchez. Or *in lust* might have been a better way to say how her cheeks flushed, whenever Alejandro Sanchez came near.

Alicia hadn't known the dangers of what she was about to take on—carrying notes from guerrillas to their urban supporters—after meeting and falling in love with the guerrilla commander. Somehow, she managed to not get caught. Friends weren't so lucky. Picked up by the dictator's thugs, they'd been tortured, their bodies dumped at the outskirts of the city as a warning to others.

"All for love," Alicia whispered moments before she left the house, as she recalled the risks she'd taken to meet Sanchez in the mountains. Not long after the guerrillas seized power, Sanchez got involved with someone else. In less than three months' time, that woman became Sanchez's wife.

At nearly fifty, Alicia Mendoza was still a beauty. One of the country's most respected poets, she had also become known for her scandalous love life. Some said Mendoza was the country's first truly liberated woman, not bothering to marry her lovers—some, in fact, were already married—and having three children out of wedlock.

Maybe it was the anniversary that drew her out of the house and toward the water. Whatever the reason, Alicia Mendoza slipped on a white cap-sleeved cotton dress in the old peasant style with large red and yellow embroidered flowers. She slid her feet into a pair of backless silver sandals and stepped out the front door into the damp heat of another exhausted morning.

As soon as Alejandro, Alicia and Magdalena were in their places, others from *barrios* throughout the city began moving closer to the beach. No one could explain how this sentiment traveled so quickly, except that hope which had fueled the country's revolution had lain dormant for years in that lush humid place. Some incorrectly assumed hope had drowned in the afternoon downpours that turned the dusty roads and lanes into rushing rivers of mud. Others feared that during the war which followed the guerrillas' triumph, when the dictator's thugs fought to regain power, every ounce of hope had been left to bleed on the ground, the dust soaked red and mothers sobbing. There were even suggestions that what hope remained had been swallowed up in alcohol and drugs, in prostitution, gangs and, of course, in husbands beating children and wives.

But, miraculously, hope had survived. And in each one of those tiny tin-roofed houses that crowded the capitol, a man, woman or child was managing to find a shred of it.

The morning appeared as ordinary as any other. By ten o'clock, the sun pelted the dust, creating a nearly white reflection that was blinding. You could see women walking, dressed in short, brightly colored polyester sundresses and cheap rubber thongs. A few carried babies.

A handful of men walked as well. The older ones wore wide-brimmed straw hats that hid their faces from the burning sun.

With so many children in that city, the young practically swarmed toward the shore. It looked like the old days before the brutal crackdown, when students massed in the central part of the city and demonstrated, calling for the dictator to go.

Having been the first person to arrive, Magdalena voiced the intentions of everyone, even while some people were still arriving.

“I think it’s going to be a big white ship,” she said and turned toward Commander Sanchez and smiled. “Like one of those cruise ships on the billboards alongside the boulevard.”

The old commander had imagined something more unassuming.

“I was thinking,” he said, turning toward Magdalena but gazing out toward the water, “it will be a very small fishing boat. People always expect something big and flashy. But I have learned in my life that the thing or person of real substance is quite modest.”

“You sound almost religious,” Alicia said to him now.

“Faith is not restricted to religion,” he said, flashing her a wry smile, though the right side of his lip drooped some. “Faith is what fueled the revolution. Without faith, dreams are impossible.”

“Yes,” she said and lifted her fingers to her chest, quickly making the sign of the cross. People who knew Alicia’s past would have been surprised.

“I am thinking that it will be a yacht,” she said. “The crew members will be young and very handsome.”

By now, the crowd gathered along the water’s edge had grown to several hundred and people were still arriving. Magdalena alternated between gazing out toward the horizon and keeping an eye on the crowd. She did not want to lose her place up front. When the ship sailed in, the girl wanted to be first to get on board.

For such a large crowd, the beach was surprisingly silent. And that distinguished this gathering from the

demonstrations that led to the guerrilla war, which toppled the dictator. Those gatherings were noisy affairs, with several organizers leading chants. Musicians played and sang songs written for the struggle. Participants used large spoons to bang the bottoms of aluminum pans.

This warm morning on the beach, though, each person was lost in his or her own thoughts. Though the crowd had gathered in the same place and at the very same time, the individuals came for their own selfish reasons.

Magdalena noticed the ship when it was almost too far away to be spotted. As she stared at the place along the edge of the horizon, the outlines of the white vessel waved, like air often does when the temperature is stifling. Tears formed in her eyes and that made it hard to see. Would the ship turn and head toward the beach or keep going, until the outline eventually disappeared?

About this time, the old commander saw what he'd been waiting for—a small trawler. The thin metal arms for holding nets formed a dark skeletal outline, like raised triangles, against the bright blue-white horizon. He recalled the feeling of happiness and pride, when he'd led the column of guerrillas into the capitol. Though the people on the beach were still silent, he could now hear shouts and applause from the crowds that lined the route that day, along the city's main boulevards.

So too did Alicia spot her yacht. The sleek white vessel still sailed a ways out. Nonetheless, Alicia managed to glimpse those handsome guys working on the deck, muscles visible, as the heat forced them to strip their shirts off.

Alicia was surprised to feel a desire rise up, a sensation she hadn't experienced in a long time. She turned to her left, where Alejandro Sanchez, an old man now, had his gaze

planted toward the horizon. For some reason difficult to explain, Alicia recalled the way Alejandro looked in the days when she met him in the mountains. His thick hair, now white, was the blackest shade of black, almost blue. She could feel its thickness on her fingers now, without reaching out her hand.

One by one, the other people on the beach began to notice the particular type of ship each of them had expected. Like those of Magdalena, Alejandro and Alicia, the ships of the people in the crowd hovered along the magical line that blurred the separation between sea and sky. Whether the ship came into shore or not, each man and woman experienced a feeling as if it had. A woman named Berta, who made a meager living cleaning rich people's houses, realized this feeling was better than the one she had each week when she bought a ticket for the lottery. A very religious woman named Elena thought it came close to praying in the cathedral, where she went alone to ask God's help.

The sun climbed higher as the crowd hung out on the beach and waited. On a normal day, no one would have lingered, letting the sun beat down on them, with the humidity so thick, the air felt damp enough to shower. But hope is a surprising thing and it can make even the most cynical person into a believer. A woman in the crowd named Marta Guttierrez was known by her neighbors as a non-stop complainer. *That Marta*, her closest neighbor Alma Martinez liked to say, *will complain even after she's dead*. Yet standing on that sizzling sand, the sweat running in two separate streams down the sides of her chubby face, Marta didn't have a bad word to say.

Normally at this time of day, Marta would have been in the hot kitchen of her employer's house cooking the

afternoon meal. Having arrived to work just after dawn, Marta would have been muttering to herself about the pain in her feet and calves, her ankles swollen from the heat, and wishing for a break when she could finally sit down. Out there on the beach Marta saw that the view was endless, and something beautiful existed beyond the small cramped box of a kitchen where she had wasted her life.

Though the people on the sand did not speak to those on their left and right, there appeared to be an understanding that they had all come for the same reason. Even after several hours, people stayed, though they had no leader, clear agenda or plan.

Juan Pedro Calderón, the country's vice-president, rode past the gathering in a black air-conditioned Mercedes. When he reached the office, he made a call.

"Any idea what this is about?" VP Calderón asked Manuel Fernandez, the parliamentary representative from the poorest section of the capitol.

"No idea," Fernandez responded. "I've been trying to find out myself."

Like Calderón and many members of parliament, Fernandez had been a guerrilla fighter before the revolutionary government seized power. Even now, he considered himself a man of the people, though he lived in a large air-conditioned house surrounded by eighteen-foot high stucco walls.

Fernandez's once lean physique had grown flabby. He still wore short-sleeved white cotton peasant shirts, wrinkled linen trousers and sandals. But the shirts that once hung loosely over his slender frame stretched taut against his substantial belly now.

As he walked down the wide main boulevard from his office, Fernandez couldn't help but recall that day thirty years before. What struck him thinking about it was how friendly the crowd seemed and how he felt a part of each man, woman and child. They were brothers and sisters, having fought together and triumphed for this beautiful cause.

Earlier that day, he had stood with the other fighters watching the dictator's plane leave the country. Like so many others, Fernandez believed the terror and cruelty, the poverty and childhood diarrhea, the illiteracy and hunger would be vanishing, along with that plane.

It was much harder than we thought, he said to some imaginary listeners, suddenly feeling the need to explain.

The heat was oppressive. Fernandez couldn't recall the last time he had walked this far. And when was the last time he'd stepped onto the beach? Why, it had to have been when he was still a child.

Even after every person on the sand had seen the outlines of the vessel he or she had come for, no one felt inclined to go. It was one thing to hope but quite another to take faith a step further. Magdalena, along with the others, sensed this but wasn't sure yet what else she ought to do.

"The ship," Magdalena said, turning to look at the old commander as her right hand gestured toward the water. "I saw it."

"I know," Sanchez replied, nodding his head. "I saw it too."

At that moment, Alicia on Sanchez's right added, "I saw it myself."

Magdalena knew what she wanted to say but wasn't ready to send those words out into the humid air. She had

seen the ship. There could be no argument about that. And these two older people who'd lived through so much hardship and also joy and who understood things about life the teenage girl couldn't possibly imagine had seen ships as well. But the fact remained. Not a single vessel had turned toward the beach where that anxious and hungry group of people still waited.

Since Magdalena had been the first to arrive, she also needed to be the one to express what needed to be said.

"They're not coming for us."

The words were uttered barely above a whisper. As soon as she'd said them, Magdalena wanted to take the words back, swallow each syllable whole and forget she'd even considered the individual letters. But it was too late.

"No," Sanchez agreed. "They are not."

Not wanting to be excluded from the conversation, Alicia Mendoza piped up.

"Not even one," Alicia added.

Now, Magdalena considered stepping into the water. She was a fair swimmer and thought perhaps she might be able to power her way out to the horizon. Without thinking more, she stepped one foot forward and then another.

The girl might have kept going if she hadn't looked up. When she did, her eyes were drawn immediately out toward the horizon. What she saw was exactly what she had seen for most of her short life. The ship she had hoped for and even glimpsed momentarily was gone.

At this same instant, Fernandez arrived at the spot where a few half-rotted wooden steps led down to the sand. The beach was so crowded with people, the sand was barely visible. It occurred to Fernandez as he took one step down

and then another that those practically broken stairs might not hold his weight. And as he often did, Fernandez chided himself to start eating less.

Normally in a crowd of his constituents as this group appeared to be, many people would approach to inform him of some particular need. Nothing of the sort occurred today. Fernandez noticed immediately that everyone on the beach stood facing the water. Fernandez looked in that direction as well.

"They must be waiting for something," Fernandez mumbled to himself. "What could it be?"

As soon as he stepped down the last of the stairs, Fernandez tapped a middle-aged woman in a red polyester dress on the shoulder.

"*Señora,*" he said. "What is going on here?"

Without taking her gaze away from the horizon, the woman said, "We are waiting."

"Yes, I can see that," Fernandez said. "But what exactly are you waiting for?"

"A ship," the woman answered simply.

Fernandez thought for a moment. Like many in the region, his government had tried to entice the lucrative cruise lines to add the capitol and a few coastal villages to their stops. But the country's poverty and crime had discouraged them from agreeing thus far.

"What kind of ship?" Fernandez asked. "And when is it scheduled to arrive?"

"The ship has already come," she told him. "Now I am waiting to see if it will return."

Fernandez pushed his way through the crowd, trying to get closer to the water.

"Excuse me," he said, lightly touching arms to his right and left, while swiveling his pudgy torso sideways to make the narrow spaces between people wider.

It was slow going, the crowd barely shifting, everyone so intent on the view out past the shoreline.

After a good twenty minutes, Fernandez was in sight of the water's edge. That's when he spotted the old commander, Alejandro Sanchez. And next to him, the poet Alicia Mendoza. What in the world, he wondered, could have possibly brought them there?

Fernandez wrestled himself next to Sanchez on the left, shoving Magdalena to the side.

"*Comandante*," Fernandez said, his hand resting gingerly on Sanchez's shoulder.

Unlike the others, the old commander took his gaze away from the horizon to look at the legislator.

"Happy Anniversary," Sanchez said, a slow grin stretching across his lips. "Thirty years, isn't it?"

"Yes," Fernandez said. "In some ways, it seems like yesterday. In other ways, that time feels like another life."

"Another life, yes," Sanchez agreed with the last statement. "And here we are, after all the lives lost, back where we started."

"What do you mean, *Comandante*? The dictator is gone."

"Yes, but there was more to the revolution than just getting rid of the dictator. We had dreams. And so many plans. Have you forgotten?"

Fernandez shuffled his feet against the sand, creating a smooth deep hole. Then he watched as the water seeped in, filling the narrow space, and cooling his toes.

Ignoring Sanchez's question, Fernandez went on to ask his own.

"What are you doing here, *Comandante*?"

"I am waiting."

Sanchez lifted his one good arm and hand, trying to take in the crowd behind him.

“I am waiting like everybody else.”

“But what are you and all these people waiting for, sir?”

“We are simply waiting,” Sanchez said, giving Fernandez another coy smile.

Then he added, “We are waiting to see if the ship will come in.”

“I don’t understand. I don’t understand what you mean,” Fernandez said.

“I know you don’t. That’s why we’re all here.”

Fernandez thought about the commander’s response and then did what seemed to make the most sense. He turned and planted his gaze out toward the horizon like everybody else.

If asked, Fernandez couldn’t have said what he was looking for. But suddenly, that wasn’t important.

Because Fernandez had suddenly found himself with a terrible yearning. A yearning to see a ship. *It will be red*, he would have said, if anyone asked for details. *Bright red and shiny.*

Fernandez was sure of that.



4

Sodium Balls and Halloween

REV. ROBERT P. MITCHELL

That unforgettable Halloween came in our senior year, which would have made it 1956. Hickey stopped me in the hall on the way to Senior English class. "Hey Mitchell!" (We always called each other by our last names) "Whaddaya doin' for Halloween this year?"

"Nothin', really. We're too old for trick-or-treatin'."

"I got a great idea. Stop by the shop tonight and I'll tell y' about it." Off he went in the other direction. I started to say, "English is this way," but I waved a hapless hand at his back, knowing he was about to cut class again.

His shop used to be his father's garage, but somehow Hickey must have cajoled "the old man" (his words) into letting him have it to work on his motorcycle and other mechanical projects. It was on the way home for me, so after school that day, I stopped by. As I stood at the open door I could see he had oil smudges from finger tips to elbows as he sat on the ground, wrench in hand, removing some part of his old pre-war Indian motorcycle. I imagined this "machine," as he always referred to it, was the love of his life. I mean, I never saw Hickey with a girl, or even speak about girls. He certainly wasn't gay, so what was I to think? We all had to love something.

“Come on, Mitch,” he said with a blazing, toothy smile, his sky-blue eyes sparkling. A charming dimple in his right cheek always appeared when he smiled like that. Once he told me he wanted to be a dentist, and therefore always kept his teeth in perfect order.

“Whacha doin’?” I asked.

“Oh, this damn clutch is forever givin’ me grief. You know, it’s a bitch getting parts for an old machine like this.”

I shrugged. “Yeah—now, what’s this Halloween business all about?”

He got up, and after wiping his hands, he showed me a half-gallon-size glass jug full of what looked to me like very large mothballs, except they were dark grey. I looked from him to the jar and back again, puzzled.

He laughed. “Don’t worry! I’ll show you what to do on Halloween night.”

He must have hung around the chemistry room so that when Mr. Kulak stepped away for a minute, Hickey swiped this jug of sodium balls. We knew that when you joined an unstable element like sodium with another unstable element like chloride, it would become a stable compound, in this case, sodium chloride, or table salt. Hickey, ever the experimenter, also discovered for himself how explosive it can be to join an unstable element like sodium with a stable compound like water. Sodium plus water produces caustic sodium hydroxide and highly flammable hydrogen gas, resulting in an explosion. My chemistry is a bit rusty, but the formula looks something like this: $\text{Na} + \text{H}_2\text{O} \rightarrow \text{NaOH} + \text{H}_2$!, the last arrow means that one molecule of hydrogen is released to the air kaboom!

Hickey was not about to explain. You'll see, he said with a twinkle in his eyes. The wheels of naughtiness just got a jump-start.

So, on Halloween night we set out to have some fun. I was quite apprehensive about what Hickey considered "fun."

We went to the houses of people we didn't like, such as my next-door neighbor, a certain Mrs. Messerly—an old battle-ax, if ever there was one. She always yelled at the neighborhood kids for any slight infringement of her property. She even built a wrought iron fence to keep us out. It wasn't a high fence, maybe three feet or so, consisting of iron poles painted black and held together by decorative bars along the top, punctuated by what looked like large arrow heads every six feet or so at the top of a pole. After her husband died, she reinforced it with chicken wire. If we hit a ball accidentally into her yard, she was there to confiscate it. And she never gave it back.

We had a number of apple trees in our back yard, the remains of an apple orchard from long before we lived here. The tree nearest Mrs. Messerly's fence still produced a good many apples. My mother loved to make pies and dumplings with them. Part of the tree hung over the Messerly fence, and deposited apples in her yard. She picked the good ones for herself and threw the rotten ones back into our yard. It was my job to clean up the apples, separating good from bad, a messy business, so I especially resented her compounding my work.

So I didn't object to doing her a bit of mischief.

Hickey carefully placed a small tray of water under the front doorstep, then put a sodium ball on the small lip in front of the outside storm door, placed so that when the door opens outward, the sodium ball would be pushed into the

pan of water directly underneath. I hadn't experienced the chemistry of what would happen next, but Hickey had, so he knew I'd be just as surprised as Mrs. Messerly would be.

We worked quickly and quietly. When everything was in place, I rang the bell and we both ran to hide behind the nearest bush. Mrs. Messerly came to the door. She opened the inside door, but not the outside one. With her glasses against the pane, she squinted through the window suspiciously. We assumed she knew full well it was Halloween, and expected trick-or-treaters. When she didn't see anybody, she opened the outside door for a better look to see who rang her bell.

"Whoo-oosh!"

A jet flame shot up in front of her, causing her to jump back, dislodging her glasses. She shrieked as we expected. We snickered from behind the bush, and took her moment of confusion to make our escape.

After three of these visits, it was not surprising that we heard police sirens from downtown, screaming their way towards Susquehanna Avenue. Hickey hissed, "Let's get the hell out of here!"

He jumped on his old Indian motorcycle and cranked the engine into full roar. I jumped on behind him, and we headed down Susquehanna Avenue as fast as we could. I held the jar of sodium balls in my right arm, while wrapping my left arm around Hickey's waist, holding on for dear life.

The jar was heavy. There must have been twenty-five or thirty sodium balls left. It was becoming more and more slippery in my sweaty hand.

"Where'r we goin'?" I shouted over the din of the Indian.

"We have to get rid of these things," he hollered back. "If we get caught with 'em, we're dead meat."

"Where we gonna do that?"

"The Susquehanna."

"Can't we put these back?" I pleaded. "What's Mr. Kulak gonna do for lab experiments?"

"Forget it! You wanna get caught for breakin' and enterin', too?"

End of discussion.

We roared straight for the Lockport Bridge without passing a squad car, lucky for us. They must have come up Church Street or Main Street when we went down Water Street. It's a wonder they didn't hear us, the Indian was so noisy! I nearly dropped the jar a couple of times, going over the railroad tracks and taking curves at high speed. And, I almost lost my grip on Hickey, as he laid the motorcycle almost to the ground turning left onto the bridge.

"Wait 'til we get to the other side," he called over the din. He slowed down as we approached the Lockport side, and pulled the cycle as close to the bridge railing as he could.

"NOW!" he shouted.

I heaved the jar over the side to my right, much as a football quarterback laterals the ball as he's being tackled. In the several seconds it took for the jar to reach the water, Hickey made it to the far end of the bridge and turned the machine around, so we could get back to the Lock Haven side.

The night was clear, but dark, without a moon. A mile downstream, the lights on the Constitution Bridge sparkled. As we came back across the bridge to the spot where I had

tossed the jar, a fireworks display rivaling a Fourth of July celebration shot up from the river below. Fiery balls of sodium hissed straight up in the sky, some bending in giant arches back towards the river, with tails of brilliant white flame in their wake. We were about thirty feet above the water, and some of the blazing balls flew as high as the bridge scaffolding high above us. Fragments sputtered down on the roadway near us.

The sky glistened with sodium balls bursting into flame like giant fireflies, streaming light behind them like shooting stars, from the top of the bridge back down to the water. Many balls fizzled out as they flew and fell back into the river, only to explode all over again, creating a circus-like display of hurly-burly lights, hissing and humming through the air.

Hickey slowed down to take it all in. "Holy shit!" was his superlative for the fireworks show he had engineered. In pure wonderment, I tried to see every flash and stream of light dancing all around us.

Suddenly, a ball bounced off the machine, its fire not yet spent. Another hit me on the arm. "Ouch!" I screamed.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" Hickey shouted.

His concern was more for the motorcycle than for us, but he was just as anxious that the cops might see this dazzling display from the city on the other side of the bridge. He knew that if they did, they'd come racing in our direction, and if they got here in the next few moments, they would cut off our escape route. Jim didn't want to go the Lockport side, now behind us, because he already had an alibi plan in mind.

He gunned the old Indian back to its throaty roar, and off we went like a guided missile. As I desperately clung to

him, now with two arms around his waist, I looked back over my shoulder to watch sodium balls still popping and fizzing all over the place. Hickey drove as one possessed, straight over the bridge, past the courthouse, and made for Jordens Alley, half a block straight ahead. He swung into it, and quickly stopped in the shadows of the darkest building he could find, abruptly shutting off the noisy engine.

The silence jarred my ears. Putting an index finger to his lips, “Shhhhh,” he jumped off the machine. We both froze as we heard patrol cars on the main streets to either side. We cringed as beams from the swirling red lights bounced off the nearby buildings.

“Come on!” At this whispered command, he began to push the bike up the alleyway toward his house. He grabbed the handlebars, while I swung around to push from the other side. At some point, we had to get over to Willards Alley, a block over, the one that went past Hickey’s shop. He knew that sooner or later the police would stop by his shop to see if he were there.

We rolled the bike as quickly as we could, especially when we had to cross a main street, but we had to stop at least twice in dark shadows, as squad cars passed by on the main drags. Thank heaven, no officer thought to check the alleys. Of course, they were not only looking for us, but listening for the boisterous sound of the old Indian as well.

I gotta hand it to Hickey—he knew—he had it all figured out. I shivered at the thought of getting caught. What would my mother say? And Dad? Forget about it.

By the time we got to his shop, we were both dripping with sweat. Hickey immediately swung open the large front door of the shop and switched on all the lights, inside and out. He

quickly disassembled the Indian's hot gearbox, with much swearing from burnt hands touching hot engine parts. After spreading the parts on the floor, we found rags to wipe away our sweat, and sat down, to try to appear cool.

As if on cue, we heard tires approaching, crunching on gravel, accompanied by the extra-bright head lights, and we saw those ominous, twirling lights from atop the squad car, splashing red on sheds and trees alike.

The squad car stopped right in front of the shop door, engine and lights still running. The officer stepped out, slowly. Deliberately he walked around the front of the car, passing through the headlights, so that his sidearm, ammunition belt, and badge all glinted in the headlights. His large frame overpowered the open doorway of the shop. With his dark glasses glinting in Jim's shop lights, we couldn't tell who or what he was looking at. A tense eternity passed as he stood there, thumbs locked in his gun belt. He leaned against the doorframe, staring at us, trying to make up his mind what to do, I suspect.

Having wiped away my sweat, I tried very hard to appear as calm as Hickey. I couldn't look at the cop; I tried to concentrate on what Hickey was doing, parts all over the place, and Hickey looking as though he had lost a piece of something or other. Neither of us spoke.

Suddenly, as if he hadn't noticed him before, Hickey looked up and flashed one of his winning smiles at the poker-faced officer. "Oh—hi there, Officer Clancy! Com'on in!" Hickey chimed in his cheerful baritone, motioning him to a seat as if he had been expecting him to drop by and hang out with us—which wouldn't have been the first time. Jim knew the entire troop as well as they knew him.

Officer Clancy stood there, stone-faced, looking at us without a word. He seemed to be deciding what to say. Slowly, a knowing smile crept over his face, but at the same time, he tried to suppress it. Finally, his body relaxed, and with a broad, okay-you-got-me-this-time smile, he raised his right hand in mock salute.

"You boys have a good evenin'." Shaking his index finger towards us, he continued, "Stay out of trouble now, y' hear?"

"Sure thing!" Jim beamed.

"No problem, sir!" I offered.

As he dipped his head toward us we could see our own reflections in his air force-style glasses whiz past us. His right eyebrow raised to stick out above his glasses, he turned back toward the car, solemnly shaking his head in defeat. He retraced his steps, got in, turned off his top light, and once again we heard the slow crunch of tires on stones down the alley.

When the tire-scrunching faded into the darkness, we heaved a joint sigh of relief.



5

Guru

FRANK CAVANO

From the East and the West they had come to hear her speak. The red rock gates of Sedona had welcomed them all and directed them to a large opening in the land where they could await her arrival and her wisdom. Shantia now stood on a modest platform, raised ever-so-slightly above the crowd, preparing herself to listen and to speak. Many minutes seemed to pass as she waded into the depths of her now silent mind. At last, she was ready.

Bowing to all in attendance, Shantia spoke softly with a voice made powerful by the tenderness emanating from it. "Today we shall speak only of gratitude." The crowd grew restless. Each had brought with him a burning question or painful problem and did not want this major event confined to a single topic. "Who will be the first to speak", she asked?

A man, red-faced and troubled, rose from his blanket and asked his question with a shout. "Am I then to be grateful for the loss of my job and my income"? "My friend, you are angry and I understand." "You look toward the future which appears bleak to you and this perception is causing your frustration." Then Shantia, with a voice at once gentle and authoritative, cautioned him to take one day at a time adding that the most important lessons usually come

during the most difficult times. Before he had regained his seat on his blanket, a woman rose to speak.

This woman with strings for hair and wearing a torn and soiled shirt could not hold back her tears as she began to tell her story. "I have been wandering throughout the South since Hurricane Katrina took all that I owned." "I heard that you were coming here and wondered if you might teach me how to pray so that I could regain what I have lost." "There is nothing wrong in praying for things but, in life, loss is inevitable as you have already learned." "I no longer pray for anything specific but, instead, that I see each event as God or Spirit would have me see it." "I am thus a willing student in a world which is nothing but a classroom." "There will come a day when you will see it in the same way and peace will be a frequent visitor." "In the meantime be sure that you have my love and, more importantly, God's."

Although she had heard from only two guests so far Shantia could see that people were looking for her to fix their earthly problems. They were seeing her as someone with special gifts, as a miracle worker. Now was the time to clarify her role at this gathering. "You call me 'guru' and believe that I have powers to fix your lives but this is not so." "I see the pain you are experiencing and I care deeply about each one of you but I have no special powers and am not a fixer." "I can only teach you what I have learned from my own internal guru and that is that each of you has an internal guru of your own." "You tend to look outside your self for solutions not realizing that the entire physical world is but the tip of an iceberg and that the hidden part of the iceberg is your true identity." Shantia then told the gathering that, within this iceberg, resides one's very own guru to be called on

whenever peacefulness has been replaced by the pain of life's circumstances.

"If this is so, another woman countered with much doubt in her tone, how does one contact this personal guru?" Shantia stated that it would necessitate exhausting the rational mind until it held no thoughts at all and a sound of silence would then welcome the internal guru. She then added that one should begin by taking a favorite spiritual passage or, alternatively, one that had proved puzzling to the student. The rational mind would then concentrate on the passage until mental fatigue produced a complete absence of thoughts. Knowing that many in her audience would associate a great fearfulness with an absence of thought, Shantia assured the listeners that profound peace and not fear would be the result. She noted that additional benefits occasionally would occur such as the healing of a physical problem or the resolution of a troubling situation or relationship. Then she stressed that peace was the greater gift and the prime reason for calling on the guru. One should not feel that he had failed if no bonus gifts arrived.

Now even as she spoke of the internal guru and how to contact it, Shantia knew that many would not comprehend what she was offering them and most would not try this meditative process. She hoped that a few in the crowd possessed the readiness to try but had absolute confidence that, for those who would not try, heaven would provide alternate paths that they might ultimately awaken to the wonder and majesty of What They Are.

Soon the questions began again and continued for some time. Shantia had no idea how long the questioners had persisted because she was apart from time now. No matter what question came forth she resided in the silence of which

she had spoken. Out of that silence came the knowledge that all who were present were, in reality, an extension of the single, perfect and eternal Spirit of the Creator. She did not budge from that knowledge regardless of the form of the problem presented to her. A tragedy and slight nuisance were the same to her, both failing to demonstrate the truth of our Being as protected, loved and loving Spirit.

But now the sun was beginning to hide behind the red rock formations to the west and even Shantia discerned that this day was coming to an end. Agreeing to take one last question, she watched a man rise to pose it. "You said at the beginning that this gathering would be about nothing but gratitude but you have covered so many things and so I do not understand what you meant." "My love, Shantia began, I am grateful for What all of you Are." "I am grateful to the Creator Who made the perfect Spirit that is your true Being." "I am grateful for the chance to meet with all my brothers and sisters here."

"Your holiness blesses me and bestows on me a gift I will carry in my heart for the rest of my days here." "I am grateful for the opportunity to give to you the gift of this day however meager my offerings may be compared to What You Are." "The gratitude of which I was speaking was my own."

With that said Shantia bowed once again to the crowd, walked westward and seemed to disappear with the sun.



6

Sins of the Society

USHNAV SHROFF

The sun was setting over the city in all its blood-red glory. It was the time when crows began circling the skies and mimicking eagles. The sky was lit with blood as the sunset began and Suja was beside herself with worry. Gayathri, her seven year-old daughter, hadn't returned back from her school. It should have been over almost three hours ago, in the afternoon. The postman had come and gone a long time back. Pacing up and down the living room, she thought of the options she could take. She felt very helpless then.

She had called up the school authorities as soon as she realized that Gayathri was late in coming than usual. Unfortunately, they did nothing to help other than confirm the fact that Gayathri's school-bus had left on time, along with all the other school buses. Immediately after, she had called up one of Gayathri's close friends' mother and enquired about the children.

Her heart had turned cold when she found out that Raj had already reached home some time back. Hurrying down the stairs of the chawl, she had then gone and asked around whether Gayathri's yellow-red bus had come or not. To her horror, it had and she found out that it had just passed by, not stopping. An old lady who always sat on one of the many benches there had told her this.

She had gone up to her room in a daze after that. She began to distract herself, trying to make dinner and arranging the utensils in their proper place. As she was about to place the frying pan on the stove, she heard the doorbell ring. Her heartbeat accelerated like that of a galloping horse. Hopes raised high, she almost ran to the door. Her hopeful face fell as she stared at Raghav. The drunk excuse of a husband.

Whatever state he might be in, he must listen to me today. With *feeble* determination in her heart, she went over to him.

"Raghu?"

"Raghav?"

"Hmm?"

"Raghu, Gayathri has not returned yet from school."

There was no response from her husband, who it seemed had come back home freshly-drunk.

"Raghu, Gayathri has not returned yet from the school. It has been almost four hours since her school closed. I am very worried!" Tears wouldn't help her now, she thought with steel in her mind.

There came a silence then that lasted for quite some time. Suja was used to his drunkenmeditation-pose, but right now, it was all could do to not shake him up from the *stupor* he had fallen in. Irritated with herself at going to him when he was in such a state, she cursed herself and went back to the kitchen. Not before long, she heard mumblings from the living room. She came out, the rolling pin in her hand.

"Raghu, what happened?"

"Suja, my darling. Come to bed with me. I love you."

She shook her head, irritated. Men, especially bastard men like her husband, only wanted two things in life from

their wives: hot food and sex. Normally, they'd prefer sex after the food.

"Raghu, Gayathri!! What about her? Where is she? Do something, find her!"

Her whimpers fell to a deaf ear as he got up from the chair. He opened the bathroom door and went inside.

Suja sighed in frustration. Her husband was totally useless, just like any other man who was drunk right then. Even when Gayathri was born, he didn't practice enough to hide his distaste for the fact *that a girl was born*. But then, she herself had been born into a family in which she was the youngest child and the only daughter of the nine. Her childhood was not for children.

It was almost 7 o' clock now. She was about to leave the house with all intentions of finding Gayathri and bringing her back safely. Then, the landline rang. She hurried into the bedroom to pick it up, but her husband had beaten her to it. Irritated that his sleep had been disrupted, he grumbled something inaudible and picked up the phone.

Suja would remember what would happen next for as long as she would live. It would be with unspeakable horror though. Her face turned into one of disgust and horror as the person she thought was her husband talked with the people she assumed were calling for ransom. It was yet to sink in; it would take time to sink in.

Then, she heard the words coming from her husband's mouth and she ran towards him to snatch the phone out of his cursed hands. The very hands that had picked up the telephone. She ran towards him. He saw her coming and anger clouded the features of his once-handsome face as with one heavy slap, he sent her sprawling on the floor.

White light and stars appeared momentarily in front of her. She was in a daze. Tears continued to spill out helplessly. All this while, Raghav continued to communicate with the kidnappers. Only that it wasn't anything like communication. He told them how the girl child was a curse, that he never wanted Gayathri and still doesn't. His maniac laugh suppressed her sobs as he directly refused to pay the required ransom of sixty thousand rupees.

Suja stared at the person she thought was her husband in utter disbelief and disgust. *It was yet to sink in; it would take time to sink in.* The final blow came when he casually asked them to keep her for a few days and see how tiresome and useless having a girl was.

She couldn't bear it anymore. Still crying and uttering her daughter's name over and over again, she passed out.

Suja woke up when she felt a sharp jab in her belly. Her first thought was for her daughter as she remembered what had occurred earlier. Having no more tears to spill, she turned her full attention to the creature she hated the most.

Her husband was thrusting himself into her, not caring whether she was awake or no, let alone hurt. Bile formed up in her mouth, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of disgust. All this while, he continued to do what he was doing with occasional grunts.

It would come to pass. Just like it had each time. She closed her eyes.

Hey Ganesha, what had happened to Gayathri?

The next morning brought along with it headaches and hangovers for some, while for others, morning activities beckoned. The chawl came alive. The wives came down to fill

up water for their daily chores. There was a time-limit within which every family here had to do so.

However, the usual buzz of *activities* happening everyday had shunned down. People were gathered around downstairs, but they weren't fighting over water. They were talking in hushed tones, creating a circle in the process.

It was this hushed crowd that Suja found herself a spectator to. She walked down the stairs of her chawl with a large container in her right hand for the water. She came down and stared at the non-existent queue, puzzled.

Her neighbor, who was in the circle suddenly spotted Suja and alerted the others. Their low talk got transformed into a grave silence as she walked towards them. When she reached the outer end of the circle, she saw that her neighbor had tears in her red eyes.

The crowd parted.

Gayathri!

Her soul departed.

*There laid a girl frozen in time.
With lips like ice and a face like mine.
A big heart and a charming smile
was all I had now to remember her by.*

Her teeth shivered with fear and her body shook in disbelief. Lying on the ground in an angle that defied human existence, Gayathri appeared to be in a deep sleep.

Someone hugged her, and in the process took her away from her only child. They hugged her and consoled her. All of them told her not to hold back, to let it all out. But, for Suja, the impact of the situation was yet to sink in. Somebody then suggested she go and wake her husband up immediately. She

closed her eyes in defeat and her mind went down memory lane.

She thought of the magical moment when Gayathri was born, after many wasted attempts. The calm that had enveloped her when she gazed upon a miracle she and Raghu had created. She thought of how fortunate she was to have witnessed little Gayathri's first step at their old home. How Raghu was there to share the moment with her. She thought of how she had consoled her little one when she suffered her first bicycle fall—wounding her knees rather badly. How her heart had stopped with pure fright for a while when she had witnessed her walking in, hands and legs soaked in blood. She thought of the day Gayathri had come running home with a shiny silver trophy, a grin spread from one end of her happy face to another. She thought of how a little angel had left home for school one day and never returned.

Her blue eyes jerked open, black with rage. She removed herself from the hug of a fellow woman and wiped off her tears. Without a word, she climbed up the stairs.

There were cries of anguish that the neighbors heard all of a sudden. These were followed by several denials and more cries. This was followed by three loud sounds. It felt as if metal was being clanged repeatedly.

Worried for Suja and what her drunken husband might be doing to her, the noisy neighbors rushed upstairs. Upon hearing the news, Raghav might have done anything. He was known for the huge fuss he made. He might have lashed out his anger on Suja in any way possible. There was no saying what he'd do when in rage. They were naturally scared. The concerned neighbors entered through Suja's open door, where they found nobody. It was empty of people. But, it was

not empty of sound. Surprisingly, laughter had begun to emanate from the room suddenly.

The nosy neighbors began to retreat in haste with shouts and cries. Suja had come out, with laughter in her mouth and a pan in her hand. The pan was painted red upon black. The ones that remained among the neighbors were terrified. The white of Suja's teeth contradicted the black rage in her eyes. This created a scary image. The neighbors now had no option but to lock Suja in. She, the bloody pan and whatever she had done to Raghav inside. They were all safe outside. Safe from her laughter and safe from the pain in her eyes.

The moment her shit-scared neighbors locked her in, her laughter had begun to subside. She kept holding onto the pan as if it fed her strength. The first 'lone drop of tear glided down Suja's right cheek as she recalled the image of Gayathri lifeless, in her mind. She knew that what she had just done could not bring her sweet angel back, but she had to do it. *It was the only way.* She closed her eyes. This time, there was no question of defeat in them. *It was the only way.*



7

Eavesdropping in a Train

by

S.K.POTTEKKAT (Late)

Translated by

DR. K. PARAMESWARAN

It was 3.00 am when I reached Shornur junction by the Janatha Express. I was on my way to Ernakulam, and the train that would take me thither was lying on the next platform. But the grand dame would make a move only at 5.30!

Passengers who arrive at Shornur are always subject to such waiting, regardless of when they arrive or where they arrive from! The railways invariably prepare the timetable in such a way that, whatever be the case, one is forced to wait at the station, twiddling fingers, for at least three hours.

However, reaching the station by the Janatha express in the wee hours of the morning has its own advantages. You may be spared the agony of spending time in the waiting room, forced to practice acrobatics resulting from the numerous bites and consistent drones of mosquitoes. You might even be able to enjoy the luxury of comfortable sleeping on a cushioned second class berth; it depends on your luck!

Tucking my bag underneath my arm, I walked from one end of the platform to the other, peering into the compartments. The entire train was bereft of lights, sounds and movements; but the unmistakable odor of human presence was clearly discernible. There seemed to be quite a few people who were really asleep. But there were as many people occupying berths, but were not asleep.

I shone my torch into a second class compartment, the door of which was partially opened. The sight in the compartment resembled the mortuary of the general hospital, with corpses occupying many upper and lower berths. On one lower berth I could see two persons lying tightly packed, their heads placed at opposite ends of the berth! They resembled a pack of shoes.

Moving forward, I tried to open the door of the next compartment. It seemed to be locked from within. Selfish crowd! I know the people who are comfortably sleeping in such locked compartments—some were passengers with third class tickets who paid bribes to the porter for being allowed the luxury of sleeping on cushioned berths, others were railway employees who have proceeded to the station after their dinners to enjoy a good sleep! The list can be extended to some other obnoxious people too! Bad luck! At last I decided to spend the night in a partially empty third class compartment.

It was a new model compartment, with a wooden screen down the middle. The smell of paint still lingered in the compartment. I quietly maneuvered myself onto a luggage rack behind the screen, and using my bag as a pillow, stretched on one side—like any ordinary passenger, who didn't want to create any problems to anyone.

But sleep evaded me. From down below emanated so many sounds that interfered with sleep—all different manifestations of snoring. It seemed as if all the sleeping people together had formed an orchestra—so many varieties of sounds! The turning of the charka, a car being started up faraway, wood being sawn, curry being garnished in a vat, the crooning of a bird... in short, my ears were subject to an onslaught from a variety of sounds. The rhythmic embellishments indulged in by some snorers were utterly unbearable: haraaam! Some were felt to be like the recitation of hymns. (It is to be surmised that the sounds of Vedas could have emanated from the sounds of snoring). A sweet sound, like that of fresh milk falling into a brass vessel, during the process of milking, could be intermittently heard from the bench immediately below the luggage rack on which I was lying. It was the snoring of a Brahmin lady, sleeping, even while breast feeding her kid.

Some nocturnal proclamations too could be heard in the midst of the snorings. “Mr Devassy 150 rupees”—this declaration came from a figure lying curled up in the western corner. Who knows what secrets lay behind the dealings with Mr Devassy? I know a ration shop owner. His wife knows all the details of the black market dealings that he does during the day: he calls out all of them at night. Is this man a ration shop owner?

Suddenly a penetrating perfume spread throughout the room. A voice that could be placed neither as male nor as female reverberated in the compartment, ‘Thommacha, bring over the things, there is space in this compartment!’

Within five minutes, a set of Travancore Christians, with their luggage of numerous packets and bundles settled onto the various empty benches on the other side of the screen in

the compartment. Obviously, they were on their way to their native places from the settlements in Malabar. Included in their luggage were bottles of homemade, grass based, oils, and it was the perfume emanating from these bottles that heralded the arrival of the group.

Within ten minutes all the commotions subsided and the reign of snores continued in the room.

Another half an hour passed. The man in the corner had announced his affair with Mr Devassy once more during this interval. The baby belonging to the Brahmin lady blared out once or twice, in the manner of an electric horn. It might have been due to either the baby losing contact with the nipple or because of the bites from mosquitoes.

Suddenly the beam of an electric torch flashed into the compartment and the soft voice of a lady could be heard 'let's settle down here'. 'This seems to have been reserved for both of us', the loud voice of a man followed.

They—a man and a woman—settled on to an empty bench on the platform side of the compartment after having inspected it in torchlight and after having deposited a huge box under the bench. The lady curled up in a corner. The man stretched out on the bench.

My position was on their side, but above them. A cold wind swept into the room. The man got up, bolted the windows and resumed his prone position. "Oh, how cold is it! How about the cold in Kashmir?" The soft voice.

"What does Devaki teacher know of the cold in Kashmir?" came the reply from the male. "There when you sniff and cleanse your nose, do you know what you get? Pieces of ice—ice! You have to use a pen knife to break these pieces from your nose".

A sweet peal of laughter. And following this came a cry "Ayyooh", an elongated expression of happiness, at the end of which could be heard a burst of spirited squeal! It seemed to be the result of the male touching the female somewhere and titillating her.

"Now Menon has but to go back to the bitter cold, isn't? Your leave and trips are nearing to a close, is it not so?" The soft voice said. The male voice replied, "The punishment for all this enjoyment and laughter I will get from the military camp. How many nights will I have to spend painfully recalling these days of enjoyment?"

"As if you are going to remember all this play and enjoyment! As if Kashmir is a place devoid of girls and women!"

"Whatever may it be, it is difficult to forget the fragrance of the women in one's own native place."

"Mm, enough of this. Why is it that nothing about your marriage has been firmed up till now?"

"My impression was that all the responsibility of getting me married off has been taken over by Devaki teacher!"

"About that, don't worry; there will be no delay at all. Is getting a suitable girl for you that difficult! Surely no!—But there was a rumor that you were going to marry that Radha".

"Oh, that proposal was dropped. It seems that girl has a lover—at Udyogamandal in Always or somewhere".

"Chi chi!" the exclamations came from the old man curled up in one corner, the same person who had the 150 rupees dealing. He got himself up in a hurry and cried out in a sorrowful voice "Ammma, your baby has passed urine and has dirtied everywhere". The remark was addressed to the Brahmin lady. "Isn't children urinating common? What is

there to make such a hue and cry about this?" The comment came from the soldier. After making such a comment, which was wholly unwanted, he and the soft voice giggled amongst themselves.

"Aren't there enough and more good lasses in C---?" the soft voice continued with the question of marriage. "Um, my ambition is also to marry a girl from C---"

My memories flew back to C---. That village near Trichur was a place that had attracted me. I remembered roaming around the village, in search of a friend, three years back. It was in the by lanes of that village that I met with one of the most astonishing models of Kerala's wealth of feminine beauty. She was returning from her bath in the country river, toweling her black luxurious hair, as soft as China silk.

A boy, who was coming opposite, as he neared her, belted out a rural love ditty, full of obscene references. The girl, just hung her head down, and walked by silently, with an unperturbed expression. The song was one of the most obscene ones I have ever heard. I felt agitated both at the ditty as well as the lad. I felt that the lad was playing too much, much ahead of what we normally allow of a boy of that age.

I turned back, readying myself to talk to the boy on behalf of that poor girl. The boy also turned back, and looked at me with an empty smile. Then he spiritedly told me, "The girl, of a carpenter family, is deaf and dumb, sir!" The boy must have thought that I too would share his laughter. I felt too numbed for any reaction to show through.

It was the same lad, Velayudhan, who showed me the way to my friend's house. We walked through several by lanes of the village. Velayudhan made me up to date concerning the local news of the village. One of the stories concerned Mariya, the teacher of the local school, who,

during an attack of epilepsy, bit off head master Menon's nose!

It was some holy month observed by the Christians. In front of many homes and huts could be seen plantain stems decorated with gaily colored flags. After meandering through numerous lanes and grounds, we came at last to a grass thatched hut, on the banks of a paddy field—my friend's house. But he was not there....

Even then, I did not think of that evening tour through C—village as totally un-profitable. It was a rural boulevard, bursting with an over flow of unadulterated beauty of a pure Kerala village. The small compound grounds of the village, filled with the slanting, evening sun shine, decorated by the walls made of red mud, the bushes resembling green colored sparklers that grew helter-skelter on these compound walls, the fences made of bamboo rafters, the mailanchi plants that covered these fences, the cashew trees that provided a green canopy—all flashed on to my mind's screen, no sooner than Devaki teacher mentioned the name of the village.

The army man Menon was intending to marry a girl from that very same village. Good; my congratulations!

"There's Nalini—Nalini—that girl has passed the school final", soft voice.

"I don't want Nalini". The soldier placed a cigarette on his lips and struck a match stick. In that light, it became possible to see one side of his face. An elongated, rough nose and a curled up moustache. When he let out smoke through his mouth it resembled a nose diving fighter plane that had caught fire.

"Why do you say that you don't want Nalini"? The soft voice enquired.

No reply from the soldier was forth coming. He may have some sufficient reason to spurn Nalini.

After a while, that army man revealed the real reason for his dislike of Nalini. "You know Nalini's father that pensioned head master. He had once tried to get me caught by the police. The reason for the case was Kamalam, Nalini's sister. Where's Kamalam now?"

"Kamalam is in Nagpur or somewhere else", the soft voice replied. "She is a college lecturer".

The soldier whistled, his mind following some chain of memories.

"There's Ammini. Why, isn't she a nice girl"? Soft voice brought forth another proposal.

"Oh, I know her very well. She has a 'never mind' attitude towards men in general. I don't want her".

"But she is a beautiful girl"

That woman seems to have a special regard for the girl. But the man does not want that dominant girl.

He might be saying so on the basis of experience.

"There is Kamalakshi. How is she"? Soft voice.

"That shortie, isn't it? Girls should have some height".

The soft voice did not respond to this. It might be because she also had the same defect.

"There was that Rajalakshmi. Where has she gone? Is she married?" the male voice enquired.

"Which Rajalakshmi? That master's daughter?"

"Yes, that slim, tall girl, with the complexion of gold. She is what I would call a real beauty!"

“Oh, do you want to know where your real beauty is now?”

“Mm, did she run away with some one?”

“She has been admitted to the TB sanatorium at Madanapilli.

“Oh! The poor Rajalakshmi”.

On hearing about Rajalakshmi being admitted to the TB sanatorium at Madanapilli, I suddenly remembered Malathi. Malathi was one of the complete beauties in my locality. Not only was she good looking, she was good in her studies too. She used to compose poems also. She cleared the school final in state first position. Then she went, not to the college, but to the hospital at Madanapilli. She spent six months there. Later she came home and passed away before long. The images of the silk covered body of Malathi being taken to the cremation ground crawled into my memory...

The sound of the croaking of a frog could be heard, a new note of snoring. One of the members of the Travancore set had also joined the snorers' orchestra!

The army man and the schoolteacher continued with their discussions and analyses of the marriageable girls of C--. Chandrika, Sarada, Anandavalli, Leela, Kunhilakshmi, and so many other names were discussed thread bare. The soldier was prone to find fault with each and every girl. Ambujakshi's hair, he criticized, seemed to have been imported from the Himalayas. Sarada's fault was that she was once caught in a case involving a love letter. Not only that, her mother was afflicted with vitaligo.

Chandrika's eyes, nose and lips pass muster; but her body was 'unfit'. Anandavalli's case was just the opposite. With long curled hair, chiseled buttocks and narrow waist,

any one seeing her from behind will surely feel attracted. But no sooner than he sees her face to face, the admirer will feel it is better not to have seen her. Her face resembled a buffalo.

Kunhilakshmi's ancestors were renowned. All her brothers occupied high positions. But anyone who has seen her will never go in that direction again. So immense was she, so intimidating was her style of walking! It seems, her walking resembled that of a frog that had been crushed by a cycle.

I felt as if I had seen those rural damsels face to face. Chandrika, Sarada, Kunhilakshmi, Ambujakshi, Anandavalli – the list seemed endless. Poor lasses, who, in all probability, would now be asleep, in the land of dreams. Could they even imagine in their wildest dreams the postmortem they were being subjected to in a railway compartment at the Shornur junction!

The small child of the Brahmin lady cried out aloud, repeatedly. This time it seemed that the child had no intention of stopping. "Ay, is the mother of this child asleep? Try to stop the child crying." It was the soldier who called this out in a gruff voice. A part of their conversation was drowned for some time.

"Menon's aunt does not like me taking tuitions in your house", soft voice.

"Um, what does auntie dislike?"

"She might be suspicious of uncle."

The soldier laughed out aloud. She continued: "But Chandran and Usha are very fond of me. It is because of the love and affection shown by the children that I am going to take tuition in your house. The children are of the same age as my Rajan and Rema."

“When the father of your children dies, didn’t you get Rs two thousand from the insurance company? What have you done with it?”

“That was the only savings he had. I have not touched it at all. It has been deposited in the bank.” The soldier did not speak for some time.

I felt afraid. Is the soldier plotting to rob the teacher of her bank deposit? It is not improbable. The teacher is so much in love with the young man.

Suddenly the lights in the compartment came on. The soldier got up hurriedly. He had, till then, been lying down with his head on the teacher’s lap.

I observed the man closely. A fat, fair, specimen, who resembled Ghatolgajan of the Mahabharatha. It seems that the job he is best suited to is the military service. Getting good food is never a problem. Intelligence is never required. He lacks the time and patience required for love or romance. The requirements of sex should be satisfied then and there. He speaks everything out right. And he is antagonistic to none.

But at first sight, he would seem someone not at all amenable to social company. At times, he will be ready to offer his services un-asked. At other times, he may reject out right any request for help! There are people who form special specimens or types. Our soldier seems to be one such, I was able to gauge at the first sight itself.

The lady was middle aged—maybe about thirty five. Her beauty had not totally faded away from her face. In addition, the lady—the mother of Rajan and Rema—was shrewd enough to make up for what beauty she had lost by attractive mannerisms.

Picking up hints from the conversation between the soldier and the lady, I was able to patch up a picture of what might have happened fifteen years back.

Devaki teacher then had been the new teacher at the school in C—village—just completing her teens. The soldier—let us call him Shekharan—was studying for the third consecutive year in the eighth standard. Devaki teacher might have scolded him and punished him.

Shekharan failed yet again in the exams and deciding that continuing in the school and failing might prove embarrassing to the teachers, he dropped out.

We know nothing much about Shekhara menon's activities during the period immediately ensuing. His family was prosperous enough to ensure regular meals. He might have spent the days roaming about with friends. Small change for tea, cigarettes etc and for miscellaneous expenditure was made by stealing coconuts from the compound. There were some women related cases which almost reached the door of the police station.

By and by, one fine morning, Shekhara menon left home and eventually was recruited into the army. Finding the army life most suited, he stuck on. Now he is back home on leave from Kashmir.

On reaching home, what he noticed there first was old Devaki teacher's presence as a tuition teacher. What happened subsequently is not clear. Now, both of them are returning from a secret trip—secure in the belief that no one has noticed!

The train reached Poonkunnam station. "Let me get down here" said Devaki teacher. Taking a jute bag, emblazoned with an advertisement in Tamil and a small

umbrella, the size of a piece of cucumber, the teacher got down from the train. After going a few yards, she turned back, flashed a secret, suggestive smile at the soldier and smartly walked out of the station. The Brahmin lady and the hand baby also got down at Poonkunnam.

The train started moving. It had not gone even a hundred yards, when it stopped, its wheels making a jarring note. Someone had pulled the chain I raised my head and looked. It was the soldier. He bellowed "my leather box, my leather box".

"Boxes being robbed are quite common. Why make such a commotion over it", came a comment from one corner. I turned round to see who made it. It was the person with the one hundred and fifty rupee affair. He was a dark, short man, with a rosary around his neck—a cruel smirk adorned his face.

"How can you identify your box?" he asked the soldier.

"It was a new, red leather box".

"Oh, I had noticed a young man, getting down from the train at Mullurkara station. It might have been your box!"

(*Antharvahini*, 1971).



8

The Dream House

ASHOK PATWARI

For Kajri, it was the second time in her life when she confronted a very difficult situation where she had to make a personal decision utterly crucial for her ownself!

Her Madam gave her just one week to make a final decision about something which primarily concerned her own aspiration; something she thought was her right. Even though everybody else acknowledged her role as the lone source to raise her family, she never expressed in words that she had done anything which other women didn't do because she had voluntarily taken the task and commitment to dedicate herself to making life easier for her children and grandchildren. And all along, she had been doing her best to achieve this. But this time she wanted to take a close look at herself and think about her own aspirations. She was prepared to be accused as selfish and wouldn't get hurt if her children thought she was too self-centered. She encouraged herself to be firm on her stand because she knew this was her only and once in a lifetime chance to do something for her own self.

Both the times when she faced a situation of making a decision for herself she was ambitious, had a long standing dream, yearning for something specific, was clear about what she wanted and also had the courage to express herself. The

only difference was that she was a fifteen year old girl then, and a fifty year old widow and a grandmother now!

Kajri's illiterate father who lived in a nondescript village in Uttar Pradesh, despite his extreme backwardness and poverty, gave her a chance to make a decision when she was fifteen. It was a rare opportunity in her society but her father always considered her an intelligent girl who was ambitious and capable of making her own decisions in spite of her extremely unfavourable circumstances. She was perhaps the first girl in her community who was enrolled in the nearby primary school. By the time she was in Class Fifth, she could visualize a lot of things which her peers were ignorant about. Her perspective was greatly influenced by what she studied in her school and learnt from her classmates who came from better social background. She was already fifteen years old and knew pretty well that she was at the bottom step of a life she dreamt of. But she had the ambition to climb up the ladder to Tenth Class, Twelfth, college... university...and...! Her dreams had no limits; her ambition merged into infinity. And that is when she faced her first ever confrontation with the reality of her life, of her family background and of her environment which was not as bright as her dreams were!

Something which really bothered Kajri in her native village on a daily basis was the way she and her other family members had to go for nature's call every morning. It was the unique nature of rural life that every day they were lucky to find a different place amidst the vast fields guarded by the tall hedges of crops in the open fields which served as a natural cover for privacy. In her school she used to get lessons on personal hygiene and environmental sanitation but what she was experiencing in real life was just the opposite. The toilet in her school was even worse. When she

grew up as an adolescent, her loathing for going out to fields changed into fear. With so many incidents of sexual abuse and abductions happening from those secluded spots she was even afraid to walk alone through the fields.

“Will our life ever change?” she used to ask herself and her age mates in the village.

“Not in this village and not so soon” was the general impression.

But Kajri wanted a change, that too quickly, at least in her own life.

Kajri had never heard of him before that day. He was her father's distant cousin who lived in Delhi. Everybody addressed him as *Chacha* but Kajri's father called him by name—Sukhbir. It was an unanticipated opportunity which literally shocked her when she and her parents accompanied Sukhbir to Delhi. Kajri was quite impressed to see Sukhbir's 'pucca' room in one of the government colonies in Delhi. Sukhbir worked as the driver of an IAS officer and his wife did the domestic chores. The servant quarter in which they lived looked like a palace to Kajri, a small room with fridge and television, and a small kitchen and a bathroom outside the one room apartment with adequate arrangement of water and electricity. She was so fascinated with this glamorous image of Delhi that she wanted to spend all her life in Delhi rather than return to her village. It was much later that Kajri realized that her experience of visiting Sukhbir's servant quarter was like a fantasy which created an illusion in her mind and influenced her in making a quick decision.

Sukhbir was instrumental in getting Kajri married to Ramchander, one of the cousins of his wife, who used to

drive a rented auto-rickshaw and lived with his old parents in Delhi in an illegal settlement along the railway line. Kajri wanted to study at least up to tenth class but she knew that it was not possible because by that time she would turn twenty—a culturally unacceptable age to remain unmarried. She had no doubt in her mind that she was ambitious and wanted to live in a city like Delhi. Sukhbir's life style impressed her so much that she feared she might not get another proposal from a Delhi boy again. She said yes without asking another question.

It was not too long after her marriage to Ramchander that Kajri realized that she had made a mistake. Apart from being illiterate Ramchander's background was quite disappointing for Kajri. Their two room *jhuggi* made of tarpaulin along the railway line housed a family of eight people with a common community hand pump as their source of water and dangerously hanging electricity wires looming above the *jhuggi*. Since the electricity connection was illegal, they had to disconnect it during the day and reconnect at night. Kajri was shocked to see the other face of Delhi. Her village was better than this place. What stunned her most was the way she was supposed to go for nature's call every morning along the railway line. Even in her village she didn't have a proper toilet but there the vast fields in the village protected everybody's privacy. But the railway line connecting with the busy New Delhi railway station crossed through their *jhuggis* and privacy for a woman was not something which could be imagined under the circumstances.

It was a blessings in disguise, at least for Kajri, after spending several years in that shoddy environment she and her neighbours were forcibly evicted from the illegal settlements by the railway officials. That was when she

luckily got an opportunity to work as a domestic servant to a spinster doctor who lived in a government flat. Kajri was offered the servant quarter in lieu of her services as a maidservant. Life took a turn for the better. Kajri and Ramchander moved out from their joint family to stay in the servant quarter. Given her immediate past experience of living in a *jhuggi*, Kajri was more than satisfied to live in a small *pucca* room with open kitchen outside the room, common toilet and a bath room they shared with only two other servant quarters. Her childhood dream of living in a comfortable home like that of Sukhbir was shattered long ago but this place wasn't that bad. Her employer, an eccentric doctor, who was generally not friendly with anybody else, was somehow very kind to her. Whatever others had to say about her, she always treated Kajri well and financially helped her from time to time.

Ramchander continued to drive his rented auto-rickshaw and kept on spending part of his time and money drinking country liquor. Kajri added to the family income by working extra as a maid servant in another house. She raised her three sons with minimal financial support from her husband. She was struggling in life but was not sad. The only unhappiness she had was her husband's overindulgence in liquor and her disappointment with her children who didn't show any interest in studies. All of them dropped out of school before completing even primary school and preferred to engage themselves as skilled labourers.

Kajri had quite reconciled with her life even after Ramchander passed away after a protracted illness following a liver disease. Her children got married and started living separately. She was nearing fifty and because of her recently diagnosed cardiac problem she was not sure how long she

would live when her eldest son, Vinod, told her that his daughter Babli wanted to go to school. Vinod expressed a desire that Babli stay with her grandmother. It was like a dream come true for Kajri. She was overjoyed with this new development and took her guardianship with pleasure. She could see a glimmer of brightness on her granddaughter's face. Babli, like her grandmother, was a bright girl who wanted to study and do something in life. Kajri could see her own childhood reflections in Babli which prompted her to take up the responsibility in spite of her poor health. Kajri was thrilled to observe Babli's interest in school and home work. She considered herself very lucky to have a master like Madam and a granddaughter like Babli.

It was at this stage of her life when everything was peaceful and full of hope, that Kajri confronted another big challenge in her life!

Kajri was bewildered that day as if some crashing sound woke her up from a deep slumber. She had not realized that she had been working for her Madam for over twenty years. It was more than a shock for her to learn that her Madam was retiring next month. Over the next few days Kajri realized that very soon her Madam would have to vacate her government flat and surrender her servant quarter as well to the Estate Department. Kajri was shell shocked because that would also imply that she had to vacate her quarter. Madam was moving to her own luxury apartment in Gurgaon and had decided to vacate the flat the very next day after her retirement. Madam did consider Kajri a part of her life, having been served by her for over twenty years. She always appreciated Kajri's honesty and sincerity which she thought was a rare trait in most of the domestic servants. She also got

so much used to Kajri's cooking and her efficiency as her housekeeper that she wanted her to accompany her to her new apartment.

Madam, however, was quite conscious of Kajri's limitations in moving from her present location to Gurgaon. There was no way Babli could continue her studies in Gurgaon area because there was not a single government run school around her apartment. She also knew that Babli was Kajri's source of inspiration to live. She knew pretty well that Kajri's own illiterate children would not be able to continue Babli's education. Therefore, Babli's education was a big hurdle for Kajri to cross the barrier. Madam also knew Kajri for a long time and was aware how Kajri had carried out the responsibility of the head of the family before and after her husband's death. Even though all of them stayed in separate servant quarters nearby, Kajri was accessible to them. Vinod, Babli's father, visited her every day. Madam in her heart of hearts was quite sure that Kajri wouldn't be able to move because of her social and sentimental baggage. Therefore, as a gesture of rewarding her services, she was willing to recommend her to the next occupant of her staff quarter so that she was not dislocated. But Madam wanted Kajri to make that decision herself. She gave her two options, either to accompany her to Gurgaon or stay back where she was. She took Kajri to her new apartment in Gurgaon to see for herself the attached servant quarter there.

Kajri was literally shocked with disbelief when she saw the newly constructed multistoried luxury apartments in Gurgaon, the parks, the ambience and the servant quarter which opened into the kitchen from inside and had a separate door from outside. It was a Sunday and Babli had also accompanied her grandmother. Both of them were excited to

see the quarter; and Kajri, for once, could not believe what she saw inside the servant room. A 10 x 10 room with proper woodwork and cupboards, a small kitchenette and a balcony, and to top it—an attached bathroom and toilet! Kajri felt as if she was daydreaming. Till that time the best possible picture of a household for her which she had nurtured in her imagination for years was that of Sukhbir's flat but the one which was offered to her by her Madam was really beyond her imagination, much more than she could have ever imagined.

After Ramchander's death Kajri had learnt to live alone; and therefore she would have no problem in moving to Gurgaon. It was her lifetime dream to have a space for her like this. Her sons were busy with their own lives and she was not financially dependent on anybody. She wanted to fulfill her dream before she died and this was the only chance. She could have moved to her new quarter without blinking her eyes but her only problem was Babli's schooling. Therefore, the very next moment Kajri was sad as if she had missed the last train to her ultimate destination!

Kajri thought over it again and again, but there was no way she could move to the new quarter and continue Babli's education at the same time. Kajri was not so sure whether her son and daughter-in-law would properly help Babli to continue her education if she stayed back with them. She was scared to imagine that like her father and uncles, Babli might also drop out from school.

As always, she would have killed her dreams and sacrificed for the family but unexpectedly Vinod came to her rescue and offered to take her daughter back in order to continue her studies in a nearby government school. All the past events in Kajri's life flashed before her eyes right from

the time when as a child she started roaming around in the fields in her village. The visuals of her life of a newlywed bride living in a dilapidated *jhuggi* near the railway line and the unpleasant experience with that memory got eclipsed by a colourful rainbow drawn across the blue canvas over the sky. She could see a genuine willingness in Vinod's eyes which drew her more close to her decision. She was overjoyed and excited at being on the verge of fulfilling her lifetime dream.

It was her first night at Gurgaon!

Before going to bed she made a list of things. Madam had already passed on her old bed and mattress to her. What she wanted to get for her dream house was a chair, a small table, a fridge, 14" color TV, curtains and a three-in-one framed picture of Goddess Lakshmi, Goddess Saraswati and Lord Ganesha, besides many other small items.

It was not just the comfort of the soft mattress which kept her awake. She felt as if her sleep had vanished and her mind was invaded by a tornado. Her experience in a new location and the refreshing ambience of her room could not distract her mind from the whirlpool of thoughts. Faces of her children and grandchildren reeled before her eyes one by one and the moment she focused her eyes on each picture her mind got caught up in a whirlpool. Every time she got herself out from the whirlpool, her eyes got fixed on another picture. Her mind was so flooded with the avalanches from inside that she did not notice the violent thunder and the strong winds hitting the window from outside. It was only in the early hours in the morning when she fell off to sleep and it had started raining.

Kajri suddenly felt a sprinkle of droplets of water touching her face. Reflexively she got up to get a bucket to collect the water dropping from the leaking roof. But suddenly she realized that she was somewhere else. It was not her tattered *jhuggi* with a leaking tarpaulin but the servant quarter of a luxury apartment. It was just the partially open window from where drops of rain water were coming in. She got up and closed the window. The sprinkle of water stopped but her thoughts did not. She felt guilty of being selfish but this was perhaps a last chance in her life to realize her dream of living in a flat which was better than her dream house.

She was about to go to sleep again when she heard a continuous knock at her door, and got up with panic and a feeling of unknown fear—a sudden feeling of vacuum inside her chest!

When she opened the door, she was stunned to face Babli drenched in water standing in front of her.

On seeing her grandmother Babli just uttered a monosyllable '*Dadi*' and clung to her like a leech.

It took Kajri quite some time to console Babli and separate her from herself but Babli again clung to her and started crying, "Dadi, I will stay with you."

When Babli stopped sobbing, Kajri heaved a sigh as if a heavy weight was removed from her chest. She affectionately touched Babli's head, her eyes got flooded with tears and the next moment Kajri washed away her tears, and the dream!

Kajri dried up Babli's hair, cleaned her face and clothes with a towel and packed her bags. Before leaving the room, Kajri tore her shopping list into small pieces and threw it in

the toilet bowl. With trembling hands she pulled the chain of the toilet flush like a hangman pulling up the noose.

The next moment Kajri was out of the multistory building. Holding Babli's hand tightly, she started running away from the building as if it was going to collapse and fall on her.



9

Mrs. Ramchandran

NITA BAJORIA

“It appears that you enjoy your fruit!” Mrs. Ramchandran looked straight into the eyes of Arpita and smiled, rather like a saleslady might smile at a prospective customer. Her blue earrings sparkled in the morning sun.

Arpita looked startled. It was only last week that she and her family had moved to Krishnakunj Housing Society, Mrs. Ramchandran knew. She also knew Arpita had yet to befriend anybody in the colony.

“So, you’re fond of fruit?” persisted Mrs. Ramchandran, adept at striking up conversations with total strangers, and nothing if not persistent. She pointed intently towards the packet in Arpita’s hands. Golden yellow mangoes showed through the transparent plastic of the packet.

Perhaps in Bombay—where she knew Arpita had come from—neighbours do not talk to each other now and then without reason, thought Mrs. Ramchandran. Well, Arpita was in Kolkata now, and she would get used to their ways soon!

Apparently warmed by Mrs. Ramchandran’s easy friendliness, Arpita smiled back and replied, “Oh! Yes my son loves mangoes.”

“That’s good! My son will not even touch them.” Mrs. Ramchandran said, with an appreciative look. Whether she was appreciative of Arpita’s son or her own was a matter of curiosity.

“My son is fussy about fruits too. But he enjoys mangoes!” Arpita answered.

“How old is your son?” Mrs. Ramchandran enquired further, emboldened by her success.

It was 9 am in the morning. Mrs. Ramchandran’s 6 year old Rohit and 9 year old Kavya were at school and Mr. Ramchandran was not in town. Which meant, she had all the world’s time to chat. And moreover, she genuinely needed a new topic for her afternoon kitty.

But Arpita was looking up at her 5th floor balcony, from where her infant son Aditya was calling down to her.

Mrs. Ramchandran too looked up towards the voice.

“Oh! Is that your son? What an adorable child!” Mrs. Ramchandran chirped. So the new woman lived in Tower III, just opposite her own tower, and on the same floor as Paromita! Early morning... facts emerging one after another... what else could one ask for?

“I’m coming baba! Yes that’s my son calling from our balcony. I must hurry back before he gets restless.” Arpita called back to her son and tried to excuse herself swiftly.

But not before Mrs. Ramchandran had, just as swiftly, introduced herself.

“Oh yes! You should rush. Well! I am Mrs. Ramchandran. But people here call me Rina di you see. They all love me a lot. And I stay in block 5, flat 2F. Please feel free to ask me for anything you need, dear. Don’t hesitate.”

“Thank you Mrs. Ramchandran. I am Arpita. See you soon. Bye.”

Arpita hurried across the lawn and Rina di’s eyes pursued her till she was visible. Glancing at her watch Mrs Ramchandran surmised that she had some free time yet. But then, this bit of news was sufficient to regale the ladies later that day. Hence, abandoning her explorations, she entered her block and walked to the lift rehearsing to herself how she would roll out the storyboard.

Basically, Mrs. Ramchandran was a cordial and happy-go lucky sort. Being among the first residents of a rather posh complex in an upcoming area of Kolkata, she assumed it to be her foremost duty to help shy neighbours adjust to the new environment. Her beaming smile would attract everybody passing along the walking area of the garden, and no sooner had an unsuspecting person smiled back than Mrs. Ramchandran would strike up conversation and begin filling her data bank with all the necessary and interesting information about the new neighbour. Not that she misused such information or even intended to. She simply used it to spice up her afternoon gathering.

Mrs. Ramchandran’s second floor balcony, overlooking the garden and the entrance gates, and burdened with every manner of balcony accessory possible, was an area of guaranteed entertainment. Not that she was always there sipping her favourite filter coffee, but if one held one’s patience for a few minutes there was a good chance she would appear with a big smile and a story to share. Her stories ranged from her maid’s intolerable efficiencies, to her daughter’s smart moves against her to the unexpected glories of nature. She loved talking, that much was certain. She could talk and talk; on subjects that flowed from one to another,

ignoring her four year old son plucking at her kurta, or the maid notifying her of the depleted soap powder, or the drone of the airplane overhead. 'Topic of conversation' has never stumped her. She could talk about anything and everything, with easy humour.

This special skill established Mrs. Ramchandran as the leader of a women's group in the colony that enjoyed Gossip. Every afternoon, except for Saturdays and Sundays, saw a mini Durbar being held in one of their drawing rooms in turns. Everybody was welcome to join the group and the more the merrier. The basic criterion was to have a passion for Gossip. It was a sin to be boring there.

The members of this special club didn't felt any particular need to give it a name but there were others in the colony who derided them and called them The Gossip Broadcaster's Group or GBG for short. The motto of GBG was to keep an inquisitive eye on everything around and share their findings with each other every noon in an atmosphere of great fun and laughter. Amidst several rounds of tea and Marie Biscuits and occasional treats of Singhara and Rassogolla, topics were thrown and caught and expertly thrown back, in such a way that the outcome was oftener than not a quite changed version of actual fact. And when this new, twisted version spread itself around the complex, they did create a stir sometimes, and pain and embarrassment for many. But oblivious of this fact or its seriousness our GBG thrived day by day!

Gradually the afternoons started getting hotter, and GBG chased after spicier nuggets like whose husband was reciting poems for his wife, who bought a new jewellery set, whether the set was of old or new design, whether it was bought from a renowned shop or a local shop, whose

daughter-in-law was now wearing salwar kameez and whether it was permitted by her mother-in-law, which husband was behaving like a wifey's pet at the colony party, who had experimented with her hair and whether she'd been successful or not, which couple is returning to the colony way past midnight (a commendable job indeed, to wake up in the wee hours at the swooshing sound of a car entering the gates and to find out who it was and with whom!), who was walking down to buy vegetables in her pink flowered nighty breaking all rules of culture and propriety (Chhi chii), whether tangra or Gule or chingri was cooked in the neighbour's house, who's looking plump in her new dhakai, whose husband helps his wife with her sari pleats, which balcony has the best plants, whose daughter has got herself a merit seat and whose son has failed, which mother is seen feeding her 2 year old in the park, in the balcony and on the stairs, and oh, much more such ostensibly guiltless chitchat !

It was the first Sunday of November. The Ramchandran family was returning from a brunch at a friend's house. The lift was not working and hence they had to take stairs. Mrs. Ramchandran who in her new Kanjeevaram had earned many an admiring glance at the brunch was feeling somewhat euphoric. And as she climbed the stairs head held high, she missed the broken granite on one of the treads and fell. Her left ankle twisted beneath her and her body toppled over it, sealing the damage.

The X-ray showed a hairline fracture in her left ankle. The doctor prescribed 15 days bed rest with a plaster, some painkillers and antibiotics.

A catastrophe had struck GBG! The afternoon congress collapsed! Members gathered around her bed in utter dismay!

“Arrey! Why are you all so upset? I will be fine soon. “

“Yes Rina di! We all wish so!”

“Then why are you all so gloomy?” Rina di asked but quickly realised, “Oh okay, I know! You are all worried about the afternoons! Don’t worry! We can continue right here, in my bedroom! Okay?”

“That’s a great idea! “

The gloomy faces quickly turned cheerful! A day without the GBG Durbar was unthinkable! It was their daily dose of energizer!

Whether it was the doctor’s antibiotics or her gossip yoga, Rina-di was healing fast. On the 8th day, the doctor declared that she could try walking in three days, provided she practiced certain exercises for 30 minutes, twice daily. This news sent a wave of happiness through the women’s group. And why not? Their leader was being set free after so many days. A mini celebration was called, with plates of low fat sweets, singhara, dhokla and diet cola. And the icing on the celebration was a fascinating bit of gossip! Mrs. Chandra had an interesting story to tell. She proudly narrated how fortunate she had been last evening to have eavesdropped on the conversation of her aged driver and her young maid, when the maid had been bitching about the unmarried lady dance teacher who was seen with a married man of the colony.

Exclamations of “OMG!” “What?” “Really?” “Arrey baap re!” hummed around the room for the next couple of minutes, quickly followed by “Who’s the man?” in near chorus.

"I am still to find out!" Mrs. Chandra admitted dolefully. "But I will, soon. You don't worry. Just give me a day or two." She continued with hope.

"Okay then, let's keep our eyes and ears open for any further information." And on this note Rina di concluded the meeting that day.

The next day, Rina di tossed and turned on her bed in anxiety all morning. The phone was beside her, and she used it every now and then to get updates on the case in hand.

At a quarter to one, the hapless phone beeped. Rina di nodded a few times replying "hmm" or "ok" and then informed Anuradha to immediately call an urgent meeting.

Settling herself in the corner sofa of Rina di's bedroom, Mrs. Chandra narrated how she had put her best efforts into the investigation. She described how unfavourable were the conditions and how she with her quick wit turned them to her advantage and succeeded in this almost impossible task. Finally, she told everybody that she'd overheard the dance teacher talking on her mobile. She heard her fix a coffee date with someone at 5:30 pm on Wednesday at the nearby mall.

Great!

Applause for Mrs. Chandra was quickly followed by speculations on who the man could be! Whoever they pointed the finger of suspicion at, an amazing, unsaid hypothesis was being followed. They all seemed completely certain that Mr. X was none of theirs. He ought to be the husband of any of the women who did not belong to their kitty.

But Anindita, a new member questioned it. "How can we be so sure, that it is not one of our husbands?"

“We all keep good watch over our husbands and we are good wives!” exclaimed Dipali “How can our husbands even think of looking somewhere else?”

A murmur of assent ran through the room.

“Everybody thinks they are the best wives,” Anindita argued. Although fond of gossip she was quite practical in her outlook.

The murmur got agitated. Nobody wanted to accept this newly argued fact! They were used to pointing fingers at others. Turning it on themselves was new and frightening.

But Mrs. Ramchandran sensed a maturity in Anindita’s argument.

“She might be right! We often overlook our own folly. Let’s keep an eye on everything around us.”

This statement made everyone shudder inwardly. The faces tightened, still trying hard to keep a smile on for the others to see. Everybody tried to look at ease, but soon one by one each woman left for her home on the pretext of looking for clues.

Even Rina di was not untouched by uncertainty.

Rina di And Mr. Ramchandran had had a Love-cum-Arranged Marriage. Their parents knew that they were friends in college and had happily agreed to the marriage even though they belonged to different states.

The first year had flown by like a dream...Rina di closed her eyes in reminiscence. They were both enthusiastic about life and had great plans to lead it joyously. Each wanted a simple life revolving around the other’s sorrows and joys! They had their initial struggles. Mr. Ramchandran didn’t have a good job when their first child was born. Her second pregnancy was complicated. But their confidence and love for

each other took them through it all. Things got better. Now he had a good job, the children were older and things were easier.

But along the way, the practicalities of life took over the idealism of life! And they had started drifting... love and Romance gently took a back seat. It was difficult to remember when they had last chatted their heart out together, when they had last walked hand in hand, when they had really looked into each other's eyes.

Mrs. Ramchandran felt a twinge in her ankle and turned towards the pillow for support. Can she really be sure... that her husband wouldn't look around?

That night when Mr. Ramchandran returned, Mrs. Ramchandran looked at him closely after a long time. He was handsome for his age except for the stress bags around his eyes. He was always well groomed. She had turned a little plump herself.

"When did you buy this new shirt?"

"Which one?"

"The one you're wearing now?"

"Oh this one. Arrey, Kumar had come to the city for some work. He had to do some shopping for his family. I accompanied him and that day he insisted that I buy this!"

"But you didn't tell me?"

"I was going to. But when I returned you were sleeping and then the next day I forgot. Do you like it?"

Ayah entered the room just then and Mr. Ramchandran left.

Three of them including leader Rina di were elected to witness the Wednesday evening coffee date. But Rina di was

not yet on her feet. She wasn't to step out before Friday. An urgent call to the doctor was made. The doctor advised that if it was an emergency she could move on Wednesday. Her exercises and the medicine doses were altered. The get well soon brigade took the responsibility to assist her in every way. What an amazing display of teamwork.

Everyone looks excited, except Mrs. Ramchandran. What if the missing man turned out to be her husband? Only Anuradha and Mita were supposed to accompany her. But would they keep their mouths shut... if it was her husband? She was definite they wouldn't. The first rule of Gossip is obviously to gossip! They have always diligently done so. Instead of secretly warning a person of his or her folly, they have gossiped aloud! And now if the same treatment is given to her! What will happen? Their family's position thus far in the colony will sink in a second. Their kids will have to face such embarrassment!

"Let's drop the idea!" Mrs. Ramchandran suddenly blurted out.

Aghast, everyone in the room looked at her!

"But why?" Mrs. Chandra asked. How can she let go?

"I mean... how does it matter who goes around with whom? And I am not feeling all that well. I don't think I will be able to make it," Mrs. Ramchandran threw her dice quite assured that they wouldn't want to budge without her.

"What are you talking about Rina di? We have a great responsibility of keeping our society free of evils! We have been doing this for so long. And this is such a grievous matter!"

“But I think, she is right! She shouldn’t go, considering her sprained ankle. Let’s send someone else instead of her,” Paromita suggested.

“Yes. That’s a good idea! Let’s send Mrs. Chandra.” Many seconded the proposal.

“No, no. I am fine. I mean I will go. How can I disappoint you all?” Mrs. Ramchandran reverted sheepishly realizing her trick had worked against her. How could she let the others go without her? Her presence would at least put her in a better position to deal with what they found.

On Judgment Day the three women reached the coffee shop as soon as the two hands of the clock touched five. The dance teacher in question was already present at a corner table, but the man was yet to arrive. Carefully they chose seats such that they could observe the gentleman clearly when he took a seat opposite the teacher.

It was difficult to ascertain who waited for the man more eagerly. The girlfriend or the investigators? Around 5:45 the lady received a call on her mobile. She spoke into it shortly, looking around, and then snapped it shut.

Rina di had a better view of the corner table than the two ladies accompanying her. The man entered the coffee shop in a blue striped shirt. He walked swiftly to the corner table, said something to the dance teacher and both of them left the coffee shop before the three investigators could blink! The entire episode happened so fast that only Rina di was able to see the man. By the time the other two turned around to have a better look, the couple had left.

Where did they go? Who was the man? Did you see him Rina di?

Rina di looked at them both for few seconds and then declared with a smile.

“Thank GOD! He was no one from our complex. A complete outsider. Probably a bachelor!”

“But why did they leave in such a hurry? Did they see us?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the man had other plans. But why should we bother now? We know what we wanted to know.”

And with this she got up and left the coffee shop so quickly that they had no choice but to follow! Anuradha and Mita looked dissatisfied at their failure to see the man for themselves. Not that they didn’t believe Rina di, but their very coming seemed a waste.

Back home, the result of this investigation evoked a mixed response. Although everyone was definitely relieved, they felt like they’d missed a catch too! If the person had been someone from the colony, they would have had something exciting to criticize and chat about for several afternoons! But nobody said as much and expressed their pleasure on the finding.

As evening dawned Mrs. Ramchandran was alone in her room. The mobile in her purse started ringing. She took it out and glanced at the screen. An unknown number. She picked up the phone and a man’s voice spoke, “Rina di... have you told Mita?”

“No. I haven’t. I didn’t tell anybody. And I will not do so. But please think about what you are heading into...! You have a child and your wife... I am sure she loves you dearly!”

“Thanks a lot Rina di. I will definitely consider your advice. Thank you. I appreciate what you have done for me and my family!” The man disconnected.

Rina di walked towards the window and looked down. She saw Mita walking down the garden path towards her home with the others happily talking and laughing! Rina di drew a deep breath and closed the window.



10

The Magic Moslem

LARRY SMITH

He pegged Dora Roberts for a lower middle class black woman adequately educated and presentable, if a bit aggressive, as long as she was on her meds. They were all like that at the aftercare facility, essentially the same as you or I when they were drugged; creatures of an impenetrable plain when they were not. She wore a red skirt and nylon stockings, and her face was a little heavy with mascara. Thick darkish-red lipstick. He imagined her growing up in a track house in Tewksbury or Saugus, her father a blue collar worker periodically unemployed. She was fleshy, especially her cheeks. Sexually, she made no impression on him.

“The other patients seem to like you a lot,” she said when they first had a chance to chat in the lounge area of the facility.

“I hope so,” he smiled. “We don’t actually think of them as patients.”

“What do you think of them as?”

“Members of this community.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” she asked, no tone of challenge but a kind of nervousness in the question.

“Dr. Litowitz, Dave Baldwin, the rest of the staff.”

"Ok," she said and was about to say something more when a look he hadn't seen on any of the other members, like a vision, not nearly the same thing as incipient hallucination, preempted her. She was still with us, here on earth, not dissociated but distracted by something she was perhaps not seeing but rivetedly imagining.

Then she seemed to clear her mind. "Are you from Boston?" she asked.

"No, Cleveland originally, then New York, now here. I may stay here."

"So you like Boston?" she offered.

"Yes. It has a lot of texture. Where are you from?"

"Rhodesia, what is now called..."

"Zimbabwe?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

He didn't see her for another week, when she turned up wearing what she told him was called a jilbāb. It hung loosely over her full body. Her hands and face were uncovered. It was a multicolored garb, the reds and blues fairly muted, with faintly etched floral patterns. It looked like North Africa and he complimented her on it.

"It is hijab, which means proper clothing when men and women are together outside the family."

"Oh, Moslem tradition interests you?"

"I am a Moslem," she said.

"You became a Moslem?"

"I was born a Moslem."

“Oh,” he said, non-committal, as deferential to her narrative as he would have been to any of the others’. “May I ask where you got this jilbāb? They sell them here?”

“My father bought it for me last year just before he died, when he was in Fez. He was passing through the city.”

“He traveled a great deal?”

“He was in exile,” she said.

It was a powerful term and she said it gracefully. Dora plainly told him that her father was Ian Smith’s most powerful black advisor. That Smith was well-disposed toward Islam for the social control he then thought it provided. Other blacks resented her father. They thought him a conspirator, an adventurer, a traitor to them. He bought a mansion in Rhodesia on a high hill overlooking many meadows, and there mother and father raised her to love God and respect authority. As she affably disclosed more, he could hear no trace of Boston in her accent. She sounded rather like one of the black women he’d known and worked with in Cleveland.

Through successive visits, she’d volunteer several of her thoughts on Islam. He never questioned her about her accent, about her name which seemed so prosaically American; he never asked her to say something in Arabic. He was fond of her, or at least respectful enough not to back her into a corner. Dora talked about her family’s pilgrimage to Mecca when she was a little girl; how the intent throngs vibrated the air with their collective piety, the humming sense of mission that brought so many nationalities together in such contained fervor. “Why did you choose America of all the places your family might have gone?” he asked, as if he actually believed any part of her biographical rendition. “And why Boston?”

“Oh, we didn’t come for good to this country until last year, after my father died. “We had visited many times, but only visited. When my father died, my uncle sent for us. He’d been living in Detroit for many years. He’s a well-respected Imam. But when we passed through Boston, my mother met Governor Sargent’s wife, and she was very gracious, and urged us to consider living here.”

That struck him as a perilous fantasy, since the Governor’s wife was a patron of the aftercare facility and periodically visited. “What did you do here when you arrived?”

“Actually, I didn’t stay here long at first because I got a job teaching Arabic language and literature in a private school in Rhode Island,” she said. Then her eyes glazed over, the same visionary interlude that transpired when first they met. He waited in cautious silence until she returned, clear-eyed, and then he ventured, “For Westerners like me, Arabic seems to be an impossibly difficult language to learn.”

“It is a language that puts people in a different world from those who don’t know it,” she said. “There is a secrecy about the language that I can’t explain to you. There is an intimacy about it. It is very difficult to translate. You will never understand the great beauty of the Koran. I’m not satisfied with the translations I’ve done. The short Suras are especially difficult. I felt like I was trying to translate the light of one world from that world to another. I’m not sure I succeeded.” Then she paused and, apropos of nothing, said matter-of-factly, “Mugabe raped my mother.”

He started to respond but did not. “I wish I knew Persian as well as I know Arabic,” she said. “I love Hafiz. I would love to translate him.”

"Language is so..." he stuttered. "Do you know the American poet Wallace Stevens? He uses the phrase 'ithy ploonts.' His rhythms, his constructions; sometimes he reminds me of Dr. Seuss."

"Ithy ploonts," she repeated, respectfully. "We felt very strangely when Ian Smith visited Mugabe and Smith said he was treated most courteously. Mugabe told him that our country was a wonderful country. Ian Smith once called Mugabe an apostle of Satan but now he was calling him sober and responsible. Ian Smith told his wife Janet that he hoped it was not a hallucination."

Now her only home, and her mother's only home, was Mecca, and it was mere symbol. "I am a Jew," he said, "and I understand how the Semitic peoples have wandered and wandered. I hope that proves to be a bond between us all."

"Yes, I hope the bond is not a hallucination," said Dora. "Jews are wonderful people."

Once during a group discussion with other members, Dora seemed vague, detached; it was not quite the visionary reverie he knew, but she was away somewhere else just the same. When he asked her afterward if she were tired (an innocent-seeming question, but a way, perhaps, for him to begin to know more about those realms to which she'd suddenly travel), she told him she was remembering their days in Mombasa. The cowrie shells were everywhere there, adorning the clothes of both sexes, hung around voodoo-like statuarities sold for a few coins on the city corners, and many were transported elsewhere by merchants visiting, say, Turkhana, a dry land in central Kenya which was also mainly Moslem.

She'd look out from their dark suites across the mysterious waters, knowing that soon the family would be

leaving their womb-like refuge on the teeming city block to sail she knew not where because she was still too young to know. "Mombasa," he murmured to himself, wondering if it was the exotic name "Mombasa" that had captured her fancy, and to what extent her visions of the city had been based on photos, maybe old photos stretching back to early colonial days.

Weeks went by without her. He was distracted by the others. When she returned, she seemed disheveled. Sleeves on her mauve blouse were frayed. She wore an American-styled skirt, which was a little crooked and awkward around her hips. "Have you been all right?" he asked.

"I have *been*," she answered. She said to him, I ask myself why you people like Maria Callas so much and then I realize it was because she had such a big nose. It was a stiff protuberance right in the middle of her face, and when you people looked at her she looked back and ravished you with it. He was impressed she knew who Maria Callas was. But then again she also knew who Ian Smith and Hafiz were.

"I missed you," was all he said, and she said, "I missed you too, and I came back mainly to see you, because I have something I want to give you."

It was a leather pendant, a narrow quadrangular form pointed at all four tips, reminiscent in shape of the Star of Bethlehem as usually illustrated on Christmas cards. It was brown and black-fringed on its front; it looked sub-Saharan. On its plain back was an Arabic-looking scribble, which was not inelegant, and which he admired for the effort and skill she must have needed to make it look so plausible...

الرحيم الرحمن الله بسم واحد لي جبل

He thanked her profusely. Then he went back to New York and many difficult years went by. He saved the pendant as he had saved mementos of the other members, mostly little fond notes they'd written him or snapshots or signed copies of the mimeographed poems and stories the counselors at the aftercare facility encouraged them to write. Naseer came over for dinner, and he reminisced about them. He always enjoyed talking to Naseer. Naseer was a Palestinian who worked as a translator for both governments and companies. He'd just returned from Albany. "Oh, that Empire State Plaza!" said Naseer. "My friend, all it lacks is two-thousand years to become a ruin just like the Acropolis and then it will have the same prestige. Don't you think the Acropolis was equally monstrous in its heyday? Ruination is the great dignifier and the blessings of time are blessings indeed."

"You should have seen some of these people," he said when the conversation moved on to the aftercare facility. "There was this one guy who when he didn't take his meds would rail against this godless world of ours that—can you believe it?—names missiles and space missions after pagan gods! I used to play chess with this other guy who'd squirm and twist in his chair and then announce, 'You will be checkmated in four moves.' And he was always as good as his word."

"Chess," said Naseer, "that's another level. I'm surprised there are chess masters who *aren't* floridly psychotic."

"Some of these mental patients were very bright. One woman had this whole narrative about herself, how her father was Ian Smith's chief black advisor, and how she had done translations of the Koran that didn't quite satisfy her."

"I'll bet," smiled Naseer. "What do you think was the etiology of all that?"

"Oh you could speculate all kinds of things involving race, politics, and religion. But at the end of the day, who knows!"

He showed Naseer a few of his mementos and identified the pendant as Dora's gift. Naseer turned it over. His manner suddenly changed. The irreverence drained out of him. "Where did she get it?" Naseer asked.

"I don't know."

"Did she write this?" he asked, referencing the scribble.

"I guess so. Why?"

"Well, it's very strange. It is Arabic."

"You're kidding. What does it say?"

Naseer averted his eyes. He was embarrassed. "It says, 'Oh Merciful One, mount me.' Did she write this?"

He didn't reply for a moment, wondering who else might have written it.



ARTICLES

1

Diaspora and Identity Crisis – a Psycho-analytical Study through Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* and Jumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

SUBAS CHANDRA ROUT

The mesmerizing magnetism of globalization has shrunk the whole world through the accelerator of technological advancements. The acceptance of this tendency at the outer level stimulates migration but in the depth it only ends with a void which echoes an utterly chaotic feeling of rootlessness in life. That cognition ultimately mirrors the realization of the diasporas about the impending loss of hope as a constructed tension. This tension incessantly haunts their psyche and corrodes every sphere of their life. The decision to migrate may be compelling or willing induced by different stimuli. There are coercive factors like poverty, lack of employment, discontent with the natives, long-term colonization and the high handed executive attitude and masterly dominion of the colonizer as well as disagreement with politics or coaxing factors like higher income, better prospects with regard to education and employment. If the migration is dominated by

coercive factors, it is the forced diaspora which is usually associated with forced displacement, victimization and alienation.

The very thought of diasporic life explores the deeper socio-psychological issues relating to 'home away from home', undergoing a constant transformation from 'being to becoming', from 'what they really are' to 'what they have become'. This psychological transformation is accountable for their displacement from a historical homeland and subsequent dispersal through many lands. It is a type of consciousness conceptualizing their predicament, a type of acuteness in perception that penetrates to the brain when they encounter the question of identity. From this direction, the profound splitting thoughts strike the mind, 'Will the diasporas be able to forget their past?'

Memory marks a great loss. It is always a representation representing a formed tension which once was and no longer is. Homesickness, as a feeling of longing for one's familiar surroundings, is juxtaposed with the tensions of transplanted existence, the struggle for survival in a world of strangers. This schizophrenic experience shatters the life of the diasporas when their entity is cracked by multiple identities. These instantaneous socio-psychological issues connoting to identity crisis of the diasporas in the global era have been the consequential keynote of Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Robert Dixon, in his essay "Travelling in the West: The writing of Amitav Ghosh" in the book *Amitav Ghosh; A Critical Companion*, has mentioned, "The Circle of Reason certainly explores the relation between culture and imperialism. But Burgess's argument that it juxtaposes stable, traditional cultures with a diasporic, post-colonial culture is a

reading made within the paradigm of classical ethnography. For Ghosh, even societies that appear to be static and traditional are always already diasporic”(13). Similarly, in the introduction chapter of the book, *The Novels of Amitav Ghosh; A Critical Study*, Joydeep Banerjee has highlighted how “Ghosh seems to be telling that “Everyone is on the move, and they have been for centuries; dwelling-in-travel” (11).

The *Circle of Reason* is a big storehouse of memories, dreams and desires which is propped up by its progress from Sattva to Rajas to Tamas. It begins with the arrival of an eight year old orphan Nachiketa Bose, a typical Bengali name better known as Alu. He is brought to Lalpukar a village in rural Bengal to live with his childless aunt Taru Debi and uncle Balaram.

Alu’s foster father, Balaram is obsessed with the science of phrenology by what he applies his instrument for measuring on Alu’s head as a case study to match ‘outside’ of a person with his ‘inside’. By establishing the Pastuer School of Reason, Balaram becomes an enemy to Bhudev Roy, the unscrupulous profiteer. Balaram leads the movement to wipe out the germs from the village with carbolic acid which indirectly aims at the movement to finish Bhudev Roy and his lieutenants. The germ is money that impures and pollutes the village through the agent, Bhudev Roy. On the contrary, a devastating fire destroys all-Balaram, his home and the school. The traditional village life is destroyed by the modernizing influx of western culture, i.e. the carbolic acid. By the time Bhudev Roy comes to know, Alu has been an easy scapegoat. Out of jealousy and cynical attitude he announces Alu as a dreaded terrorist. For this identity, predicament of Alu begins. From this moment onwards, the

diasporic life of this innocent orphan Bengali boy starts for his discontent with the natives. The Asst. Supdt. of Police, Jyoti Das is told about Alu and his alleged terrorist activities. The Police forces criminalize Alu by which this innocent fugitive joins a tide of job seeking diasporic Indians drawn to the rich oil economies of the Middle East.

These diasporic Indians are Zindi, Karthama, Kulfi, Chunni, the Professor and Rakesh. All these migrants join Zindi's households, finding work with her assistance. In al-Ghazira Alu resumes his craft of weaving; "since the beginning of time al-Ghazira has been home to anyone who chooses to call it such-if he comes as a man. But these ghosts behind the fence were not men, they were tools-helpless, picked for their poverty" (281). One of these helpless poverty stricken people is Alu who is accidentally buried alive when a new concrete building the Star collapses in his workplace. The Lalpukar Alu as a weaver, the traditional craftsmanship i.e. another part of diaspora at al-Ghazira, does not exist in the global capitalistic sense of western scientific culture. Alu, the Indian weaver is trapped inside post modernity of global economy. When the other diasporas reach him to rescue, they find him "lying beneath a slab of concrete that is kept from crossing him by two antique sewing machines"(259). When he finally comes out, he declares that money is the evil of mankind for "it travels on everyman and every woman, silently preparing them for their defeat, turning one against the other, helping them destroy themselves?"(302). It explores the deeper socio-psychological issues experienced by Alu. It registers the persistent forms of Alu's mental distress long after the event at Lalpukar.

The neocolonial rulers of al-Ghazira put the challenge for these diasporas. In their encounter with the police, many

of Alu's friends are killed and the survivors are rounded up and deported. Zindi manages the survivors to run away, "Hurry, we can still get away; they haven't seen us yet there aren't any of them on this side of the embankment. They were all on the other side so that we wouldn't see the ambush" (377). Here, their identity is in flux and trauma is a crux, speaking to the undecidability of representation and the limits of knowledge. Alu himself in traumatic condition escapes with Zindi, Kulfi and Boss but is forced once again into migratory flight to a small town in Algeria. In that small town, on the way Boss becomes ill. In a shocked grief Zindi says, "In an unknown town in the middle of the desert, with nowhere to spend the day but the sand – dunes..." (384).

The third part of the story is Alu's experience at Algerian Sahara with Mrs. Verma and Dr. Mishra, the diasporas who are also in the clutches of their homesickness, "No, we don't have a maid servant, and if you want one you should go back to India..." (382). When Mrs. Verma is on a long way down the street, Kulfi identifies her as an Indian looking at her orange sari. Zindi gets a blessed shower of relief in the hope of giving medical treatment to Boss. "Her cradled arms lifted Boss's head to her cheek and kissing him, she whispered: Allah! You're saved now; saved in the middle of the desert. They're your country men; they'll have to do something for you." (385). The Indians living in an alien land are always eager to meet and share the moments with their countrymen. As an Indian Mrs Verma extends her hands towards these desperate diasporas but Kulfi dies there. In her death, Mrs. Verma becomes shocked and goes into the kitchen and returns with a brass bowl and a spoon. Kneeling beside the body, she says, "Go on, Mr. Bose. Even though it's too late now, you should wet her lips" (433).

It is in the Indian cultural heritage to give Ganga-Jal to a dying person by the relatives and these diasporas make it vibrant in the distant Sahara. Mrs. Verma puts the spoon into Alu's hands and helps him slip a few drops of water through Kulfi's dead lips. Alu does it as her so called husband. Then, regarding the cremation of Kulfi's body, these diasporas become conscious of the laws of Manu and the Smritis what arrest to their psyche. Dr. Mishra says:

Mrs. Verma? Well, let me tell you. First, you have to find a clean place on the floor somewhere and you have to purify it with Ganga-jal. If I remember correctly, you're meant to cover it with cow dung, too. But since you're not going to find much cow dung on the sand-dunes, I suppose you could always use camel dung instead and do a few penances when you get back. (444)

Then, Mr. Mishra thinks of some sandal wood and ghee for cremation. To get sandal wood in that Sahara desert is difficult. The tension continues till Mrs. Verma finds "two battered sandalwood bookends" (448). Lastly Mrs. Verma tells Alu, "And that is you have to bathe and shave your head...you have to perform the last rites—the kapalakriya, lighting the pyre, and all that. Who can do it but you? Your son's hardly the right age. And to do it you have to shave your head" (450-451). This cultural tradition plays a vital role in human psyche, between the self and the society. Its deviation makes the self chaotic and fragile. What is noteworthy is that Alu, since the day he becomes an orphan, does not travel but is driven to move under the compulsions beyond his control, i.e. from Lalpukar in Calcutta to al-Ghazira in Egypt and then to a small town in the North Eastern Edge of Algerian Sahara. Everywhere, the socio-psychological issues emerging from identity crisis make his

life a void. Ultimately, he returns to homeland in a new hope with Zindi and Boss.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's writing, to grasp socio-psychological tension of the diasporas goes to be a matter of their interaction with the transforming existence, away far from their native land. The subjectivity of their homeland becomes invaded by and juxtaposed with the subjectivity of foreign land. Beneath the shifting process, there is a sense of elsewhere that steadily reinforces migrant's need for survival and self preservation. The diasporas become aware of a deep and significant difference between their past traditional culture and a completely new, strange one. This profundity of redefining to themselves is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside. This view haunts the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity' claims.

Sandhya Tiwari, in her Introduction chapter to the book *Displacements and Alienation of Indian Diaspora*, writes, "The young diasporic writer of repute, Jhumpa Lahiri does not require any introduction to the readers of latest fiction. Her works deal with the internal strife and changing human predicament among identities and cultures" (29).

In the collection of short stories entitled *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri narrates the lives of various Bengali-Americans suffering from the problems of identity crisis and quest to explore their destiny in an alien land. These diasporas undergo the psychological tension issuing from dislocation and rootlessness. Getting uprooted from the native cultural traditions and values, far from being grounded in the past history and the loss of native colloquial language, these characters become inflicted by their restlessness and irritation. The first story of the book is "A

Temporary Matter” which narrates the life of a young couple, Shobha and Sukumar, who had lived in Boston for three years, suffer from intense nostalgia. What they talk that reckons how these migrants carry with them the little India in their memories. When the lights went out due to electricity cut off, Shukumar went to bring candelabra. Watching him tend his makeshift candelabra, Shoba said, “It’s like India. Sometimes the current disappears for hours at a stretch. I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark”(11). Unable to think of anything in particular about spending an hour in darkness, Shoba says, “I remember during power failures at my grandmother’s house, we all had to say something”(12). She was trying to focus on a distant object. This story digs out how the diasporas are emotionally attached to their past traditions but dislocation brings about a total collapse. The end of the story canvasses the complete failure to find any foothold and security in diasporic life.

The second story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” manifests the deeper sense of homesickness and intact memories. Pirzada, a professor of Botany, visits America to pursue his research. Lilia, the narrator of the story, is a young child from a Bengali family in America who says, “Mr. Pirzada and parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr.Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea”(25). These observations tell about the practices, ideologies and aspirations related to the tradition and ethnicity of the homeland of the diasporas that essentially differ from the natives of the place. Their life is connected to the past but

they compare it with the present. As a small child, Lilia does not understand the tension of the grown-ups when they discuss the world issues.

The third story, "Interpreter of Maladies", is the title story of the collection. It presents the social problems corresponding to psychological tension of the Indians living abroad, far away from their homelands and their ethos. It is the story of an Indian family in which the central character is Mrs. Das who is persistently haunted by the principle of chastity. An Indian by origin, she is unable to adjust the gap between the incompatible of the tradition of Indian culture and the modernized, advanced, Americanized life. She tells to Mr. Kapasi "I'm tired of feeling so terrible all the time. Eight years, Mr. Kapasi, I've been in pain eight years"(65). It is the pain about chastity what only an Indian woman can think. In the whole story, there is a sense of disintegration which sketches a broken, fragmented self. It creates the tension between the attempt to belong to the new society and the desire to retain the old culture. In the next story "Sexy", Lahiri presents not an ecstatic life full of dreams for the diasporas rather synthesizes how their dream of Americanization turns into a nightmare.

In another story entitled "Mrs. Sen", Lahiri projects how a lady of Indian origin, whose husband is a mathematics professor in a university, feels lonely and becomes isolated in a strange new culture. She plays the role of a baby sitter to an eleven year old boy Eliot in order to avoid her loneliness. She shares her fear, tension, and happiness with the boy, what necessarily she doesn't find out from her busy husband. That American boy minutely and keenly observes the day to day activities of Mrs. Sen in her home which eventually exposes to the Indian life, just a contrast in his mother. He

interestingly watches how "Mrs. Sen chopped things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor. Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas. The blade was hinged at one end to a narrow wooden base. The steel, more black than silver, lacked a uniform polish, and had a serrated crest for grating ...she could peel a potato in seconds. At times she sat cross-legged, at times with legs splayed" (114). This method of vegetable cutting performed by Mrs. Sen is purely Indian, not by an Americanized wife.

Mrs. Sen is not in support of the mechanized life in America that has caused loneliness in her home. She tells Eliot, "Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence" (115). She claims how there is no sharing, no fellow feeling among the natives of the place she lives. But about India, she says, "Not everybody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements" (116). Regarding her driving license, she anxiously questions to Eliot, "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour" (119)? This reflects her eagerness to return back to India. From day to day she finds the huge gap in between her own culture and a newly accepted strange one. She fails and in a tension ridden mind, she says, "In Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky. They ate the tail, the eggs, even the head. It was available in any market, at any hour from dawn until mid night" (123-24). Her dreams of a fascinating luxurious rosy life in a foreign land is shattered into multitude sufferings. Her hope has been turned into fear. In response to her

Americanized life, she becomes reactive to the letter of her relatives, "Send pictures of your new life." (125). In an exhausted voice she says, "What picture can I send? They think I live the life of a queen. They think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace." ([125). The intensity of her words articulates her high regard and love for homeland.

In the last story, "The Third and Final Continent", Lahiri propounds how a young man runs to America for better job opportunities with high package and initially faces difficulty to be settled. As a newly married young man, he thinks of bringing his wife from Calcutta to America. But when he sees an Indian woman on Massachusetts Avenue, wearing a sari and pushing her child in a stroller he finds an American woman with a small black dog on leash walking by the side of her. "Suddenly, the dog began barking and leapt up seized the end of the sari between its teeth" (190). From this mishap, the young Indian realizes and becomes conscious of protecting Mala and taking care of her. Towards the end of the story, both the couples are worried about the loss of their culture what they have not been able to feed to their son. Occasionally, Mala weeps for it, "So we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die"(197).

In these two writers, we observe how the dream of the diasporas for better material prospects ultimately transforms into the life of restlessness. This perspective of life promulgates the socio-psychological blending formation of a conceptualized tension synthesizing to identity crisis.

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The Animal and Bird Imagery in the Poetry of Niranjan Mohanty

DR. JIBANANANDA MUKHERJEE

The poetry of Niranjan Mohanty (1953-2008) has secured a prominent place in the history of Indian poetry in English. Mohanty has eight volumes of poetry to his credit. They are *Silencing The Words* (1977), *Oh! This Bloody Game* (1988), *Prayers to Lord Jagannatha* (1994), *On Touching You and Other Poems* (1999), *Life Lines* (1999), *Krishna* (2003), *Tiger & Other Poems* (2008) and *A House of Rains* (2008). He is a poet from Orissa. His poetry mainly shows his basic commitment to the lot of life in general, his poetic search for a meaningful existence, his knee-deep involvement in the Oriya culture and tradition and the sad plight of the society in his post-colonial nation. His poetry springs from his sincere preoccupation with two worlds—the real and the imagined, the literal and the metaphoric. His subtle and accurate imagery plays the most essential role to present his poetic vision. He interacts with these worlds and tries to articulate his feelings with the help of his imagery which is lucid, transparent and easily accessible. Imagery becomes the expressive medium of his vision. Mohanty's poetry is contrived of miscellaneous imagery. The present paper is to deal with mainly his animal and bird imagery.

Tiger is a frequent image in Mohanty. It is plurisignificant in nature. It symbolizes conscience of modern man. In modern society man is a victim of immorality, hypocrisy, lechery, corruption and other abominable crimes. The poet wants to suggest that this victimization is the inevitable result of an undesirable passivity or inactivity of the conscience latent in man. A poem entitled "Shsh! The Tiger Is Asleep" draws a significant picture of the tiger lying asleep in man. With the help of this image Mohanty tries to convey that all of us are indifferent or irresponsible to our misdeeds and misbehaviours and also predicts that someday our conscience will wake up like a tiger and pounce on the inhuman activities committed by man. Mohanty implies that a day will come when man will get rectified by his own conscience and abstain from doing anything unworthy of him. Thus tiger signifies the remonstrative self or reformistic zeal in man. When the surrounding world gets smothered in manifold problems caused by absolute anarchy in society, Mohanty hears within him a tigerish voice raising against all kinds of corruptions that throttle man's life:

These days, when the market is ferreted with price—
rise,

corruption, black malice ...
... the hospitals healing no diseases,
houses unhousing love, eyes shedding blood,
...
a tiger roams about the thick jungle of my body.
And I realize, I'm not different from the tiger

(*On Touching You* ... 43).

Tiger also signifies the uncontrollable ferocity of man's sexual urges. In a poem entitled "Tiger", the poet presents himself as a harbourer of the tiger of desire and orgasm. He shows how the bestiality of a grown-up man still lives in him with full

vigour and temper even though his physical strength dwindles. Mohanty's tiger also symbolizes hunger of the unfed and poverty-ridden people who beg for a morsel of food. With this image the poet tries to draw a picture of our society where most of the people have to live without food. In a poem entitled "Yet Another For Tiger" he writes :

Hunger is the theme-song
Of Kalahandi, or of the tiger.
No oblivion, no salvation
(*Tiger & Other Poems* 104)

In another dimension tiger stands for the poet's hunger for words that can produce poetry. A poet is always hungry mentally and this hunger he appeases with the help of his production. He endeavours to create something new, something artistic and so, he is always in search of a fitting word to express his art. In this regard he may be compared to a tiger which is always in search of a prey. To justify these various interpretations one should quote Mohanty's apocalyptic vision in "Hunger III":

A tiger always leaps people-ward.
The smell of the tiger-skin
flourishes in the air.
The groans of the tiger hang all round,
and the foot-prints are noticeable
everywhere from the shrunken belly
of a beggar
picking up morsels from the dustbin
to the eyes of a poet
blinking at the sky in search of words.
The tiger leaps into our dreams,
songs, hills of lost youth.
The tiger is seen slouching toward our sins.

(*On Touching You ...*45-46)

For Mohanty, tiger is the theme of his poem. It is the life of the whole body which is constituted by words and lines. With the help of the tiger image the poet indicates how the essence of the poems assumes significance:

The tiger sleeps between the lines
of a poem; between words, spoken or unspoken;
between silences and serenades.
Through the crowd of words,
this tiger entails its freedom
to move towards people ...

(Tiger & Other Poems 95)

Tiger also enlivens the poet's life. Without it the poet finds no meaning in life and becomes lifeless. In a poem entitled "The Other Tiger" he admits:

Its disappearance takes away
my breath ...
My white bones become grey.
I begin to hang like cobwebs
in the corner of our ancestral house

(Tiger & Other Poems 98)

Thus tiger becomes the part and parcel of the poet's being. It shapes his vision. It moulds his wisdom in the form of poetry. It brings him a vibrant voice, encourages him to dream spontaneously and teaches him how to perpetuate his dreams.

Horse is frequently used as a symbol in Mohanty. It symbolizes creative spirit in the poet and also beauty embedded in his art. The sight of the galumphing horse invigorates him, activates him and inspires him to write poetry. In a poem entitled "Horses" Mohanty visualizes two horses approaching with their riders on them:

As I see them approaching,
my blood starts flowing, rippling.
As though, they were not themselves

nor I, myself.
Even the horses were not horses:
the flowers whose fragrance
fills the air I breathe in

(On Touching You... 25)

The horses inspire him to create poetry whose beauty and melody fill his heart. In a symbolic dimension the sound of the galumphing horse stands for the musical rhythm of his poetry. When he is in the creative magnitude he can clearly hear this melody in his heart:

the sound of those horses' hooves
is heard beneath the grove
of my bones;

(On Touching You ... 26)

Mohanty is an earnest devotee of Lord Jagannatha. In his prayers he prays to Him:

Make me a horse to drag your cart

(Prayers to Lord Jagannatha 65)

He desires to be His horse i.e. His servant and obedient devotee and being so, he wants to drag His chariot. Here the image of horse stands for an earnest devotee of God.

Mohanty also uses image of lion in his poetry. Through this image he tries to indicate the vigorous energy and prowess embedded in his poetry. In a poem, "I Envy the Lion", he uses the myth of the goddess Durga and presents the lion as one that can cleanse the world and relieve it from all evils. The poet strongly believes in the strength of his poetry that can purify his society. He imagines:

In the absence of my mother
and the lion, the words in my poem
hold up before me the lion,
sleeping at the feet
of my mother

(Tiger & Other Poems 28)

Another recurrent image attaining symbolic proportions in Mohanty is the bird. It becomes a symbol of imaginative flight i.e. poetry. With the help of the wings of the bird the poet flies to the world of imagination, a world which is far away from the sordid reality. In a poem entitled "Sparrows" the poet sees a number of pretty little sparrows that rejuvenate him and lessen the burden of his sordid life.

The scene in the poem is one of dawn when the poet wakes up and opens the windows of his room from inside and watches the birds flying into the open sky above. The birds leave the poet with energy and enthusiasm. They evoke a spirit of creativity in him. He is strengthened to start the day, to face the real world. He expresses his feeling:

Watching them mingle into the vacancies
of the blue, I feel within a strange
pulsation. My heavy heart grows less
burdensome, less cumbersome

(On Touching You ... 20).

Bird is a symbol of poetic inspiration to Mohanty. He is encouraged to listen to the song of bird and this song inspires him to sing in terms of poetry. He states:

Song is the theme.
The rest is nothing.
From the foliage thick and green,
this saintly yellow bird,
mumbles nothing; yet everything
gets uttered spontaneously
like the wingless hymns

(On Touching You... 18).

In "A Quiet Morning" Mohanty refers to the crow which, like a saint, instructs him to write poetry. In the morning ambience of quietude he listens to the cawing of the crow. The crow can also be interpreted as the poet's imaginative

self, his creative mind. Thus the cawing of the crow stands for the poet's voice that utters his poetic message. The poet writes poem transmuting the cawing of his heart into poetry:

The saintly crows quicken blood
and caution me to order words
and listen to the song, ingrained

(Oh! This Bloody Game 9).

The cawing wakes him from the dreamy darkness of sleep and prepares him to encounter the realities of life. With his experiences he tries to locate the meaning and relevance of life. Thus the crow is a source of "wisdom" for the poet. It initiates the outflow of his song already latent in his heart. Mohanty calls the crow "saintly" because it declares the start of the day and awakens all people to their daily works. To the poet, the cawing sounds like a clarion call to poetry.

Listening to bird's song the poet becomes bird. Symbolically he flies to the world that is characterized by his infancy and youth:

Yet when the cuckoo spreads its songs
on the edges of green leaves,
...
... someone fits bright wings
to my bleak mind, and the burden of myself
becomes less gruesome and less gingerly,
I feel, I'm not yet thirty-six

(Oh! This Bloody Game 30).

Mohanty tries to transcend all the difficulties of the reason-bound world and bird serves as a metaphor to imply his transcendence. He prays to Lord Jagannatha to make him a bird:

Plume me with your love's pollen,
and make me a bird so that with my flight
I can endure all ...

(Prayers to Lord Jagannatha 20)

Through the image of bird the poet also describes his sheer love for his homeland. In the poem "To Belong Here" he metaphorically shows that his love is like a yellow bird which sits on the *neem* tree or tamarind tree in his neighbourhood and sings with ecstatic joy. The metaphoric suggestion indicates how Mohanty's sense of belonging is strengthened:

This love, like a song only
flourishes to make me belong
here ...

(*A House of Rains* 124)

The yellow bird appears in his poetic space again and again. It becomes a symbolic figure. It mingles reality with memory as it brings the poet back to his childhood days, to his private past. The yellow bird in Orissa is also considered as a prophet who can predict someone's sudden arrival. It brings in good news. In a poem "Kalahandi" Mohanty, aggrieved at the immensities of hunger and woe of the poor tribal people, hopes for the yellow bird:

Ah! for a sigh of relief
let the yellow birds sing
the arrival of rains

(*A House of Rains* 33)

Symbolically the yellow bird is an agent of solace and sustenance here. It can bring in the rain of redemption for the people of Kalahandi.

Employing the bird imagery the poet tries to identify himself with the birds and to translate their songs in terms of his poetry. Their qualities of patience, innocence and harmlessness have attracted the poet. The birds have much to teach him how to shoulder the burden of reality. Here they have been posited against the complexities of human nature

today. Their flight lifts the poet from “an island, dark, dingy, disaffectionate/where men and women burn and groan on a burning cauldron” to “another island—fragrant, / bright and ever green—where, voices / of children resonate the air like hymns. / In the air, flights of yellow birds and cuckoos.” (*A House of Rains* 55-56) The poet’s persistent preoccupation with the outer world and the inner world, with the mundane and the sublime, is best evident when he says in his “Autobiography” about the bird that it “bears these two islands on its wings” (*A House of Rains* 57).

The poet is overjoyed by the beauty of nature. The vast paddy fields, full of soothing laughter in the rural environment in his homeland enlivens and pleases him with the message of life and living. He at once identifies himself with nature and finds him as an integral part of it. In this situation the bird is an important factor. The poet mingles himself with nature as a bird singing the songs of life, the songs that contain the rhythmic reflection of life and assume timelessness through the quality of music. He thrills with joy:

In an open field,
I become a bird,
a poem, a pool of blood
wherein my white ancestors
gleefully swim sans any pretence

(*On Touching You...* 15).

Mohanty’s images resonate with meanings. They are the breath and voice of his poetry which is chiefly image—oriented. Through the employment of the animal and bird imagery the poet stresses upon man’s bonding with nature and its forces. This imagery not only indicates the poet’s love for nature but also his poetic progression from the literal to the metaphoric.

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3

Text, Culture and Identity in Judith Wright's Poetry

DR. S.G. PURI

My real interest... is the question of man in nature—man as part of nature. The theory of correspondences that Baudelaire brought forward—the question of nature as a symbol of one's experience has always seemed to me to have a good deal in it. (Judith Wright (1))

Judith Wright was born in 1915 into a prosperous pastoral family of the New England. She was a prolific writer, critic, short-story writer, wrote more than 50 books uncompromising environmentalist and social activist, campaigning for aboriginal's land rights she believed that a poet should be concerned with social and national problems. In her writings, we find an amalgamation of emotional bonding as well as social accountability which reflects the spirit of writers towards the human world. Her family came from the Hunter Valley, which is mesmerized with the beauty of Northern South Wales. She received doctorates from five universities, and numerous literary awards; she was the first Australian to win the Queen's medal for poetry. She was also nominated for the Nobel's Prize. From the early period of her life, she was always ready to extend her hands for the needy and marginal people of the society. She completed her study in English Literature at Sydney University, and in 1937 travelled to England for the customary "grand tour" of that class. After

that she worked hard to earn a job for herself so that she could do some help of her father. In the beginning of her days, she had to do a lot of small jobs in which include mustering, cooking, milking and keeping the study books. Therefore her early days work on poetry was very much influenced by the real life experiences. She accepts that the hard truth of life in her writings include 'Bullocky', which is the live experience of a common man in which she acclaims her presence. "Bullocky" is a realistic portrayal of the writer whose character has been influenced by the flora and fauna of the Australia. Though he is a rickshaw puller, one of the ordinary men, yet he has been involved with the great acts of the time and made his contribution in the development of the country. Later on, he became a man of the legend, a part of history through his works. Wright developed the character through her exotic imagery as well as figurative expressions. Bullocky is no any other but Jack Purkiss, one of the European pioneers, whose contributions have been recast and retrieved in the form of nostalgic experiences and composed in the form of a tribute paid to him as a matter of token of love. Thus, she realizes that this token of celebration is not for only the Europeans but also for the aboriginals as well. She says:

Beside his heavy-shouldered team,
Thirsty with drought and chilled with rain,
He weathered all the striding years
Till they ran widdershins in his brain:
Till the long solitary tracks
etched deeper with each lurching load
were populous before his eyes,
and fiends and angels used his road.(Bullocky)

Judith Wright endows a figure with mythical significance which renders Bullocky timeless and part of the Australian heritage. However, the European pioneers were not the only people whose suffering helped to fertilize the land for a

future vintage. Significantly Judith Wright incorporates aboriginals into her poetry as a very important part of Australia's cultural heritage. She also believes that land lives in her heart and say, "I love sunburnt country", because her the land is part of herself, and her ideas are developed through her treatment of the world, both literally and metaphorically. In "Woman to Child", she expresses her feelings of a woman and nature where the work of nature in our life is of a mother what she does for her child. A woman serves her child to build her/his a complete man/woman and for which she undergoes through all troublesome experiences. She has presented her feelings in such a manner that combines her personal overtones. In this poem, she has made an attempt to capture the period of conception of a child to the death that is the complete dimension of life-cycle. She says:

You who were darkness warmed my flesh
Where out of darkness rose the seed.
Then all a world I made in me,
All the world you hear and see
Hung upon my dreaming blood.

And she has also expressed her pregnancy and motherhood experiences in a beautiful manner that is one of the life memories. At one level this portrayal can be realized as one of the personal motherhood feelings but on the other hand we can't neglect for its generic significance. She justifies that the role of mother is of a creator and the relationship of which connects a child with her mother. On the other hand she has made a comparison between the role of nature and man. Nature nurtures a child to become the human being in every way. Hence, she says:

I wither and you break from me;
Yet though you dance in living light

I am the earth, I am the root,
 I am the stem that fed the fruit,
 The link that joins you to the night. (Woman to Child)

Judith Wright is an environmentalist, social activist; philosopher and political person whose versatile intellectual knowledge paved her path smooth to understand the flora and fauna of the Australian culture and identity. Interestingly what comes in her writings common to understand is of her close connectedness with the nature and manhood. Having read her poems it has been become clear that she was looking for amalgamation of human minds staying in different globes to convince the mind of people for safeguarding the nature which is our life force. Similarly she also worked for the rights of aboriginals which remained continued up to the last breath of her life. She believes that Australia is not a country of one community or individual but it is country of every individual who learnt here how to take the breath of life. In Australia, we have more than two hundred dialects and people of ethnic groups who have their own vocabulary to articulate their words with meanings. They are still glowing in their own web/groups of life. Environment of the country has been a main cause to influence the life of the people directly or indirectly. Consequently, she draws the attention of people of the land to work for the country in such a manner so that countrymen could be able to make the country fruitful and promising land. Thus she memorizes in "Bullocky",

O vine, grow close upon that bone
 and hold it with your rooted hand.
 The prophet Moses feeds the grape,
 and fruitful is the Promised Land.

Through her exotic images she comes to realize the past experiences in order to present the ideas in the current

scenario. Sometimes she composes her poems like John Donne's poetry where he presents metaphysical conceit which is beyond common man's understanding and recognition. She also presents every nuances/complexities of the nature. There is a clash between two of the cultures when they (Europeans) came close to each other which was because of the enormous cultural differences between the races. The first European settlers of Australia were unable to comprehend the ageless achievements of aboriginal people. Judith Wright took this challenge to work for the adjustment between the two of the races, which approach has been widely acclaimed by the contemporary writers. We can't ignore the influence of the British writers such as Thomas Gray and William Collins who had given an impetus to Australian poetry writing tradition. The earliest phase of poetry of Australia has been known for the bush ballad which carries the cultural sentiments of the time and the context of these ballads have been influenced by the flora and fauna of the country. In nineteenth century, most of the poems were published in the newspapers as they did not have a formalized platform to work on it. Judith Wright writes with full vigor and consciousness. She has a versatile genius in herself which we realize recurrently in her works. She supports the aboriginal's rights and works for their identity and culture. She says that the work of a writer is not to be limited with the writings only but more than that. Her range of poetic craftsmanship covers the various themes-personal, regional and universal. She absorbed-carved environment in her writings and she believes that the saving of environment can sustain the culture and identity of the people. The issue of depicting the environment in her writings was because of the result of emotional bonding with the land. There is a mixture of spiritual and physical connections in her writings that

make the portrayal truly in exotic order. Judith Wright advocates for the women's rights and thinks that the position/contribution of a woman towards the society is superior to man. Her sentiments can be analyzed in order to understand the human mind that she has advocated for in her writings. Through her poem, *Woman to Child* and *Woman to Man* she has focused on the man and woman relationship in which her main endeavor is to fill the gap between both of the sexes. In Indian English Poetry, Kamala Das and Sarojani Naidu have also advocated for the love and emotion and they have corrected the dissatisfaction of human love, as compared to Judith Wright what she did in her writings. Many of views of the writer relocate in her images and symbols portrayed through perennial themes. Judith Wright's cultural ethos is deeply rooted in her heart and furthers in her writings through the images and symbols. Her words and expressions are appealing to human heart, and one cannot put oneself away during the reading of the text. She says that a writer's responsibility is not limited only to write some poems and feel that the work has been done, she/he is more responsible person and then they should fulfill the expectations of society with their words and active participation. She also believes in the property of identity formation which is not fixed but changeable according to the social conditioning and location. Identity is environment as well as culture specific. She talks of the position of Europeans when they came to this land had single aim to establish themselves in the new land, but gradually they became the indispensable part of this land and contributed their efforts to make the countrymen proud. Now, Judith Wright advocates for recognition of every individual's efforts and realize the people that the country belongs to everyone and there is no discrimination on the behalf of community or race; the

European or the Aboriginal. Country has an address of everyone. Jayne Ifekwunigwe in *Mixed Race Studies: A Reader* (2004) has proved that "all races studies are, in fact, 'mixed race' studies! ...despite the fact that "biological" explanations for "racial" differences have long been discovered"(4). Judith Wright talks of oneness and encourages the people to work for the country's universal brotherhood. She does not like to create the wall or binary opposition between the social groups but amalgamation for the country's unity and identity.

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4

The Politics of Strategic Essentialism: A Study of Spivak's and Butler's Feminist Theory

KANIKA GANDHI

The term essentialism, in philosophy, is commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the “whatness” of a given entity. (Fuss 1989) It presupposes that a group or a category of objects/people share some defining features exclusive to the members of this particular group or category. The paper, in taking on board this concept, will attempt to tease out the various strands comprising this conceptualization, as put forth by Spivak. The paper will attempt to bring Spivak's “strategic essentialism” in close juxtaposition with Butler's “genealogy”, and explore the productive possibilities generated thereby; possibilities which have a radical import in the domain of action.

The early 1980's and 1990's were witness to the term essentialism acquiring negative connotations since it defined categories like gender, sexuality, race, religion and class in fixed human essences. It was accused of ignoring nuances among populations to construct a homogenized identity and emphasizing crippling gender stereotypes. For example, recent anti-essentialists like Judith Butler, in interrogating the constructed nature of sex, critique Simone de Beauvoir's

model¹ which leaves the biological category of sex unexamined.² Even Spivak suggests that independent definitions of woman always risk falling prey to the very binary oppositions that perpetuate women's subordination in culture and society.³ Against this binary system of thinking, Spivak proposes a critical strategy which she calls, "strategic essentialism".⁴

Strategic essentialism refers to the ways in which marginalized groups may temporarily put aside local differences to forge a sense of collective identity, which can then be deployed for political ends. For instance, Spivak uses strategic essentialism in furthering her concept of the "subaltern."⁵ Spivak's observation is that, while such terms as "indigenous" peoples or similar labels result in problematic and unstable groupings that erase significant differences and distinctions, these acts of identity formation support important political ends. So, "while terms such as 'Indian', 'African', or 'Native American' may be manufactured and suppress highly significant differences, they nonetheless do important work." (Dourish 2008)

Though strategic essentialism accepts that "essentialist" categories of human identity should be criticized, it emphasizes that one cannot avoid using such categories at times in order to make sense of the political and social world. The use of essentialism as a short term strategy can be effective for minority groups, as long as the identity does not get fixed by the dominant group.

Although strategic essentialism argues that groups have "essential attributes", it differs from essentialism in two important ways. In strategic essentialism, the essential attributes are defined by the group itself, not by outsiders trying to oppress the group. At the same time, the essential

attributes are acknowledged to be a construct, i.e. the group, rather paradoxically, acknowledges that such attributes are not natural, but are rather merely invoked when it is politically useful to do so. Moreover, the power to decide when the attributes are essential and when they are not remains with the group itself.

Spivak in an interview with Ellen Rooney points out that, "a strategy suits a situation, a strategy is not a theory".⁶ Strategic essentialism is thus most effective as a context specific strategy, but it cannot provide a long term political solution to end oppression and exploitation.⁷ The misuse of the concept strategic essentialism entails that "scrupulous" practitioners ignore the element of strategy and treat it simply as a "union ticket for essentialism". Spivak claims, "as to what is meant by strategy, no one wondered about that." In "Bonding with Difference" (1993-94), an interview with Alfred Arteaga, Spivak claims that she has given up on the phrase, though not the concept.⁸

According to strategic essentialism, feminists should acknowledge that essentialism is descriptively false in that it denies the real diversity of women's lives and social situations. Nonetheless, in delimited contexts, feminists should continue to act as if essentialism were true, so as to encourage a shared identification among women that enables them to engage in collective action. Any political strategy can be effective only when it allows its agents to recognize and intervene into the real social events and processes which make up the social field. This implies that a strategy of affirming fictitious commonalities among women will fail to facilitate effective action given a world where women do not really have any common social characteristics or locations. Denise Riley counters this argument by positing that the

fiction that women share a common social experience is politically effective because the social world actually does treat women as if they comprise a unitary group. But at the same time, one can argue that it is not true that any uniform set of essentialist constructions informs all social experience. These constructions may all identify women as a homogenous group, but they will vary widely in their account of what women's homogenous features consist in. Strategic essentialists have thus attempted to resuscitate essentialism by merely arguing that it can take a political and non-descriptive form. There is, then, a constant flitting between what may comprise an acceptable use of strategic essentialism and what may not.⁹ While essentialism may, as it organizes itself for the purpose of challenging orders of domination and oppression, represses and erase the complexities of its own constituency, committing a violence of a certain order, what requires to be seen is if it is possible to achieve a group identity which does not sacrifice its complexity for the sake of solidarity, and one which may lead to radical praxis. Here, Butler's conceptualization of a "genealogy" of women comes handy. Her understanding of genealogy is indebted to Nietzsche.¹⁰ In line with Butler, this "genealogy" is seen to constitute a group which is internally diverse and yet remains a group in virtue of having a complex history composed of multiple and overlapping threads of interpretation. The concept of genealogy helps us restore the idea that women even in the absence of common properties constitute a distinct social group.

To study the experiences and practices genealogically is to situate them within a particular group, not because of any essential characteristics which they share with all the group's other members, but just because each member in the group stands in the appropriate historical relationship to (one or

more of) the others. The items in this group need not have anything in common, but need only be connected together through a complex process of historical drift in meaning. Nietzsche's idea that any chain of historically overlapping phenomena has a genealogy makes it possible to reconceive women as a determinate social group without reverting to the descriptive essentialist claim that all women share a common social position or mode of experience. Any such "genealogical" analysis of women must start by recognizing that concepts of femininity change radically over time, and that these changing concepts affect women's social position and lived experience. In particular, a genealogical analysis of women is premised on the view—articulated in Judith Butler's work—that women only become women, or acquire femininity, by taking up existing interpretations and concepts of femininity.¹¹ Although they do not share any characteristics simply qua women, in each case they become feminine by reworking pre-established interpretations of femininity with reference to their specific situations. All women thus become located within an ongoing chain of practice and reinterpretation, which brings them into complex filiations with one another. The genealogy that arises through this process is not only a history of concepts of femininity simultaneously, a history of women themselves, as individuals who become women by taking on and adapting existing concepts of femininity. Moreover, within a single generation, each woman's reinterpretation of femininity will overlap in content, to varying degrees, with other women's reinterpretations; these overlaps must arise, insofar as all these women are engaged in reworking the same set(s) of pre-existing meanings.

An understanding of women as having a genealogy thus entails that, instead of forming a unitary group, they are

connected together in complex ways and varying degrees; and, in particular, that they are linked by their partially and multiply overlapping interpretations of femininity. One might agree that a genealogical view over-emphasizes the overlaps and continuities between different interpretations and experiences of femininity, it ignores the deep chasms between the understandings of femininity—the breaks in the chain of (re)interpretation. But, one must also try to focus on how the attrition which occurs in the process of reinterpretation can lead to formations of separate cultures of femininity. As a consequence of these discontinuities in the meaning of femininity, women must be considered not merely as an internally diverse group but also as a group fractured and torn apart by divisions in power.¹² This genealogical view not only emphasizes that what unites women and their history is internally complex, but this complex history remains singular and yet constitute women as a group whose history can be identified as distinctively oppressive. This rethinking of women and femininity as having a genealogy opens up the possibility of an anti-essentialism which supports, rather than paralyses, feminist politics. Since women's history is internally complex, and women's concerns are correspondingly diverse, the only mode of collective activity appropriate for women must be similarly diversified—allowing women to pursue concerns which are specific to them as women, yet which differ from one another as well. This suggests that a coalition politics is uniquely appropriate for women. Coalitions may be said to arise when different women, or sets of women, decide to act together to achieve some determinate objective, while yet acknowledging the irreducible differences between them and the often highly divergent concerns which motivate them to pursue this objective. On the basis of the idea that women

have a genealogy, we can explain why women might, despite these irreducible differences, reasonably seek to mobilize together on such a coalitional footing.¹³

To conclude, the paper, in having explored the aforementioned issues, brings to the fore the productive possibilities generated by the concept of strategic essentialism and the radical uses it can have at the level of practical politics. The dilemma can be solved by reconceiving women as a specifically non-unified social group, as having a genealogy. This opens up various ways in which women might become motivated to engage in collective action organized coalitionally. The paper suggests then, that the idea that women have a genealogy overcomes the dilemma posed by feminist critiques of essentialism, explaining how—despite their lack of common characteristics—women can still exist as a determinate group, susceptible to collective mobilization.

Notes

1. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*, 1993.
2. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990.
3. Spivak “Feminism and Critical Theory” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, 1987.
4. Spivak *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography*, 1988.
5. “Subaltern” refers to the people who have been as equally instrumental in history as the Europeans, but have been under-represented. The category of the subaltern was intended to shed light on the practices of dominance and resistance outside the framework of class struggle, but without ignoring class itself. The category of the “subaltern” would be of help in avoiding the pitfalls of economic reductionism, while at the same time retaining a necessary emphasis on domination and exploitation.

6. Gopal, Priyamvada. *Reading Subaltern History*. pg. 146-150
7. A positive use of “strategic essentialism” to challenge universal claims of western feminism is seen in Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Mohanty in her essay “Under Western Eyes” shows how Iranian middle class women veiled themselves during the 1979 revolution to indicate solidarity within their working class sisters. This context-specific strategy challenges the common assumption that the veil is always a sign of women’s oppression by Islamic patriarchal laws and hence she proposes a more careful and situated approach, which she calls transnational feminism. This critical endeavor to situate women’s social location in a transnational framework of political, social and economic relationships is one of the most important legacies of Spivak’s thought. For Mohanty, the idea of global sisterhood is problematic.
8. Spivak points out the misuse of terms and phrases by the western academia and distances herself from the phrase but does not abandon it as a project. She resists the appropriation of the phrase in essentialist terms since her project is a political one where she is interested in examining the questions of power in a majority/minority group.
9. It is significant to keep in mind that while marginalized groups themselves formulate their own identity in order to advance their own communities, often identities are also imposed by communities. For instance, native American tribes in order to be recognized by the US government had to force themselves to fit into the essentialized criteria stated by the government or risk not receiving recognition. hence problematizing the notion of strategic essentialism.
10. In the *Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Nietzsche sketches a distinctive form of historical enquiry which traces how historically changing concepts—such as “guilt”, “duty”, “community”, “good” and “evil”—shape lived social experience. He also traces how the power relations that are at work within people’s social experiences lead them to reshape those concepts in turn. Nietzsche thus adopts an anti-essentialist approach to morality, taking its constituent practices and beliefs to be highly diverse. Foucault stresses that

for Nietzsche, this history is not to be studied through “traditional” modes of historical enquiry, which misleadingly presuppose an underlying unity amongst moral phenomena. Instead, the history of morality should be approached through a novel mode of enquiry—“genealogy”—which attends to the fluctuating and internally heterogeneous character of its object of study. Thus, the genealogist treats any historically arisen phenomenon as the reinterpretation of a pre-existing phenomenon. Because incompatible elements of meaning become shed upon each occasion of reinterpretation, a process of attrition / erosion takes place through which earlier layers of meaning gradually get eroded away altogether. Nietzschean genealogy, then, traces how concepts such as “guilt” and “evil” undergo varying interpretations, where these interpretations continually reshape our experience and practices.

11. There is no unitary meaning of femininity on which all women agree: for, even although all women may identify with femininity, they will always understand and live their femininity in different ways. Nonetheless, according to a genealogical approach, all women remain identifiable as women.
12. Women’s history should be understood as the model of a tree, which remains singular even as it ramifies into innumerable branches.
13. One must, at the same time, acknowledge that each woman’s historically shaped experience inevitably overlaps in content with that of at least some other women, which gives them areas of commonality that they might reasonably seek to transform together. Also, in each woman’s case, there will be many other women with whose experience her own has no direct overlap, and with whom she is only indirectly connected.

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5

Reflections upon the Silver Linings of Diasporic Existence in Jhumpa Lahiri's "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "The Third and Final Continent"

DR. PRASENJIT PANDA & ABHISEK BHAKAT

Etymologically the term 'diaspora' has its roots in Greek language. Combining together the meanings of two words— *dia* (which means through) and *speirein* (which means to sow or to scatter) the term 'diaspora' has evolved as the most important discourse on cultural and ethnic studies. Agricultural metaphor connected with the term allows us to see the case of migration as the dispersal of seeds in an alien and unfavourable land. In its strictest sense diaspora is applied to the exodus of Jewish people from Palestine with an intense longing in their hearts to come back. Post colonialist critics apply the term to religious, cultural and ethnic groups who are aggrieved by inexorable sense of exile and displacement. Diasporic literature and critical discourse are not the exclusive property of post colonial theory, simply because various other schools of theory have interpreted it in their own eccentric ways. As for example the Post-Structuralist critics look at diaspora as something which is much more than craving for an illusory homeland or essential identity. They take it as a concept illustrative of dynamic network of communities in modern day scenario. The race

theory takes into account slavery (though now not extant) assuming it to be a diasporic phenomenon (Hawthorne 78). This paper is a venture to unearth the positive sides of diasporic existence amidst general hue and cry of identity crisis by illustrating the condition of modern man and the factors instrumental in constructing one's identity.

Diasporic communities in a new geographical context find it difficult to settle in because of the cultural baggage they carry with them. The concept of spatio-temporally distant homeland which is rooted in language, religion, custom, folklore controls over loyalty and emotions of diasporic group for the old nation. Same history of migration and sense of co-ethnicity facilitate the formation of diasporic groups in foreign countries. Diasporic communities feel cut off from roots, a kind of spiritual void chiefly because of the unsatisfactory identity which transnational migration entails (Nayar 186). Post colonial theorists profess two ways of diaspora—earlier in the colonial era and now in the post colonial era. During the colonial era white people migrated to colonies set up in the so called 'third world' countries and with an air of superiority preserved, extended and nourished their culture. In the post colonial era, non-white immigrants in first and second world countries, find themselves fragmented by unidentifiable and unsatisfactory identity which inevitably results in cultural degeneration. Diaspora is basically the outcome of migration, immigration and exile. Reasons behind migration of people are innumerable as the immigrants may be—refugees, asylum seeker, illegal immigrants, voluntary migrants, job seekers etc. Diaspora entails identity crisis, de-territorialization, unsettlement, nostalgia, frustration of shattered dreams in many cases undoubtedly but it is also useless denying the fact that it also offers the prospect of amalgamation of two different cultures,

financial affluence, up gradation of life-style and most importantly weighing one's culture in relation to other cultures.

Diasporic writers are placed on a vantage ground to write about their homeland in an objective and unbiased manner. The enviable corpus of diasporic literature holds evidence to the profundity of creative genius and excellence of skills of diasporic writers across the world. Raja Rao, G.V Desani, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandya, Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Amitava Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Aravind Adiga, Jhumpa Lahiri are only a few names in the illustrious cluster of writers in the firmament of diasporic literature. The most prominent, unifying feature of these writers is the fact that they are also the part of the diasporic community. They also carry the sense of dislocation, unsettlement. The constant effort of a diasporic writer to find a balance between dislocation and re-location, survive hostilities, settle down in new circumstances find a voice in their writing. Jhumpa Lahiri is also representative this sensibility of diasporic writers.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1967 in London and brought up in Rhode Island. She is a second generation diaspora as her parents emigrated from India before her birth. For this reason India is a distant homeland or land of origin of her parents which shaped her sensibilities and way of conception as a writer. In an interview Jhumpa Lahiri says:

I did not go to Calcutta as a tourist nor as a former resident-a valuable position, do I think, for a writer. The reason my first short-stories were set in Calcutta is due partly to that perspective-that necessary combination of distance and intimacy with a place. Eventually I started to set my stories in America and as a result the majority of stories in Interpreter of Maladies have an American setting. Still, though I have never lived anywhere but

America, India continues to form part of my fictional landscape. As most of my characters have Indian background. India keeps cropping up as a setting, sometimes literally, sometimes more figuratively, in the memory of other characters.

This cross cultural bent of mind is the most promising aspect of diaspora. Her debut work *Interpreter of Maladies*, published in 1999, won Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. Her other works are *The Namesake*, *The Lowland*, *Unaccustomed Earth*. She is the voice of non-immigrant Americans who have not fully come to terms with straddling the line between two varied cultures. Author Jaydeep Sarangi elucidates, *Jhumpa Lahiri's short-stories are the gate way into the large submerged territory of cross-culturalism. It is a metaphor to share cultures...something that will allow them/us to share, instead of dividing, what is on either side* (Sarangi 117). Jhumpa Lahiri in another interview says: *the question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case with their children*. Being born to immigrant parents Jhumpa Lahiri is also placed in the same position. It is also evident from her remark that being a diasporic writer helps little in casting aside the overwhelming complexities of diasporic existence.

In this paper the focus will be limited to the two short-stories titled "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "The Third and Final Frontier" form the collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. This collection, consisting of nine short stories, encompasses all kinds of diasporic existence and unresolved complexities connected with it. "The Temporary Matter", the first one in the collection, tells the story of an Indian couple Shukumar and Shova living in America and their desperate vain attempt to rejuvenate the fissures of strained married life. The third story in the collection, titled, "Interpreter of

Maladies" is about American born Indian couple Mr and Mrs Das. Their visit to Udaigiri and Khandagiri with their children provides the opportunity to Mrs. Das to give vent to submerged dark secrets of her past. "A Real Durwan" relates the story of Boori Maa who suffers from an acute sense of loss-family, wealth, home and shelter. The next story "Sexy" presents a fine blending of two different cultures. The one day stay with Rohin changes Miranda's perspective drastically which helps her getting over an illicit relationship (broadly physical) with a married man named Dev. The sixth story titled "Mrs. Sen's" beautifully captures the experiences of Mr.Sen and Mrs. Sen as immigrants in America. "The Blessed House" tells the story of how Twinkle and Sanjeev, despite having conflicting opinions about religious breadth and liberalism, successfully work out on a compromise. "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" is a heart touching tale of how the unwanted child, conceived through heinous act of sexual violence, propels Bibi Haldar from an unstable, unmarried and hysterical state towards normalcy.

Diaspora is not all about rootlessness, hostility, struggle, nostalgia and dislocation. Behind the hardships of diasporic settlement lies the hidden seeds of positivity which will be beneficial in creating the sensibilities for embracing even more complex heterogeneous societal challenges. In the age of technical advancements and globalization a pure identity is a myth. In dynamic world like ours change is the only fixity. Identity of individual, community, nation is under the process of constant metamorphosis. The central character of the story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is introduced to the readers thus, *His name was Mr. Pirzada, and he came from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but then a part of Pakistan* (23). It is a historical fact that civil war of Pakistan in the year 1971 transformed the identity of East Pakistan into

Bangladesh. This change of the identity of the nation testifies the linguistic and cultural contradictions that lie within domestic domain. Lilia, the second generation immigrant is the narrator of the story. Mr. Pirzada's purpose of visit to America is study of vegetation of New England and also to write a short book on his findings. His stay in alien country is far from cozy in the absence of basic things like a private room, proper stove or television. It is on such occasions that immigrants crave intensely for the comforts and solace of homeland. Amidst discomforts Mr. Pirzada gets an opportunity to conduct research, explore new premises in his field of study which would have not been possible back in Dacca. His mechanical routine life as a professor in Dacca University coupled with the responsibility of family would have negated any scope for advancement of his intellectual capabilities. He gets that rare window only through the dislocation and relocation process of diasporic migration. Hence it can be considered as the silver lining of the diasporic existence. In India, the religious fanaticism has created invisible wall of hatred between Hindu and Muslims. But in America the same history of migration turns instrumental in the formation of diasporic community consisting members of professed antagonistic religious groups. Diasporic existence infuses a great humanitarian zeal in them as evident from the strong bonding between Mr. Pirzada and the Hindu family. The rift between communities and riots seem like an enigma to Lilia, the narrator. Her voice is crisp and incisive when she talks about the divide between Hindu and Muslim; *it made no sense to me* (25). Apart from the religious difference they speak the same language (Bengali), eat same food and share similar cultural habits. Quite naturally the difference *Mr. Pirzada is a Bengali, but he is a Muslim* (26) gets eroded in an alien space. Being residents of America, they are far away from the riot

ravaged, over populated country of their origin *I would never have to eat rationed food, or obey curfews, or watch riots from my roof tops, or hide neighbours in water tanks to prevent them from being shot as she and my father had* (26).

The family of Lilia, the narrator girl thrives in American society after initial days of strife. Lilia's formal education allows her to know more about American culture but at home constantly gets acquainted with the culture and current affairs of the homeland which she has visited just once in her life. She straddles two different cultures so smoothly in contradiction to the American people who are only concerned and obliged to grasp their own culture. This fine balance of imbibing two cultures simultaneously is one of the brighter prospects of diasporic existence.

The diasporic existence nourishes a kind of genuine concern for the well being of the other which is vindicated by the gradually strengthening bond between Lilia's father and Mr. Pirzada. It rarely happens in sub-continental countries, owing to its dirty political game, that Hindu and Muslim deprecate the same general, which is the case in this story – *...my father and Mr. Pirzada deplore the policies of a general named Yahyan Khan*. Lilia also thinks of Mr. Pirzada as one of her family members. Her sincere prayer for the well being of Mr. Pirzada's family is suggestive of the intimacy she has developed: *but apart from eating a piece of candy for the sake of his family and praying for their safety, there was nothing I could do* (34). The solidarity among them reaches its climax when the war for independence of East Pakistan started. Diasporic existence indeed induces an equalizing effect: *most of all I remember the three of them operating during that time as if they were a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear* (41). At the end of his tenure Mr.

Pirzada returns to Bangladesh in search of his family. He is not a permanent diaspora who leaves behind a trail of warm, intense relationship in America which is his greatest gain from diasporic existence. Lilia and her family feel the bliss of relief on hearing from Mr. Pirzada of his happy reunion with wife and daughters. *Though I have not seen him for months, it was only then, that I felt Mr. Pirzada's absence (42).*

The final story of *Interpreter of Maladies* is "The Third and final Continent" relates the trans-continental journey of a nameless narrator in search of better opportunities, greener pastures in life. He is an example of double migration who goes further and further still accepting whatever comes his way. His days of struggle in England make him emotionally and physically strong enough to tackle the hostilities of new circumstances. Instead of being discouraged by the circumscribing hostilities of diasporic existence he fights hard to establish himself and earn respect abroad. His never say die attitude towards life brings to him rich rewards when he gets a full-time job in America, in the processing department of the library of MIT. Diasporic existence in his case opens new doors of opportunities, but they are challenging all the same. He feels almost inescapably caught in unpleasant surroundings at YMCA: *but there was no ship's deck to escape to, no glittering ocean to thrill my soul, no breeze to cool my face, no one to talk to (175).*

His openness to new culture, habits is exemplified by his decision to consume beef which is a common thing in America. A member of orthodox Bengali family will cringe away from having beef where as he has no issues with the consumption of mutton. Objectively thinking this discrimination appears absurd because both beef and mutton as food necessitates killing animals. *...at the time I had yet to*

consume any beef (175). The narrator's forward moving journey offers him new never done before experiences at every juncture. He realizes them at the time of experiencing them. As for example—consumption of beef, first American meal, living in the house of non-Indian: *Inspite of the heat I wore a coat and a tie, regarding the event as I would any other interview. I had never lived in the home of a person who was not Indian* (177).

An institute of international fame attracts students, delegates and probable employees from across the world. The hostel of Mrs. Croft gives shelter to students from varied cultural and ethnic background. *We had a Brazilian fellow, about a year ago. You'll find Cambridge a very international city* (183). The diasporic existence allows him to go beyond the cultural baggage of homeland and absorb whatever is there for betterment. He always strives for advancement and settlement. With the arrival of his wife Mala change of residence becomes necessity. He takes an apartment on rent and leaves Mrs. Croft's residence. *One last Friday I handed Mrs. Croft eight one dollar bills in an envelope, brought my suitcase downstairs and informed her that I was moving* (190). He tries his best to settle in the new circumstances, fate has tilted him against. With his sympathetic heart and keen eye for details he develops a kind of attachment with Mrs. Croft and her daughter Helen. For this reason he expects an emotional farewell which is not the case. *I did not expect any display of emotion, but I was disappointed all the same.* Long after that, he visits the same place with his wife Mala whose stance before Mrs. Croft reminds him of olden days ...*for the first time since her arrival I felt sympathy. I remembered my first days in London, learning how to take the tube to Russell Square, riding an escalator for the first time, being unable to understand that when the man cried 'piper' it meant paper, being unable to decipher, for a whole year that the conductor said, 'mind the gap' as the train pulled*

away at each station. Like me Mala had travelled far from home, not knowing where she was going, or what she would find, for no reason other than to be my wife (195). He stretches his hands to embrace America, its people and its culture. *Mrs. Crofts was the first death I mourned in America, for her's was the first life I had admired* (196) is what he says after noticing the obituary in the newspaper. Though he is Indian diaspora, he successfully settles down with the identity of an American citizen. The narrator finds himself peacefully place In between Indian and American cultures. His determination to live in the strange continent till the day of his death only exudes the triumph of undaunted spirit of human beings. *Though we visit Calcutta every few years, and bring back more draw string pajamas and Darjeeling tea, we have decided to grow old here* (197). He is one of the innumerable immigrants who have settled down in America permanently conveying the positive message at the end of the day *whenever he is discouraged, I tell him that if I can survive on three continents then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer* (197).

Exile and displacement narratives like the short stories presently under scrutiny are much more than simple externalization of sad nostalgia and craving for homeland. The concept of homeland is a mental construct which hinders the free exchange of cultural wealth. Salman Rushdie says, *what is the best thing about migrant peoples ...? I think it is their hopefulness... And what is the worst thing? It is the emptiness of one's baggage* (Rushdie, Shame 91). Diasporic people aggrieved by the deterritorialization often fail to see the re-territorialization which naturally follows it. Mr. Pirzada as well as the unnamed narrator of "The Third and Final Continent" clings on to their never dying hope till the last moment. On the positive note of exile Edward Said says in his essay "Reflections on Exile" (1999):

I think that if one is an intellectual, one has to exile oneself from what has been given to you, what is customary and to see it from a point of view that looks at it as if it were something that is provisional and foreign to oneself. That allows for independence commitment-but independence and a certain kind of detachment (13).

Amit Shankar Saha says that *“there are advantages of living as a migrant-the privilege of having double perspective, of being able to experience diverse cultural mores, of getting the leverage provided by the networking within the diasporic community and more.”* (Saha 194). Both the stories demonstrate how the Indian diaspora have gone through the process of cultural negotiation and assimilation. Especially in *“The Third and Final Continent”* we observe that the narrator rarely feels the prick of homesickness or any kind of nostalgia. For him the idea of home is dynamic, flexible and inclusive. Rushdie in his essay points out, *the past is a country, from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity.* (1991:12). In these two short stories we find no such lame construction of imaginary homeland. Instead what we discover is the positive outlook towards the situation which is ready to grab every opportunity life has to offer. Diasporic existence necessitates pushing the limits of adaptability further to survive hostilities in a foreign country. Susheila Nasta’s argument testifies to this fact:

This position of the migrant and immigrant I would add is enabling in this way for it allows a doubling of perspectives, a view of the inside from the outside-though in reality the two perspectives are always linked. But this vantage point has both the precision of distance and intimacy and is essentially an ambidextrous one (Nasta 42).

Thus the nuanced analysis of the two short stories *“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”* and *“The Third and Final Continent”* by Jhumpa Lahiri discloses the privileges of Diasporic

groups like multicultural identities, divided affinities, increased cultural contact, fusion of local and global, new identity and new destiny. Arjuna Appadurai rightly says, *Diaspora is the order of things and settled ways of life are increasingly hard to find* (Appadurai 172). At the end of the analysis we may draw the conclusion that the initial conflict of living 'here' and thinking 'there' resolves into a kind of double consciousness and fluidity of identity.

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6

Varanasi in the Seventeenth Century French Travelogues

DR. VINAY KUMAR SINGH

Varanasi is the holiest city for the Hindus of the world. Those who disagree with its being called the holiest will still not object to its being called one of the holiest cities. The city, tell the Hindu scriptures, has been central to the Hindu sacred geography since time immemorial. Its location by the holiest and divine river “Ganga” makes it very special: not only for the religious but also for the aesthetic purposes. The religious, and not so religious, people from all over the world come to Varanasi to wash their sins away. They believe that one dip in the holy Ganges will make them pure. It is also believed that dying in Varanasi frees one from the continuous cycle of deaths and rebirths. So, they come, throughout the year, in all seasons, to the ghats of Varanasi. Not only the Hindus, and amongst them, the believers, come to Varanasi. People from all over the world do. They come, see and write about the city.

Art, in all its forms, has always been a product of human mind processes, and the mind processes aren't totally independent of the effects of the stimuli coming from the world out there. Human actions are affected by their milieu – social, political, economic and cultural – and affect the milieu in their turn. Thus, literature has a reciprocal relationship

with the people and systems of its own time and before and after it. Writing on Varanasi from those who came as travelers may be taken as starting with Peter Mundy, but the most famous early travelers are Francois Bernier and Jean Baptiste Tavernier.

They had come to Varanasi in the 1660's, the very decade by the end of which Aurangzebe's orders of destroying the most important temples of the city hit it like a selective seismic wave. Bernier, who had come to Benares in 1660, begins his account of the city thus:

The town of Benares, seated on the Ganges, in a beautiful situation, and in the midst of an extremely fine and rich country, may be considered the general school of the Gentiles. It is the Athens of India, whither resort the Brahmens and other devotees; who are the only persons who apply their minds to study. (334)

He could not apply words more positive towards a city of alien culture and continent, than the epithet "Athens of India". He belonged to that part of the world where Athens of the classical age was (and is) seen as the site from where the Western traditions of philosophy, literature, art etc. arise. He does not continue in the same vein for long. The beginning of his tone of admiration is also its end. In the sentences that follow, he starts essentializing the Orient by calling the disposition of the students learning Sanskrit in the city generally "indolent",

... owing, in a great measure, to their diet and the heat of the country. Feeling no spirit of emulation, and entertaining no hope that honours or emolument may be the reward of extraordinary attainments, as with us, the scholars pursue the studies slowly. (335)

His critical mind sifted what was logically and historically trustworthy from what he saw as merely a glorified yarn. He

states that Sanskrit is definitely not, as Hindus assert, hundreds of thousand years old. Yet, he readily concedes to the idea of its being “extremely old” and records his having seen the books written in that language of antiquity on “philosophy, works on medicine written in verse, and many other kinds of books, with which a large hall at Benares is entirely filled” (335). His interest in the country and in its corpus of knowledge is reflected in his attempt to obtain a copy of the veds and from the tone of frustration generated out of his failure.

He is perceptive enough to mention the reason behind the scarcity: a fear “lest they should fall into the hands of the Mahometans, and be burnt, as frequently has happened” (336). The admirable way in which he applies reason over the things he hears in India finds its contrast in the way he lets his prejudices speak on the pages, as in his comment about the Snaskrit students: “I have already intimated that they are of a slow and indolent temper” (336).

He then mentions the various schools of philosophy prevalent in the country then: six in the mainstream and one an outcast. He was confused, as any one (like me) first exposed to the Hindu streams of philosophy would be. His perceptive mind did discern some similarities between the classical Greek philosophy and that of the Hindus. It would have been a sound method had he accepted his beginner status and then had kept his tone soft. Instead, he goes on opining freely about the philosophical texts. He hits at the core of the Hindu epistemology and metaphysics:

opinions are expressed in so loose and indeterminate a manner that it is difficult to ascertain their meaning; and considering the extreme ignorance of the Pendets, those even reputed the most learned, it may be fairly doubted

whether this vagueness be not rather attributable to the expounders than to the authors of the books. (337)

All he writes about what he experiences in the city is not methodically wrong. When he mentions the aversion of Hindus of the city from studying anatomy by performing dissections etc. he has his fingers upon the right pulse. And then, his mention of astronomy and its balanced analysis are praiseworthy too:

In regard to astronomy, the Gentiles have their tables, according to which they foretell eclipses, not perhaps with the minute exactness of European astronomers, but still with great accuracy. They reason, however, in the same ridiculous way on the lunar as on the solar eclipse (339).

In the end, however, he points towards the lack of the part played by reason in the development of theories of what is now known as science. He criticizes their tendency to convert everything one sees into some kind of a deity and to attribute characteristics to them. He also points out the loopholes in their geography that he finds mere fiction. He ridicules in his blunt manner when "They believe that the world is flat and triangular; that it is composed of seven distinct habitations" (340). Who would call him wrong when he makes fun of the absurd notions like the causes of the earthquakes being the movement of the elephants who bear the burden of the earth' especially when they don't know anything about the various myths of the classical antiquity of the Western civilizations? But then, Bernier had apparently never discovered anything equally ridiculous in them. He questioned the pandets of the city regarding their idolatry and was left dissatisfied by their answer.

Jean Baptiste Tavernier had come to Benares in 1665. His account of the city is special because he had been to Bindu Madhav Temple at Panchganga Ghat just a couple of years

before Aurangzebe had ordered its destruction and the construction of a mosque that bears his name even today: the Alamgiri Mosque, or, as it's known more popularly, Beni Madho's Dharhara. The Dharhara commands a very dominant position in the ghatscape of Banaras and can be seen from a ghat as distant as Raja Ghat. It has attracted painters and photographers of Banaras. It has also been shown in most of the films that show the city.

Tavernier calls the "pagoda of Benares" the most famous temple of the country, after the Jagannath Temple in Puri. He then writes of the recesses on the side of the steps leading to Gangaji and about the sanctity of Gangajal. Around four centuries ago, his mind did protest at the claim made about the purity of the river's water by the Hindus. The reason he gives behind the pollution of water is the Hindu practice of throwing corpses (of certain categories of humans and of animals) into the river. His concern has been echoed through the years that followed his, by the people who came to the city after him.

Tavernier describes the altar in the garbh griha and the idol. He mentions that women were not allowed to enter the temple, so they used to have the darshan from the outside. On the right side of the altar he had seen the figure of Garuda that was made of gold. His description of the temple services and of the devotees and their activities is detailed and covers the minutest of details. He also describes the school that Raja Jai Singh had established nearby. He went to the temple in the same building the next day and observed and recorded the early morning activities around him. These two travelers show all signs of affection for the place that is marked in an Indian visitor. Their Western minds could not look beyond the limits imposed by their religion. Therefore they could not

appreciate the spiritual essence of the city. Theirs was to be the fate of many later day European travelers to the holy city of Varanasi.

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**Tribal Discourse: Voices of Resistance
in Mahasweta Devi's
*Chotti Munda and His Arrow***

PAWAN KUMAR

Discourse is one of the social-constructionist approach that study to a particular way of talking about and understanding the world. It is a form of social action that plays a part in producing the structure of the world through knowledge, identities and social relations and thereby in maintaining specific social pattern. Discourse consists of conflicting voices and soft intercourses. The voices may be in the form of violent or silent and unspoken. Written and vocal communication as well as symbolic communication like rite, ritual, arts and manners, and spectral which is also a part of discourse. In brief, Discourse is a network of meaning that makes an expression of the world through language and different types of communication. Michel Foucault, a post modern theorist, documented in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, thus:

In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance event, to evade its ponderous awesome materiality. (210)

In theory of discourse Foucault considered the role of power/knowledge, especially power that does not relate to definite agent like individual or the state with specific interest, but exist to different social practice that control the discourse(s). Foucault thinks that power is always confined with knowledge—"power and knowledge presuppose one another" and power, Foucault considered, productive and a constraining force and closely related to discourse. The Tribal Discourse deals with the tribal's demand for their sovereignty, socio-cultural, political and economical autonomy in post-colonial India. The tribal discourse got its momentum with the alienation and protection policy of colonial rulers, who identified Indian tribal as savage, uncivilised, uncultured, none-literate, animal like, primitive, barbarous and so on. Mahasweta Devi deconstructed this colonial identity of tribal and provides them historical identity through her literary work.

Mahasweta Devi is a living literary legend of post-colonial India, who has dedicated the most part of her life for the sake of subaltern and exploited tribal communities. It is the charm of her affection that the tribal people of West Bengal calls her lovingly 'Didi'. As a socio-political activist, she raised the voice of tribal, and through her fiction, articles and poems give voice to the voiceless. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay "Can Subaltern Speak?" put a question mark on the voice of the subaltern and asserts that the 'subaltern cannot speak', but Mahasweta Devi's fiction provide voice to the voiceless to speak. They not only speak but also revolt against the exploitation in the hand of colonial powers as well as Hindu Rajas, moneylenders and landlords. They mentioned their voices against exploitation on the National level and forced other (the mainstream society) listen their voices. Spivak observes that "Mahasweta's fiction

focuses on (subalterns) as the spaces of the displacement of the colonization-decolonization reversal. This is the space that can become, for her, a representation of decolonization as such.”(*Outside in Teaching Machine*, 78).

The voices of resistance that Mahasweta Devi has given to the tribal, is a powerful response of tribal to repressive tendencies of the non-tribal elite, who establish themselves to the position of God, and considered it to their divine right to govern the tribal. She wishes that her works should be read as the voices of resistance against the colonial tendencies of non-tribal in post-colonial India, and a “demand for the recognition of tribal as a citizen of independent India an advanced cultural heritage”.(*Imaginary Maps* ,xvii). By keeping the tribal into the centre of her literary works, Mahasweta Devi exposes their plight in decolonized nation (India). Her fiction works are a documentation of the hardship of tribal’s life which they faced under the integrated National concept. She exposes the existing parallel space between tribal and non-tribal. She states:

The tribal and mainstream have always been parallel...the mainstream simply doesn’t understand the parallel...They can’t keep their land; there is no education for them, no health facilities...they are denied everything...That is why I started writing about the tribal movement and the tribal world... I repay them their honour. (*Imaginary Maps*, 31)

Mahasweta Devi does not romanticize the tribals. Her stories neither deal with tribal’s dancing and singing, nor does she deal with the pleasant natural atmosphere of the rural side. She exposes the privilege blackness of bonded slavery in independent Indian society. In one of her interviews she observes: “I think a creative writer should have a social conscience. I have a duty towards society. The sense of duty is an obsession”. (Sree.99). She wishes that her work should

be read within the social context and it to be one of the main duties of a writer to expose the blackness and separatist consciousness of the society. She identifies neo-colonial practices of the decolonised India that is no less subversive to the tribal and other subaltern than the colonial period. Her literary works are not only provided voices to Indian tribal but it is also a kind of demand for the equal political and economical rights of tribal within Indian territory.

In "Chotti Munda and His Arrow" Mahasweta Devi has depicted colonial practices of bonded labour, land alienation, physical torture and violence against which the tribal raise their voice of 'resistance' and weapons. The novel begins with the background history of tribal rebel against the British administrators as well as local Hindu rajas, moneylenders and landlords. "The Kherwar revolt, the Mulkoï revolt of sardars, and Birsa's revolt (Ulgulan)" (*Chotti Munda*, 11) pave a way for the voices of resistance of tribal masses. The voices, that are a part of discourse, can be heard in the form of Dhani Munda, who represents to the history of tribal revolt. He, as Mahasweta Devi writes, "Was a young man at the time of Sidhu's Hul. From Hul to Kherwar, from Kherwar to the Mulkoï struggle, from Mulkoï to Ulgulan, walking from revolt to revolt, grinding the poison-berry of the wild creeper..." (*Chotti Munda*, 15). It is he, who taught Chotti Munda archery and handed him the arrow of spell. This arrow is not an arrow in literary sense, but a symbol of the continuity of tribal rebel (voices of resistance) against the inhuman exploitation of tribal. Mahasweta Devi, in *Telling History*, state; "I find that Birsa die with Birsa. And so through the figure of dhani, I wanted to say that there had to be a magic arrow, not magic in the narrow sense, but an arrow Dhani Munda wants to hand over. This arrow is a symbol for the person who will carry on that continuity.

Chotti on emblem of that". (*Telling History in Chotti Munda*, x). That is the reason that Mahasweta Devi has presented Chotti as tribal aspiration, and open book with a mystic ancestor, dhani Munda.

The tribal's constant marginalisation and exploitation without any protest in post-colonial India, is the main issue of "*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*" that Mahasweta Devi has articulated. The local authorities like Baijnath who is a local moneylender-landlord of Chotti village, Tirathnath, the successor of Baijnath, Harbans Chadha, the capitalist merchant who establish briklin, the king of Narsingarh, and Rameo, the political activist of Youth league all hunted the tribal masses and forced them to live within neo-colonial. They forced them to give bonded labour, beat them bitterly, murdered them and set fire to their villages. The novel ends with the murdered of Romeo committed by Chotti Munda and tribal's threaten of weapons revolt against disable legal system that is merely a toy in the hand of elite whose conscience is polluted with colonial tendency. Chotti stands against that law which gives unlimited power to the colonial authorities in decolonised India, and leaves tribal for the exploitation and death.

The tribal, who are very gentle, polite, highly civilised, are much easier to the landlords like Baijnath to entrap in bonded labour than other mainstream people. He knows well that "tribal work as they give word. It is very easy to bind to adivasies in debt. If they once put their thumb print on papers, they give bonded labour for generations...Baijnath knows the rule of adivasi society". (*Chotti Munda* 32-39). Mahasweta Devi designate to the continuity of long standing system of feudalism that was under fire in colonial period and still has a powerful existence in decolonised India. She

presents Lala Baijnath as a model of feudal authority that indulges in the shameful practice of bonded labour. He establishes creditor-debtor relation rather than master-servant with the tribal, as:

Baijnath has a creditor-debtor relationship...It is not the wish of either the foreign or the indigenous administration that real relationships grow up between the officers and subject groups. It is more auspicious for the administration to keep the relationship completely unreal. Then in the officer's eyes, the humans can remain a mathematical calculation of supplied census statistics. And in the eyes of the people of the administration can remain the king's elephants. Elephants that are no use them yet must be reared by them. (*Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, 42-43)

The event of 15 August 1947, Mahasweta does not treat as an event of Indian Independent, but she looks it as the event of beginning of neo-colonization, in which the main stream are enjoyed full power and the subaltern face the colonial situation as a bonded labour, socio-economical and political exclusion. Ranjeet Guha calls it "bourgeoisie national elitism" in which "dominant groups, foreign as well as indigenous (latter constitutes) the biggest magnates... mercantile bourgeoisie and the native recruits to the uppermost level of bureaucracy... (Who) still acted in the interests of the (feudal magnates) and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own being" Tirathnath enjoyed full power in colonial period and exploit the tribal with full authority and it continue in post-colonial India without any protest, and tribal on other hand, were facing marginalisation and exploitation in colonial period still face same situation. He considers "to take bonded labour from adivasi and untouchable is my natural duty", and believes it to be divinity in business of bonded labour. He wishes that tribes and untouchable have

full faith in the old order in which they had small wages without protest and used to give bonded labour.

The globalization of tribal region in post-colonial India also could not bring any change in colonial condition of tribal. It was merely a transformation from feudalism to capitalism in which the industrialist likes Harbans Chadha, who pretends to be more modern and liberal than Tirathnath, but in real he too exploits the tribal's natural resources and pay low wages than decided by the government. He calls to Tirethnath and his practice of bonded labour philistine work, because he believes that bonded labour and making the poor work for lower wages as a philistine behaviour. Mahasweta Devi presents him as a hypocrite industrialist who recruits tribal for low wages and exploit them servility:

Harbans is a bloodsucker but he's a small industrialist, and his way of thinking is more modern than Tirathnath's. In the coming five years plans he wants to be a middle industrialist from this area. Tirathnath's land-centered mentality is altogether repugnant to him...You (Tirathnath) want bullock-cart, I want airplane. We need a connecting road here. I want to have a bus running seven days a week. Industrial townships' growing up all around, this is the moment. (*Chotti Munda*, 143-44)

Under the exploitative practice in post-colonial India, tribal are not a part of growing economy of India. They are completely excluded from the national economy by the elite class under the state patronage. The exclusion of tribal from national economy is thus explicated by Mahasweta Devi:

...Chotti village enter the national economic pattern of independent India. The state has left no spot for them in this pattern. The majority of the population in independent India is low caste, and a significant percentage is adivasi. Therefore they are excluded from the nation pattern...(Chotti Munda, 140)

Mahasweta Devi articulate to the failure of central and state government that is only interested in passing ordinance and law in the favourer of tribal welfare, but they do not serious in the matter of their proper implementation. The Bonded Labour Abolition Ordinance that federal government passed on 24th October 1975, it declares “the bonded labour is at an end, illegal”, but practically it failed to remove the practice of bonded labour and tribal exploitation because of the improper implementation as Chotti Munda exclaim; “they’ve made t’ law, t’ law’s made, but they put a stone in t’ law, an’ t’ law tumbles. T’ debtor, t’ labourer, will charge that boss? By what strength lord?” (*Chotti Munda*, 237). Harbans Chadha also states “the law is not bad, Chotti, but nothing works by the law. For the law never applied”. The government left it on the conscience of local moneylenders-landlords who believe in buying humans for generation to generation for a bit of wheat that the tribal got to satisfy the fire of their belly. They are not wish for any change in the old practice of bonded labour. Mahasweta Devi raises a question on the government tendency of passing the Ordinance when she observes, “Why did the PM pass the act during Emergency knowing it will not be implemented?” (*Chotti Munda*, 246). She exposes the hollowness of the Central Government that use the moneylender-landlord as a crutch, and without them it does not go even a step. She presents it through the minister who says:

The central government understand nothing. Just pass Acts. Look, the central government knows full well that if an Act is passed for the welfare of adivasi or untouchable, it should be never implemented. Why not? Because that will light a fire. Are untouchable and adivasis a factor? And landlord, moneylender, landed farmer. These is the pillars of the government. Who gives campaign funds? Who controls the vote? (*Chotti Munda* 245)

Though Indira Gandhi lost her government to Janata Government, bringing a political change in the country. But it cannot touch the life of tribal nor could this change bring any change in their colonial-like conditions. On the contrary Chhotti village turned into a 'battleground' among the uncontrolled landlords, industrialists and Youth League etc., who are firmly determined not to go old practices of bonded labour. Youth League, that is considered "Youth Congress, a wing of the Congress Party under Indira Gandhi and led by her younger son Sanjay Gandhi" (*Chhotti Munda*, 297), is led by Romeo along with his friends Pahalwan and Dildar in Chhotti region create an atmosphere of anarchy by committing various murder and burning tribal and untouchables' villages. Romeo, a rapist and murderer, is supported by state government, party organization, and police and even from the central minister like Arjun Modi. They made it difficult for the tribal to live alive. During election he killed the opposition candidate and captured the booth. He shoots Munda's Pahan, Pahani (the wife of Pahan), a railway porter and set fire to many tribal's villages before the eyes of police. He justifies all his sins by saying that he is doing Arjun Modi's, central minister, brave work who announced in Parliament that Naxals would be fought to finish. Mahasweta Devi exhibits how these activists conduct contrary to Mahatma Gandhi's clamour against prevailing untouchability in colonial and post-colonial Indian society. These leagues create a polluted atmosphere against the tribal and untouchables of Chhotti village as well as neighbour villages:

Tell every landlord-moneylender, we will teach these harijans-God's people-such a lesson in five years that it will take them five thousand years to raise their head again. Remove these harijans, these tribal masses. Let the poor

high caste till the fields. If this programme is successful in Bihar, it will work everywhere in India. (*Chotti Munda*, 202)

In such conditions, when the torture of elite class in post-colonial India become unbearable for the tribal and other subalterns, they, who are unheard and unspeakable in post-colonial paradigm, resist their voice against the draconian practices of non-tribal elite, and dismentalise conventional myth of eternal silence that has been imposed on them from outside. Dukhia, a munda tribe from Jejur village, rises against Nakata Raja manager's coldblooded behaviour, who calls him a cheat, a bustard, a dung bug, in spite of doing work in his field as a bonded labour. He beats him mercilessly and made him dependent without food and water for over the days. Dukhia strongly stands against him and beheaded him. In the end of the novel *Chotti Munda*, who believes in nonviolence and never uses his spell arrow to kill anyone, was forced to commit murder of Romeo along with his companions Palawan and Dildar in replay of their unbearable tyranny. In a very powerful voice he resists against injustice committed by mainstream elite:

Shush lord! Standin' here today, ever'thin comes to mind. Me father died by reason of that Lala's dad. I ne'er did a betrayal, and still he sent me son to je-hell, and I saved him from t'wheels of a movin' train! Munda-Oraon-Dhobi have never broken trust! And what did we getfor that lord? What did you give to us? You will raise terror over us ta try theit murder, but did they not raise terror? They went to take t' honour of our daughters, all the daughters of t' families of t' pahan, his wife, of motia, of t' railway porter, of Dukha, Jugal, Chhagan—they died, and then there were no polis lord? (*Chotti Munda*, 287)

Through this way, Mahasweta Devi bestows voices of resistance to the tribal and justifies the violence against the tyranny in the condition of inactiveness of law. She, during

her interview with Spivak, observes, “When the system fails in justice, violence is justified...When the system fails an individual has a right to take to violence or any other means to get justice. The individual cannot go on suffering in silence.” (Mahasweta Devi, 44). Her statement should not be seen in the light of killings committed by bigots, but it is a kind of demand to bring an improvement in the implementation of law that could behave equally without any discrimination of privileged—underprivileged.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Dance of the Peacock: **An Admirable Ensemble of Poetry**

A Review by

KRITHIKA RAGHAVAN

The Dance of the Peacock is an admirable ensemble of poetry edited by Dr. Vivekanand Jha. It is a breath of fresh air with new outlooks and styles in Indian poetry. It features 151 poets from many different states of India as well as UK, Canada, Unites States and other countries around the world.

The poets range in age from 15 to 92 and the topics, the feel of poetry and their approaches make this anthology diverse in more than one way. It is also mentioned in the Introduction that the poets featured are from all walks and talks of life.

The title is fitting—seeing that the peacock is the national bird of India and its dance is herein displayed. In this review, I have chosen a few poems which have left a profound effect upon me. I have, however, tended to concentrate on descriptions and imagery throughout this review.

A poem with a marvellous simile and descriptive adjectives, “Not a Legend” written by Amarendra Kumar, has the perfect beginning-

“You’re not a legend
That grows like a beard...”

The poem “Cold Fury” written by Ambika Ananth (to those who perished in the floods in Andhra Pradesh) drives home its message of horror through the sheer power of its description:

“Cold, solid marble like eyes,
Open yet closed to the world...”

“Word(l)y Mess” written by Amol Redij is a witty poem skilfully written, cleverly curtaining the truth in its last few lines, giving more meaning to the poem than previously imagined.

“The Unborn poem” written by C.D. Norman describes the beginning of a writer’s block in the first few lines and effectively ends the poem by posing a clever question. The “Courtyard Tree” written by Charu Sheel Singh is a treasure trove of woven graphic imagery and intersected verbs. It ends with a most impressive metaphor—“Cocktails of heavenly creation”

“Drink Deep the Nature’s bounty” by D.C. Chambial gives a relaxing description of the nature with astounding imagery. The Tankas of Debjani Chatterjee capture the needed emotions in five lines, effectively creating an image in our minds.

“Autumn” by Geetashree Chatterjee holds a most creative personification and has a ruminative end. “A Lovely Poem is like a tree” by Harish Kumar Thakur gives a poetic approach towards a tree and gives a beautiful end:

“But lo! The word, the verse has its edge
It prays, it sings, it soothes, and glorifies
The man, the life, the tree in pledge.”

The string of haikus written by Kanwar Dinesh Singh captivates a reader's imagination well. "Gifts of nature" by Katta Rajamouly uses refrain effectively to convey the moral of selfless help.

"When Winter Comes" written by Monika Pant feels nostalgic and ends with a pang and a rather haunting end:

"An era gone, a mystery unravelled,
A city reborn;
We both cry for we remember too much."

"Sleepless Nights" written by Nugehalli Pankaja delivers an astounding comparison to drive home the poet's feelings:

"Can one imagine
Starless sky
Or
Moonless night?"

"Lackluster daze" written by Vitasta Raina paints a dull picture effectively using creative words like 'droning night', 'unexcited stars' and 'pastel afternoon'. It creates a sense of background to the poem.

"Nature on Rage" by Vivekanand Jha painted a clear picture of destruction. The poem also has a creative usage of various figures of speech: The first stanza has a smattering of alliterations, followed by inventive personifications to end the poem with a subtle cacophony, effectively resounding destruction.

There are a few other poems which deserve mention, such as "Postcolonial Poem" written by Usha Kishore, "Freezing Fantasy" by Seema Aarella, among others.

Overall, this anthology has been an enchanting and jovial read. I congratulate Dr. Vivekanand Jha for accomplishing this rather arduous task fabulously.

INTERVIEW

Talking Publishing: An Interview of Mr. Sudarshan Kcherry

by

DR. SUNIL SHARMA

Q. Let us talk business. The business of publishing. How do you feel as a leading literary publisher today?

A. First of all, thank you for the compliment.

As far as publishing goes, it's both an interesting and a scary time to be in this business. Interesting because there are a whole lot of emerging writers who bring in fresh perspectives, new formats and a refreshing change of voice for even publishers like us who have been in the business for long. It's a little scary too because the times are changing at a rapid pace—there are new competitors every year, and everybody faces threats from the rise of e-books and online piracy. Publishing outfits now also need to be attuned into the demands of the e-commerce platform.

Q. Have the models changed in the last 15 years?

A. Of course the models have significantly changed over the past 15 years. In fact, even just about 8 years ago, e-commerce wasn't such a big deal, but with the

convenience of a button, people are increasingly getting in touch with their desired books at a more rapid pace, and we have had to expand our own e-commerce reach to better reach prospective consumers. On the other hand, the rise of e-books and online piracy has eaten into our share of the market, and profits have gone down. Consequently, we have lobbied for stringer laws for the publishing industry. Royalties have also come down, or become nearly non-existent, as emerging authors have become cognizant of how difficult a business publishing is. In some cases, they are even willing to pay for being published.

- Q.** How was the experience when you started some 25 years ago? Was it more of a missionary activity then?
- A.** As far as Authorspress is concerned, we have always been about keeping a balance between, as you put it, our “missionary activity” of bringing new quality authors to the fore, whilst keeping our profitability. Over the years, this has become harder to do so, both due to declining quality in a world where everyone fancies himself/herself as a writer, and where the returns for publishing have diminished due to a plethora of market forces. When we started some 25 years ago, it was much easier to publish quality, and get a return on investment, as the publishing circle was more tight-knit then, and one knew one the channels and avenues to focus on for promotion and marketing of books, and which platforms to sell on. Now, the marketplace is a little more chaotic with the digital world, and one needs to keep abreast of trends and developments in a changing world.

Q. How important was the author then? What is their status now?

A. The author has not lost its focus in terms of publishing priority—he/she remains the crux upon which we have built our business, and remains so. The only thing which has changed is the number of factors which now compete for our attention—market demands, the online world, tightening profits, etc.

Q. Is it not a huge trade now, publishing? Publishers demand money, instead of giving royalty? What are the reasons for this attitudinal change?

A. The reasons for the attitudinal change stem from the fact that over the years publishing has become a not-so-lucrative, especially for independent publishers like us who have had to compete with not only the big players but also online piracy and decreasing margins. As a result, we can't afford to gamble on uncertain titles, and as more people look to get published, they need to choose between languishing for years amongst the hundreds of hopeful manuscripts on a big publisher's table or find a voice for themselves. As the trend of self-publishing has not really caught on, publishers can choose to demand money from hopeful writers instead of doling out royalty.

Q. What is your focus, while selecting a manuscript for publication? The overarching quality norms?

A. Any work which stands up to our rigorous standards of quality, legibility and innovation pass muster and we do our best to bring these works to light, especially if they are from an emerging or new author. We don't compromise on quality and are ready to go through numerous corrections and revisions to bring the best output to the table.

- Q.** How do you view the entire media culture now?
- A.** There is a lot of media proliferation right now, both print and digital, which makes things easier in terms of avenues for marketing and promotion of books. Literary fests have also arisen, which, apart from more traditional book fairs, give authors and publishers a chance to showcase their works and reach out to a wider audience. However, this also leaves one more vulnerable to media criticism, and one needs to be more alert about the quality of the output.
- Q.** Do you not think that writing itself has become an exercise in self-promotion and manipulation? There are lobbies and vested groups promoting and honouring writers, especially in English?
- A.** As I've said before, this is a world where everyone fancies himself/herself a writer, and as a consequence, self-promotion and manipulation has become an inevitable part of the writing exercise. And further promoting this culture are, as you have mentioned yourself, vested lobbies and interest groups. But this is not an entirely new phenomenon, only more visible with extreme media proliferation. However, this is not to say that one must take a cynical view of things—if anything, quality in some quarters has actually significantly improved, and there are a lot of talented writers out there who deserve more recognition than they have garnered, or given a viable platform to express themselves.
- Q.** What is the politics of awards?
- A.** We are not vested in terms of awards, as a lot of attention is spared upon the big names in the publishing world who have either the clout or the money to garner awards. As a result, independent publishers like us have to make a

name for ourselves via the best available means, i.e, great reviews for our authors and mentions in leading literary magazines and journals.

Q. Your take on the viral of Lit-Fests? Where is the real author in it? Is it not a big PR tamasha that neglects small-town writers?

A. To be honest, I am glad of the emergence of literary fests in a big way, as at least now there is more mainstream acceptance of all things literary. While there are problems, such as ignorance of small-town writers, or even regional literature, a good trend has finally been started, and there is always scope for improvement in terms of the diversity and variety it brings to the people. The thing is to look at it positively and understand how we can bring about change in the way literary fests bring together books, people and opinions.

Q. How do you promote the young writers?

A. Digital media has become an important platform for us to promote new talent. The younger generation has been weaned on it, so it makes sense for us to latch on to it for its benefit—greater reach, quicker dissemination of information, etc. Otherwise, we do have media releases from time to time, where new writers are felicitated for their efforts and are promoted via traditional media as best as we can.

Q. Please do a summing up of your career as a publisher of literary and academic books?

A. As a publisher, I have always strived to maintain a level of quality that does not in any way compromise with my idea of good writing, and a scan of our catalogs over the past few years will speak to that ethic. I have also been

partial to the emerging voices in literary fiction, both prose and poetry, as I believe that there are not enough platforms which give them a viable presence in the country. As a result, you would find that we have been extremely supportive of those who choose to make their debuts with us.

Q. Your plans for the digital age?

A. To keep ourselves evolving and being abreast of literary trends, we have joined Facebook, and have a huge following on the platform. We constantly update the page with news of new releases, awards functions, media mentions, etc., to maintain our digital presence, and it has become a viable platform for us to express both our thoughts as well as maintain our connections with our literary friends. We believe in keeping up with the times, and digital media has become central to this philosophy.

Q. The role of social media in the spread of literary literacy is very big and almost liberating so far. Do you agree?

A. Oh indeed. The rise of social media has enabled a new surge in literary interest as well as awareness about the literary world, and just a quick scan of the digital landscape will attest to that fact. Not only that, there are multiple avenues, both national and international, which enable readers to know about, dissect and discuss various literary works and forms, and connect with other literary-minded folks. As a result, it is a deeply liberating medium, enabling one to further immerse oneself in one's interest and love for the written word.

Q. The flip side of it is that it has become—social media—a place for deep narcissism as well. Is it good for the health of the writer?

- A. Well like everything else, the digital media has its pros and cons. Narcissism is just one aspect of the whole scenario—whilst it is true that the digital media can inflate one’s sense of importance in the literary landscape, what bothers me more is the troubling, addictive nature of social media. As a writer, whilst one needs to observe humanity in its varied hues to capture its essence, one also needs time away from the online world, to be alone with one’s thoughts, to put pen to paper and jot down one’s ruminations. I am afraid that social media hardly helps in this aspect, and every writer with an active social media presence needs to give some thought to it.
- Q. What advice from you to a writer dreaming of getting published and seeking mass recognition?
- A. The term “mass recognition” is rather ambiguous—the Indian publishing scene is host to a whole lot of writers who have gained public following and adoration despite an appalling lack of quality in their works. So for a new writer, my only advice for writing would be to stick to polishing a work to the utmost level of great story-telling and a compelling narrative that he/she can. Nothing should be compromised in making a work as accomplished as it can seem to be. As for getting published, that can be a task easier said than done. With literally hundreds of manuscripts to go through each day, big publishing houses can take their own sweet time in getting back to you, if at all, and a majority of them are averse to publishing new voices because of the marketing costs involved. This does not mean however that one should lose heart and not work on pursuing their dreams—merely that there are a lot of alternatives out

there, like independent publishers, who can give you a voice for the audience at large.

Q. Is publishing getting more lucrative, with writers ready to pay their way into the published world?

A. Whilst the decreasing trend of paying royalties and the increasing need for making a mark for themselves seeing a lot of writers ready to pay for being published, the truth remains that publishing remains by and large a non-lucrative business. It is only our sincere efforts to push through good content that has managed for us to recover costs, and our steadfast adherence to the principle of maintaining quality has garnered us a reputation. This helps in keeping an independent outfit like us afloat.

Q. How do you manage the temptation of market over arts? With an impressive list of senior writers, you have shown that publishing can be still a decent trade by publishing quality over the mass?

A. It is always easy to give in to market forces and try to publish only “best-selling” material—after all, publishing is not the most lucrative business to be in today and we need to recover costs as soon as possible. However, Authorspress was launched with the express desire to posit quality over quantity, and we have been very conscientious about it. At no point have we tried to move away from this position, despite the various temptations present. I must stress that this is not an easy choice to make—at various points we have grappled with this dilemma, and it is only a strong focus on our core identity as publishers who aspire to bring out works which satisfy our quality standards that has helped us to maintain it. There are plenty of other publishers who don’t find it

hard to keep it so, and give in to the demands of the market, and I am the last person to judge them over this.

Q. Thanks a lot.

A. Thank you so much for giving me the platform to express myself.



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