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GJLL



**Phenomenal
Literature**

A Global Journal devoted to

Language and Literature

A Peer-Reviewed Print Journal

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Chief Editor:

Dr VIVEKANAND JHA

Associate Editor:

Dr RAJNISH MISHRA

Review Editor:

Dr CHANDRA SHEKHAR DUBEY

Assistant Editor:

Prof. SHASHANK NADKARNI



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PHENOMENAL LITERATURE

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POETRY

1

Infinity

ANNA BANASIAK

I'm looking at people
lost in the rushing universe
I'm only a drop of time
in a gust of eternity
I'm searching for the truth
in the music of things
wandering in the world
like a blind bird.



2

The Dancer

ANNA BANASIAK

a drop of water
unique in cosmos
in the changing river of time
passing like a single life
I'm only a shadow
dancing in the emptiness



3

**Spring at full length:
no single bad word**

ARNO BOHLMMEIJER

When you're naked
in a sublime light oasis,
no person or dog in sight
on a wide flower-filled field
beside a dwelling of twelve birds
that sing or keep quiet, depending,

can a spider take a gentle spin
along the lanes, hills, dales
of your lower gut region,
if it's behaving decently,
not revealing a little-big secret
or proposing inappropriate rudeness?

Here's no moral to this true story,
but an after – or foreword, if you wish.
An expert reports, a spider is highly gifted:
through a meridian or nerve system
it can sense instinctively
what's required, when you're inspired, or hiding.



4

Miles of innocence

ARNO BOHLMMEIJER

If a child and grown-up
mingle into a mild world
of wise joy or frankness,
courage and truth in piles,

will poems act accordingly
and form a no-fly zone
from war to peace –
or from naïve to real?

Let's wait or believe and see
when honesty leads to confidence.



5

Beauty in Abundance

AVDHESH JHA

Amicable, matured and silent like the age of deep blue sea;
Naughty as the youth; peaceful and soft like a baby sight;
As if life at different stages; passionately she breathes and,
Manifests her immortal presence with adorable might.

Bountiful beauty, pure, pious, and fragrant; She wakes up
With the first ray of sun and showers her face with dew;
To express herself, she peeps through the window within,
And touching softly, she bestows her care on me and you.

With the essence of the cool breeze and warm sunshine,
She manifests her elegance and care, and feel and touch;
With the comfort, warmth, freshness, love and affection
She is beauty in abundance, one can ever dream as much.

Being patient and passionate, silently she reproduces;
Fair as a teacher, she adores and abhors for the deeds;
Although mighty, she conveys how to care and appreciate;
Being persistent, she adorns us to evaluate what we need.



6

Saw It Again

BEN NARDOLILLI

No idea what I would look like
if I did a self-portrait now without any hair on my face

Decades ago, I was smooth, but now
I sprout whiskers, covering up all the of the alleged “cute”

Or so some may believe, though no need
to believe them, since none follow through with me

Thus I maintain the circular empire
and the dominion of follicles, so-called manly to the end



7

Creating Ages

BEN NARDOLILLI

The isolated youth in their critical research islands
cannot connect the provinces, not even by mathematics

The business opposition does not make things easier,
with markets taking over the lore of self-governance

Civil Alexandria waits for a night life that never comes,
while philosophical Galilea fails to influence the military

Ancient Shanghai screens loyalty, and does little else,
and Babylonian Cambridge waits again for Persia



8

A Glimpse of the Apocalypse

DANIEL THOMAS MORAN

As the world
slowly warmed,
glaciers melted,
and nature starved,
the fires began burning
in Delhi.

Pyres were built from
splints of brittle wood,
the relics of the dead
were laid on the earth,
essence turned to smoke.

It is what happens
to a species, when
there are far too many
in one place, when
nothing can ever suffice.

With the world now
mad with this fever,
must we finally believe?
Can we see that,
for us, this is how
it ends?



9

Driving a Fast Car Slow

E. MARTIN PEDERSEN

Driving a fast car slow
Stifle your velocity
In a Ferrari or Porsche Turbo
Drive through the city, rumbling.

Take it out on the freeway well under the speed
Any fool can blast off his rocket
When you downshift your power's freed
Drive softly and carry a big gearstick.

Muckers will fill your cockpit with salt
Till you pull off your balaclava
It takes too much prodding when you are at fault
To contain the beast.

Self-denial stronger than crack
A better thrill than racing round a track
Not everyone can hold back
You need the knack.



10

A Nudge for Karma

FRANK WILLIAM FINNEY

A bully with a tapeworm
bloodied my nose

so the spirits made us promise
to part ways in peace.

That very Friday, I forgave my foe
and fixed him a sandwich for his lunch.

I'll never forget
the grin he wore:

a shit-eating grin,
for sure.



11

Replace Humans

GARY BECK

Driver assistance systems
that can steer, accelerate
and brake on its own
drove into fire trucks, police cars,
emergency vehicles
and were in other accidents.

Though autonomous cars
are supposed to replace drivers,
they are instructed
to keep their hand on the wheel.

People being people,
they often neglect
this safety feature.

In one crash the driver was drunk.

Another driver in the back seat
was watching a movie.

Some fall asleep at the wheel.

We need better A.I.
to improve safe driving
and get rid of human drivers,
the cause of countless accidents,
as soon as possible.



12

Left to Private Devices

GERARD SARNAT

stripped bare
part coyote, part owl, part tipped over cow
I fill a Martini tumbler with galactic trail mix
ascend Duchamp's twenty-two steps
spiral to the catbird's seat
slip on a Carlos Nikai CD
soar into the Captain's chair overlooks all creation
toward cosmic glimmer beyond picture windows
blow the roof off, howl like newlyweds.
Down below with the clocks
so cold the ocean won't shimmer
irks a clerk in the mirror broke the spring of my firmament.
I rise above where it is bright on both sides.
Love, serve everyone.
We are lonely unless banded together.
Be at one with what is, be Grateful Dead.
The end becomes a beginning.
Happiness comes from within.
May life be a feather.
Shalom Salaam Shanti.



13

Mere Shadows of My Sorrows

JAMES G. PIATT

Strange emotional voices crawl inside my mind,
discordant voices that scratch at
unreality. Haunting visions echo in the stormy night.
Then, as the moon flows into the darkness of clouds filled
with the tears of God, an unforgiving emptiness enters my
mind, and I wade naked into the icy
metaphorical ocean containing mere
shadows of my sorrows.



14

And I Forgot Yesterday

JAMES G. PIATT

Hidden in the echoing shadows of fading hours, the day
twisted itself into darkness, as the day-birds, with their tired
voices, nested for the night in the bushes as a loon started to
sing its eerie woeful night-song. In the end, there was little

left to change as today became yesterday, and the copper
teapot in the kitchen reminded me it was teatime. As the sun
dipped silently into the vanishing horizon, the day's images,
just dull hazy

silhouettes, and every sound of the day, were logged into
memories, and as the chords of fiddling crickets created a
symphony in the ebony hours of the night, I forgot yesterday.



15

Wounded Knee Massacre, a Dream

JAMES WM. CHICHETTO

Wounded Knee is painted black:
Black snow, blood-cheating snow,
Fused corpses looped together
In appalling cold.

Cannons right-angled, left-angled
Are dragged on wheels across the Plains.
Their majestic tubes shred muscle
As if waste from dirty drains.

Arms and limbs are frozen in snow.
Wild dogs bark in the cold.
Human wreckage studs the fields.
A wind descends and blows.



16

O Foolish owl above the roof

JAMES WM. CHICHETTO

O foolish owl above the roof.
The hour is not so bright.
The moon has lengthened her face
And the king can't sleep tonight.

Who can stand his drunken state
This king of Whistle, sickle-shaped,
Who hides behind a stonewall
To pick pears and winter grapes?

O mark him. Mark him on his throne
And listen, listen to his squeal.
He eats chestnuts and has an axe
To chop down trees for meals.

This king of Never-never land.
O bless his heart, his parched voice.
A jester cries in his wasted soul
To forgo a ruthless choice.

"The world looks the same from a barstool
Or throne," says he with his gin.
"Little by little the days give up,
Little by little and drop by drop
I come round right to make my stop."



17

Nightscape

JOAN MCNERNEY

Fog horns sound though
air soaked in blackness.
All evening long listening
to hiss of trucks, cars.

Shadows brush across walls
as trees trace their branches.
Gathering and waving
together then swaying apart.

While I sleep, stars glide
through heaven making
their appointed rounds in
ancient sacred procession.

Dreams as smooth as rose
petals spill into my mind
growing wild patches in
this dark garden of night.



18

The Man Who Knew

JOHN GREY

Every night,
he retreated to his study
and his books, and his files,
the facts at his fingertips.

His mind was a file cabinet.
Old information to be accessed.
New stuff to be saved into storage.

His one friend was a history professor
at BYU who often called to verify a date.
They say he never had a woman
unless you counted Madame Curie
or Emma Bovary.

He talked to his brother occasionally.
About the Jesuits, the Knights Templar mostly.
But his mother and he weren't on speaking terms.
It wasn't something she said
but something she didn't know.



19

Honour as Horrified

LAKSHMIKAANDAN R

Earlier, they wish to have me
for ornamental and as honour.
I am rare and unreachable to many,
though I have few residences.
During the emergency, I am there for them,
to assist and accommodate.
My friend Pandemic made everyone
to realize my presence much more.
Later, I am not for emergency
but for Anger and Hatred.
Exploited me, for what they want.
I wish to stay as I am in origin.



20

The Age of Humans

LARAINÉ KENTRIDGE LASDON

Waterways, red cliffs,
ancient underwater caves,
back to the Pangea age,
continents fused as one.
I stand in the stardust
of a million-year-old memory,
a flutter of songbirds,
a bouquet of warblers,
the wild swoop of blue jays.
Hummingbirds check me out.
My breath hovers over crimson wildflowers.

Long before the idea of a kiss,
when love was mystery,
the earth entered it's quaternary period,
the age of humans.
A time of gestation, anticipation,
the Great Lakes birthing,
hawks soaring, the first migration.
All we see of that coded mapping
are faint skeletal imprints,
visible in glacial rock formations.

The stone I cradle, a mountain remnant,
honors the ancestral presence
and my encounter with raw existence

The lake shivers as falcons dive,
beaks and talons fisted and footed.
A drop of water touches my face.
Profound. As much as a human caress.



21

I Age (V2)

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

Arthritis and aging make it hard,
I walk gingerly, with a cane, and walk
slow, bent forward, fear threats,
falls, fear denouement—
I turn pages, my family albums
become a task.
But I can still bake and shake,
sugar cookies, sweet potato,
lemon meringue pies.
Alone, most of my time,
but never on Sundays,
friends and communion,
United Church of Canada.
I chug a few down,
love my Blonde Canadian Pale Ale,
Copenhagen long cut a pinch of snuff.
I can still dance the Boogie-woogie,
Lindy Hop in my living room,
with my nursing care home partner.
Aging has left me with youthful dimples,
but few long-term promises.



22

Haiku My Way

NATALIA FERNÁNDEZ DÍAZ-CABAL

The time of the light butterflies is over
And the one of the fireflies has come...
But we do not glow in the dark



23

Vampires

NGO BINH ANH KHOA

The world's already filled with vampire-folk—
No, not the ones in stories, films, and myths –
That spend the daylight trapped in coffin-walls,
In cubicles, in locked-up rooms, in tiny space,
Afraid to leave the comfort of the cold
Yet comforting veil of darkness sheltering them,
Afraid to leave the space they've carved out for
Themselves – their lonesome and secluded keeps
That stay still, stagnant as time marches on.

They're living as though dead, inside and out,
Just soulless beings void of hope and dreams
Denying themselves a chance to grow,
Denying themselves a chance to change,
Subsisting with scavenged vitality
Day in day out, uncaring of time's flow
Till they eventually return to dust.
Pitiful are those that are living to die
While others out there are dying to live.



24

Fingers

PHILIP HAMMIAL

Me, I'm big on snap.
 Especially when it's scooped out & scoured clean.
 O People of the Word why you dump your brown
 on my green? So fresh, now spoiled like...
 like a man joke a man & then a scold, what happens when
 you hold a man to garment, too tight or loose. Cheer up,
 your time will come on bicycle to Yamuni. It's there
 that Tiwan Aku played Tag who should have been
 Yamuni's biggest, most perfect tart. Trouble was
 flung mud came with it, & it stuck. Bad luck
 that I heard them, the drums
 in the distance, but dismissed them, nothing
 to do with me, until they came down that lane – the
 tumblers, the funambulists, the cockalorums, the Jills
 & the Jacks. Yes, there was a debt, & I paid it.
 And a further debt, & I paid that too. Tiwan Aku,
 it was your time; you took my coin
 & with it made a realm where big on snap
 I wallowed in a spoiler's mud. So a prayer,
 some action that might fix? Some finger-lickin' good
 for a big come-on lets get this cake walk happening
 as onward we march, scooped out & scoured clean.



25

A Monologue

PRAKASH JOSHI

My friend is keeping her silence
without moving on another mileage.
I don't know if she loves me.
But whom I love is only she.

I like her for many reasons
For she is ebullient in all seasons.
Besides, I do love her intelliectitions
She is a collage of many reflections.

Her golden eyes convey to me
that I'm her drone and she's my bee.
Together we can build our hive
if not of brick and mortar but an alcove, –

An alcove of magnetic mental waves
The waves that will ethically save
us from the world's taller fence
and immerse us in spiritual sense.

Mind is more a joy-giver than limbs
It can recreate us in our dreams.
Can you meet me with natural stance?
She didn't yet her response enhance!!

I know, silence is more eloquent
Than words' immeasurable quotient.
And she says: If you know the truth
Why do you then your doubts shoot?



26

Texturing the Temporal

RAJIV KHANDELWAL

Often overlooked
Significant mundane moments
From daily life
Whose virgin aura
If captured
Using a poet's plumbing instinct
Via
Skillful use of language
Emotive expression
Composed
As a distilled narrative
Of felt thought
As fresh as the first rain-soaked soil
That can lift the heart
Gripped in anxiety
The soul touching oeuvre
If savoured by the reader
While lounged lopsided on a sofa
Without the nagging trace of cervical fear

Then
Know
You are a near poet



27

The Jester

RENÉ VAN DER KLOOSTER

when division reigns
the jester speaks the truth
parading about
as if he were
conscience incarnated
with his hands full of warnings
to scatter around



28

Tell Me Something Good

RITIKSHA SHARMA

Old, again, for new year's eve, next year

The sentience of unfinished sentences,
Stolen glances and carved faces. Palimpsests
on a person, falling down
like an affective affliction. When looking
at old photographs, chilly, trapped, a slice of time
grasped, for whom?

Outside metro stations, in the mirror, in the smog,
at a job interview, in the womb, at a funeral,
every other December, tell me,
when it comes

Back again, under a few mouthfuls of hysteria,
new year's eve, in a few hours
Hoping to coddle change into agency,
Perception into perspicuity

In your head,

build a rebounding planet for a hasty refuge, then
put on your cataracts and go to sleep. For next year,

kick punctuality to the curb, dying
schedules for the world, say,

you'll clasp my palm; say
this warmth is a forever riddle; say

something good.



29

Reach Heights of Glory

S L PEERAN

My blowing of trumpet for claiming
A place among eminent poets,
Writers, singers is like lassoing clouds,
Cupping water in my hands, collecting
Water in a holed vessel and bucket.

A jewel is required to be mined
With tremendous efforts, polished
And given cuts for it to shine.
To be adored, sought after, yearned.

A rootless plant is sure to die.
Nature bestows gifts to whomsoever
Ready to receive it with folded hands.
But only to those who deserve it
Like a mined jewel which can shine forever.

A seed bears within a plant
Waits for it to sprout and grow
When it finds good soil, nourishment.
To give shade, and benefits to mankind.

Every season bears flowers to adorn
In vases for decoration, to please all.
So also fruits to satiate taste buds
And medicinal plants for cure.

Soft kindred hearts yearn for love
To spread its dazzling light
To enlighten dark pathways.
To glorify a Prophet, a Mahatma.

A deeply humble soul sans a shelter,
Footwear, a comb, a tumbler
Becomes a Christ, his gospel
To last for eternity, to guide pure hearts.

A sheppard, camel boy, poor humble merchant
Reaches heights of eminence and glory.
His message unites humanity into a bond
Of brotherhood to pray and to fast
And to bow before that Great Being.



30

Homecoming

SCOTT THOMAS OUTLAR

I close my eyes for the briefest moment
and catch a glimpse
of a tiny black dot
in the back of my mind
hovering behind my eyes

that suddenly explodes in red ignition
like a fiery halo
burning over a vast horizon

singing to me sweetly
luring me in like a siren
with a gentle whisper

to return
to come home
to be as One

again
finally
in absolution



31

Skin Crawl

SCOTT THOMAS OUTLAR

I feel it to be a noble deed
to refrain from killing spiders that enter the house,
and to instead capture and release them back into the wild.

My reasoning behind such action
is not to pat myself on the back and feign a false sense of
honor,
it is simply because it would hurt my conscience
to take an innocent life without just cause.

Yet, such a Jainist attitude
can sometimes get one in trouble
when the spider crawling upon one's shirt
is carefully maneuvered onto the bed to be caught
but then quickly gets lost in the design of the sheets,
never to be found again...

because then there is a damned creepy-crawly on the loose
and it gives one the damned heebie-jeebies.



SHORT STORY

1

Chicken Bus Challenge

JEVIN LEE ALBUQUERQUE

The line is swelling, out of control, no clear beginning, no forward motion. Everyone is sweating, trying not to make any sudden movements. Tension. A Zambian woman is sitting at the ticket counter, taking her time, chatting, walking away, returning, producing an actual ticket every five minutes. I don't want to wait, but it's my only opportunity to get a ticket to Malawi for tomorrow.

In the back of the line, at least I think it's the back; I wait, sweating, knowing better than to start a conversation with anyone. I lean against the cement wall behind me, staring up at a gray sky, threatening rain.

"Is this the end of the line?"

Such a sweet voice, I'm pleased to look over, and the sight of her beautiful skin refreshes my eyes. Her head is shaved, making her eyes appear larger than they are, her high cheekbones contributing to a constant smile. Delicious lips, I can smell oranges.

"Would you like one?" she asks.

I take a sliver of orange, "I guess this is the back, I'm a little afraid to ask."

She goes off in the local language, tongue cracking off the roof of her mouth, her high cheeks rising up, that impeccable smile. They respond, tidying up the line, offering to let her pass toward the front.

"It's O.K., I stay here, but thank you."

"Your English is perfect."

"I go to school in London."

"But you're from..."

"Malawi, yes I was raised there."

"Great, maybe you can tell me where I should go."

"You must see the lake, the lake is beautiful...and the fishing villages, the local dance...I think you will like it."

"That sounds perfect, if we can get a ticket."

"Ah, this is nothing, we will have our tickets soon."

The next day, after rising with the sun, my first thought is of my new friend. I hope to sit next to her on the bus. When I arrive, after hitching a ride at five a.m. with a drunk driver, I count my blessings that he didn't drive me to my grave. The bus station is swelling with bodies, crowding each other, trying to get their desired spot on the air-condition-free busses. I see Damba through the glass, waving. I step aboard, pushing through the bodies where she's saved me a seat.

"You sure are a nice sight." "I thought you might be happy, I saved you a seat," she says, pointing to the back of the bus where people will stand for the entire journey.

"So tell me more about this lake."

"A beach wraps around it, but watch out for the scorpions. And if you see a black cyclone do not be alarmed; it is only insects."

“This place sounds perfect.”

“I thought you would like it, but watch for police.”

Hours pass, my head resting on Damba’s shoulder; she doesn’t seem to mind. She returns the favor when I wake up. My forehead is layered in sweat and the windows closest to us are jammed. The sauna effect combined with the lack of deodorant on this bus, including my own stinking pits, is awful. Passengers cry out from the back, still standing, but the driver refuses to pull over. Well, that’s what Damba tells me is going on. It nears the breaking point when the passengers approach the driver. He shouts louder than them. I close my eyes, sweat drips from my lids, down my cheeks.

The sun is penetrating the glass window that will not roll down; I’m having trouble breathing. Folks in the back are trying to sleep standing up, but some still shout out at the driver from time to time. My breathing is getting increasingly short.

“How much longer?” I ask Damba.

“Only a few hours.”

“I don’t know if I can make it that far.”

“Well you better, because we have more travel at the border.”

The crowd has reached the breaking point and the driver shouts back there is only a half hour remaining. A shoving match ensues in the back, apparently one person telling the other to cool down – which I thought was ironic.

“Get me off this damn thing...” I say, annoyed.

“You are weak,” says Damba.

“No, I just want some fresh air.”

“Weak.”

“Leave me alone.”

The bus slows as we pull into the dusty streets of the bus station, if you can call a few benches and couple stands to buy food a station. The hustlers are in full swing, flocking around our bus.

“Here we go,” I say.

“Don’t worry, stay with me,” says Damba, overly protective.

“I’m not taking any shit, I’m sick of this crap. If one of those guys gets near me, I swear...”

“They won’t harm you.”

“I know they won’t.” “Now you are strong?”

“Yes, I am,” I say, finally cracking a smile. The second I stand up and see the assault awaiting me outside it turns into a look of disgust. “I’m so sick of this.”

“Calm down.”

I step out of the bus, taking in the air, which warms my lungs, far from refreshing. A group of them rush me, grabbing my fishing pole case, reaching for my pack – hands all over me.

“Get away from me. I’m warning you, get your hands...”

“Relax Jonathan,” says Damba, then rattles off something in the local dialect.

“No, back up, I tell her; I’ve had enough of this, get away from me.”

“*Mzungu*, I take you. You want change.” They wave wads of cash in front of me. One of them reaches for Damba.

"I warned you," I say, surprised that I pushed him away. The crowd is getting bigger and there's nobody around that looks ready to help. In fact, most people are smiling, watching me overact to the situation and perhaps even more outrageous, is the fact I'm moving so quickly in this heat.

"Look, you play football? Get your hands off my bag. I'm going to ask you again, do you play football?"

"Let's go Jonathan."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Yes, I play football," he says, taking his hand off my bag. His hands are large and his face is skinny, but he's tall and athletic.

"You think you can beat me, one on one?" I ask, motioning with my hands. They start talking to each other and laugh.

"Don't do this," says Damba.

"I'll take you right now. If you win, I'll give you my stuff." He looks at me, not having understood. "Translate," I tell Damba.

"Don't give me orders."

"Just do it."

"Are you sure you..."

"Do it." She rattles off a translation; the man smiles.

"I'm serious, I'll take you right now! For all my shit!"

"O.K."

"Oh, you think you can take me?" I say taking off my shirt, setting my bags on the ground, tightening up my shoes. They all laugh, pointing at me. "Hey, give me that back," I

tell him as he picks up my bag. He hands it to me, pats me on the shoulder.

“Calm down, *Mzungu*,” he says.

“You must stay calm, *Mzungu*,” says another.

“We walk you to the taxi,” he says, with a big smile. “How long you stay in Malawi.”

“I don’t know, a week,” I say, trying to calm down. The look on Damba’s face confirms I’m out of control. They walk us to the taxi, carrying my things, the skinny fellow with his arm around me.

“You are a footballer?”

“Yes, I’m going for a trial in Zim with...”

“Good team. We look for you. Watch yourself, *Mzungu*.”

“You, too,” I say. Then looking at Damba, “Was I out of line?”

“Yes, and lucky too.”



2

Birds

MEHREEN AHMED

The snowman walked half the way across the world. Passed the snowy mountains of chocolate chip ice cream, he saw a red hut with a pointed roof. He fast-paced until he was at its door which stood in the middle of nowhere on this snowy island – a placid snow sheet. Inside the hut, a blonde sat by a fireside, her soup was cooking on the fireplace. The girl lived alone beyond the periphery of the woods, which beckoned her, every now and then she walked through its psithurism, where the red robins also whistled their morning songs.

The snowman looked around. It heard a tweet coming from the forest. He had paused before he knocked on the hut's door. When he didn't hear any sound of it being unbolted, he pushed it with the pointy tip of his index. The wooden door opened. He saw the young blonde sitting by the fire who, seeing him stood up. Light frowns appeared on her smooth forehead. She tried to recollect if she knew the snowman. She couldn't recollect. The man's face, she noted, was expressionless just like the icicles hanging down the window. Even the icicles, she thought had more character and nuance. Some were longer. Some were shorter. And water dripped from them. But this man had a plain, icy face, and a cold stare.

What had he intended to do with her? She thought. He stood at the door calmly as a statue carved out of snow, with a slight eye movement, as his pupils darted across her face

and her surroundings. She felt a stab in her heart. She wished she had bolted her door. But here she never felt insecure until now. She always left it open for the red robin – her only companion in a thousand-mile belt. Who was this man anyway? What was his intention? This man, was he tired from his walk? No, but he was a walking disaster himself. She should stop him. It was too late. The man had already entered. He was now going to have her for breakfast, lunch, and for dinner. She shivered and stood here defenceless. She wished she were a red robin of the tall poplars and the balsam fir to fly away to.

The man walked a few steps towards her. She retreated. He came forward, she took a few steps backward until her back was against the hard wall. He came up, close within touching distance. He was going to violate her, she thought grimly. He put out his arm and gently nudged her with the same index. His lips spread wide almost into a plastic smile, she thought – why? He had plastic skin, too. His lips only moved when he spoke. He whispered, “will you marry me?”

Her pupils darted like a ping pong ball. They were wide with fear and disbelief. “Marry me?” He said again. It sounded trifle like an admonishment. As though he was giving her a choice not to, almost. But, he stood too close. His harsh breathing was frightening. She was trying to find leeway to slip out of his grips. She would have to brave him. But he was already giving her instructions – the dos and the don’ts. The correct way to conduct oneself. As though, he was in a position to do so. “The door was not locked. All I did was push it effortlessly and it opened. Bolt it next time!” The girl nodded and tried to slip out of that corner with that excuse.

He held her within his arm cage. “Do not put that cauldron on the fire-pit like that. There is a much better way

of doing it." She nodded again. "Did you put all the spices in properly? Salt it properly?" She dropped her gaze, thinking that it was quite bland – a bland soup for her taste but completely tasteless to him. How could she marry him – but he stood in her way – he held her in iron grips so she couldn't escape? Then she heard a clear shot; the sound fast disappearing like a morning mist. This was who he was – a soldier of doom, locked in a despicable fate, trying to flee in a bid to atone himself. Who now lay before her with a bullet wound on his back? The other killer standing before her was also a soldier. He grinned and looked at her.

While the other tried to marry her, this one did not. He frightened her more. Who could save her from this danger? She prayed silently. The red robins knew what to do as the killer neared her with lust in his eyes. They flew in like Hitchcock's birds and made their way towards him.



3

The Scientist

KATTA RAJAMOULY

This is the age of science and technology when the scientist poses superior to others and does not care for others as he feels far above all others. He feels haughty and boorish for his scientific advancement and technological progress. He never cares for all others who are equally authoritative in their respective fields. He thinks that he has bombs in his hands. He can kill all his enemies and all if he wants as his bomb is able to spoil ten worlds including the earth. He thinks that he can do wonders but does not know that he does blunders too. He knows "how to fly in the sky and swim in the sea but he doesn't know how to walk on earth." It means that he forgets how to behave on earth like man to be human and humanistic to reflect humanity.

There was a clash between Dr. Sputnik and others in various fields like philosophy, art, and literature. He challenged all of them to display their powers. Others were not ready to display their powers to compete with him. He posed superior to others. One day he happened to meet Mr. Vedanth, the most reputed philosopher, and had a deep discussion with him.

When Mr. Vedanth told many things about philosophy and its supremacy over all other subjects including science and technology that help the man invent a bomb that is able to destroy the whole world today. We are not willing to lose any civilization, any culture and any heritage in the name of

world war to result in human loss. The war knows only violence and the loss of all that are to reflect the merit of man. For that, we have to preserve man to preserve all these to his credit. What we want are peace and harmony, values and virtues and so on but not bombs and clashes, violence and unrest and so on. Dr. Sputnik did not agree with him in any aspect on the one hand and challenged him to the exhibition of his powers for a success on the other.

Dr. Sputnik invited the philosopher, Mr. Vedanth to his house to learn his powers the following morning. He was ready to come to his house.

Mr. Vedanth was at the magnificent mansion of Dr. Sputnik. It was in a building with infinite floors. It all appeared to touch the sky as it was in the most gigantic stature. He was at the gate that was also very big. He did not know how to enter. He stood there humbly. Immediately the doll of a parrot came out of a box fixed on the gate to invite him in a polite manner.

‘Hello, Good Morning...my dear guest...’

‘Very Good morning...’ said Vedanth

‘Welcome...welcome...welcome...welcome...welcome...’
said the doll.

‘Thank you... Say once more... Say “welcome”... Your voice is very melodious...’ said Mr. Vedanth.

‘Thank you...welcome...welcome...welcome...welcome...’
said the doll.

‘Very sweet welcome...’ said Vedanth.

The gate was slowly opening while the sweet music was going on. It was very sonorous and melodious to listen to. His heart was rejoicing a lot. His happiness knew no bounds for he was delighted with the music.

Vedanth was at the door. The door was opening automatically. A hit song was playing to welcome him... Meanwhile, Dr. Sputnik came forward to receive him cordially. He said with all pride,

‘Welcome to you...’

‘Thank you...,’ said Vedanth.

‘Mr. Vedanth, this is my lab of wonders... I can show you all my contributions to science and technology,’ said Sputnik.

‘Very good...Congratulations...,’ said Vedanth.

‘Thank you... Let’s first visit the three dolls to speak three different languages-international language, national language, and regional language... Listen...We find them wishing us “Good Morning”, “namaskar”, “namaskaramulu” twice with folded hands,’ said Sputnik.

‘We too wish you with folded hands...It is our custom...,’ said Vedanth.

‘Let’s watch the wonders of this lab...Here is a peacock. See how it dances very gracefully when music goes on...,’ said Sputnik.

‘Very wonderful...wonderful indeed...it dances more gracefully than the real peacock...,’ said Vedanth.

‘Please stand here...without any motion...The small robot will tell your temperature, your weight, your heartbeat, your blood pressure level and your horoscope...,’ said Sputnik.

‘This is your temperature...This is your weight...This is your heartbeat...This is your blood pressure...This is your horoscope...,’ said the robot sending out a report through a window.

'Very wonderful...,' said Vedanth.

'You can see many more wonders...one after the other...I've various kinds of scientific equipment. I've prepared for all this by spending a lot and using my science brain. I've invested millions in this...,' said Sputnik.

'All are very wonderful...I heartily congratulate you on your contributions and their performances...You're indeed great...I appreciate you in all respects. I've appreciated the bombs scientists invented in the age of science and technology. The bombs used in the Second World War were a thousand times more powerful than the ones used in the First World War. The bombs which we have today are a billion times more powerful than the ones used in the Second World War. The countries that have bombs are proud of themselves. If we use a bomb in the war-field today, there will be colossal loss. It can never save any life and man's race or any race on earth. This credit goes to the scientist like you...,' said Vedanth.

'I gave an idea...a tiny inkling to them. I was the key person in the manufacturing of bombs. For that I was highly felicitated...Now my country is on par with the advanced countries.' said Sputnik with pride and honour.

'Bombs for wars are there in the pockets but ideas about peace are at the heart...It is like sleeping with the bombs under the pillows and with our heads on pillows,' said Vedanth.

'All these are the products of science and technology...These are few among the many with me to my credit as a sign of my merit in the modern age...I've shown some to you... some samples. Next time you can see many more...,' said Sputnik, welcoming Mr. Vedanth for tea.

'What would you like to have...coffee or else tea... or cocktail i.e. coffee and tea together... Here are their buttons...coffee, tea, cocktail, sugar, etc. Here is the number button...What do you want...?' said Sputnik.

'Let's have coffee...,' said Vedanth.

'I touch the coffee button and the number button...I touch 'two'. Here we find two cups of relishing hot coffee...Okay these are not coffee cups but cups of coffee. Please have...,' said Sputnik.

'Yes, it's very fine... very fine... very tasty... very delicious...Its flavour is super... unsurpassed...Congratulations...on your unfailing adventures...,' said Vedanth when he had coffee with all praises to the scientist.

'Thank you...,' said Sputnik with all pride.

While Vedanth was going to the door, He heard the words in the melodious tone, 'Thank you...u...u...u... Thank you...u...u...'. Then Sputnik sent him off, waving. He was haughty in pose and unrivalled in contribution to science while bidding goodbye to his philosopher-guest, Vedanth who was approaching the gate. Again, the doll of a parrot came out of the box and said in the echoing voice,

'Thank you very much for your visit... Visit again... Visit again... Visit again... Visit again...Visit again...Visit again and again.'

'Very sweet voice...Say "visit again" again...,' said Vedanth.

'Visit again...Visit again...Visit again...Visit again...Visit again...Visit again ' said the doll of a parrot as per the wish of Vedanth.

The next morning, an uninvited guest with his four companions was at the gate of Sputnik. The doll of a parrot came out of the box welcomed them, saying,

‘Hello, Good Morning...my dear guest...’

‘Very Good morning...,’ said the uninvited guest with the companions.

‘Welcome...welcome...welcome...welcome...welcome...’

‘Thank you... Say once more...say, “Welcome”... Your voice is very melodious...,’ said the uninvited guests

‘Thank you...welcome...welcome...welcome...welcome...’

‘Very sweet welcome...,’ said the uninvited guests.

The gate was slowly opening while the sonorous music was going on. It was very melodious to listen to. Their hearts were rejoicing in it a lot. Their happiness knew no bounds for they were delighted with the music.

The five uninvited guests were at the door. The door was opening automatically. A super hit song was welcoming them...Meanwhile Dr. Sputnik came forward to receive them cordially. He said with all pride,

‘Welcome to you...’

‘Thank you...’

Sputnik received the guests cordially though they were not invited. Sputnik was suspecting them, as they looked different. They followed him to the exhibits one after the other. They followed him to the small robot to greet them in three languages. The situation appeared favourable for them to steal all the valuables. Two were ready with guns in their hands to shoot Sputnik if he prevented them from stealing. They were filling all the scientific valuable exhibits and all

kinds of scientific equipment in their bags. Then Sputnik was shocked when he found them stealing...He said,

'O! Don't take them...'

'Shut up...' said the uninvited guests with the guns aiming at him.

'You, thieves...Who invited you...? I didn't invite you...You're uninvited guests... What are you taking? All the things are my life... I spent my life inventing or preparing all these things... Don't take them away...They are my near and dear...,' said Sputnik humbly.

'Shut up... Do you want to live or not...? If you want life...Shut up...Keep quiet... lest your life fly away to the sky,' said the uninvited guests.

'Don't take anything...I can't buy them again in my life... They cost millions and millions...,' said Sputnik with folded hands, crying like anything.

Sputnik's wife heard this and came to him crying. They threatened Sputnik and his wife, filled all the valuable things in his bags and were ready to go away.

'Please...Don't take them...,' said his wife, touching their feet while her husband Sputnik was trying to call the police.

'Whom are you calling?' said they and snatched the smart phone from him.

All thought that the uninvited guests were thieves from nowhere. They stole all the money when they found it in a box and were going. Sputnik and his wife followed them to the door, saying

'For God's sake...don't take anything...'

They tried their best, but it was in vain. While the thieves were approaching the door, they heard the words in

the melodious music, 'Thank you'. Then Sputnik was unhappy and sad. He felt insulted and humiliated for the loss of his contributions to science while his wife was weeping all the time. Again, the doll of a parrot came out of the box and said to the thieves in the voice to resonate,

'Thank you very much for your visit...Visit again...Visit again...Visit again...Visit again...Visit again...Visit again and again.'

'Very sweet voice...Say "visit again" again...,' said the thieves.

'Visit again...Visit again...Visit again...Visit again...Visit again...,' said the doll of a parrot considering their request.

Sputnik and his wife fell in the ocean of tears. All his poses vanished, and his glory diminished against his expectations. They tried to get them back with the help of the police, but all their trials went futile. The things and the fame he enjoyed were not long lasting. He wanted to own them ever but failed to do so. Pride goes before destruction or a great loss, an irreparable loss.



4

Agnes

RICK HARTWELL

The boy could feel the turd lodged in his underwear, compressed between his cheeks, squeezed into a triangular biscuit. He could also feel that it was about to be joined by a twin. He was beginning to cry softly now as he started to ascend the outside stairs to the apartment. He had waited too long, much too long. Now he was paying the bill for his poverty or his planning or his poverty of planning.

He was still ascending the steps, one riser after another, almost beyond the reach and step of his pudgy legs. Even for a four year old he was short and squat. Why he still hurried would have been beyond the comprehension of any casual observer. But there were no observers and he was temporarily alone with his embarrassment. His underpants and reputation were already soiled and somehow he knew only further humiliation awaited him at the top of the stairs. In spite of all that, he did still hurry.

He had spent the afternoon dawdling in the hammock. It was stretched between two huge something-trees in the grassy yard to the left of the four-car garage beneath his home. He could become lost deep in the hammock with his only view the bright sky filtered in shreds of blue through the fuzzy green branches of the two stately trees. He couldn't see or even consider the garage or his home from deep within his cradle. The garage itself formed the dead-end of an alley faced by two or three houses on each side and over which the

apartment perched, much like a dovecote appended on top of more professional buildings.

La Cañada, perhaps five years after the war, had rented or leased or sold every available space in which a body could lodge. Garage apartments were often occupied by two or three families, or pieces of families, each waiting for the suburban building boom to reach them and serve up their piece of the American pie. For the boy and his bits and pieces of family, the sound always seemed to be getting nearer, but nothing was ever orchestrated. His grandparents and mother and uncle and he all shared the complex roosted above the empty four-car garage. The regular house, the house served by the garage in better times, fronted another street down which they never went.

None of this concerned the boy at this instant, although he was daily baited with its possibilities. He was almost at the landing where the stairs reached a three by six platform, spun back upon themselves a hundred-eighty degrees, and rose higher to another, smaller landing and an unpainted-wood screen door. He was out of breath as he reached the first landing. The baby-fat of his leg muscles vibrated with the unusual exertion. But he didn't dare stop for fear his underwear would soon be unable to contain all it was being offered. He forced himself to climb higher and faster and he started to call for his grandmother as the only one available.

On the hammock he had been dreaming, not of his mother or grandmother, but of seeing his grandfather again. The absent old man had been sick for some time and the boy missed him tremendously. The boy had been told that the old man had gone to the hospital because the family wasn't able to take care of his needs at home anymore. No one ever responded to the boy's request to see the old man and, as the boy was very young, the image of his grandfather was slowly

slipping from his memory. The boy had been trying to visualize his grandfather's face again and had become so wrapped up in this idyll that he had ignored the signs of his own stomach distress. He wasn't a big four, but he tried to be independent, and although he had long since been declared potty-trained, there was always the possibility of an accident. But this! This was inexcusable!

By now the boy could smell as well as feel his mistake. He could not outrace or out-climb the pungent odor that rose from him and enveloped his surroundings. His grandmother heard him by now and she met him at the screen door. She waited until he had climbed all the stairs by himself, and then her mild concern had quickly been replaced by rebuke once she identified the source of his screaming. He was quickly stripped and bathed, cleaned and changed, then relegated to the back bedroom overlooking the number three stall of the garage. The boy continued to cry, but the screaming had devolved to sobbing and an intermittent gasping as he occasionally caught his breath, exchanging tears of fear and frustration for those of defeat and disillusionment.

The bedroom window was open and the boy heard his uncle return from work in the late afternoon. Seeking male support and needing the human contact of family as only the very young and the very old can, he leaned from the windowsill, whimpering, but under control, and called his uncle's name.

While in the hammock, swaying to and fro, the boy had originally been recounting the gifts he had received at his recent birthday. There had been the inevitable, unwanted clothing from his grandmother, a card with two bright-green dollars from his mother, a promise that his grandfather would be home soon, and a black Hop-a-long Cassidy cowboy hat from his Uncle Walter. As the day wore on and

the filtered light grew brighter, the boy had taken to wearing the hat over his eyes in the hammock as he was swaying back and forth beneath the trees with the shafts of sun bleeding across his eyes with every swing. It was when the sun first blinded his upward vision that he had closed his eyes, pulled the hat lower, and started to think of his grandfather. It was also about that time that his red and blue, starred and badged, Sheriff John underwear had started to turn brown. Somehow the boy had lost Hoppy's hat as he had hightailed it up the stairs in flight, and perhaps that had added to the reasons for his tears in the empty bedroom above the empty garage.

As the boy looked out the window, he saw his Uncle Walter and he started to cry louder. The sobs turned back to screams and the sniffles again became heaves of indignation. On his uncle's head was perched the undersized cowboy hat, retrieved from the base of the stairs. It is likely that his uncle was merely being teasingly cute, as members of extended family are prone to be. It is also likely that his uncle did not know the full, complete, embarrassing reason that the boy was above the garage, crying, on a late spring day in Southern California. The boy processed only what he saw looking down and the uncle processed only what he saw looking up. The boy cried louder and from the lips of his Uncle Walter escaped the hateful epithet that the uncle reserved only for the self-pitying and which the boy had heard only once before.

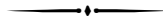
"Agnes! Stop your crying Agnes!" his uncle taunted from below. The boy burst again with louder tears and backed away from the open window where he thought his uncle wouldn't know he had retreated. But the posse of his uncle's voice pursued him and unknowingly announced to

all the world of the boy's mistake. "Agnes, what kind of mess did you make now?"



Across the low hills to the south of La Cañada, in the next town near where the 210 Freeway would eventually be built, a young woman entered Room 217 of the Glendale Sanatorium and Residential Rest Facility. She wore a funny hat that was much too small for her head. It was white and no self-respecting cowboy would have ever tried it on. But as a nurse it was her bond and duty to wear the hat, starched as severely as her demeanor. She addressed the old man in the bed perfunctorily. "Mr. Hereford. Mr. Hereford! Wake up and help me. You've soiled yourself and we must clean up before rounds and visitors. Mr. Hereford?"

Somewhere in his mind the old man knew he was being summoned or scolded, or both, once again. He could not focus with the unbroken glare from the bright lights overhead and so he closed his eyes, retreated back away from the voice, and tried to visualize the face of the boy. He could feel his stomach lurch again. He started to cry softly and to himself, and to himself he softly said, "Please don't call me Agnes."



PLAY

1

Art is Long

GARY BECK

An art gallery with modern masters and contemporaries. A spring day. The general atmosphere will intimidate the insecure. Enter Tony and Evie Piscotta, who have recently inherited a large sum of money. Evie is introducing them to culture.)

Tony: You sure it's all right to just walk in?

Evie: Of course, silly. It's open to the public.

Tony: There's nobody else here.

Evie: This is an exclusive gallery. They don't get lots of people.

Tony: What if they don't want us?

Evie: Anybody can come in.

Tony: Even a homeless guy off the street?

Evie: That's not what I meant and you know it. Now don't be difficult.

Tony: I don't see why I had to come here. I don't know shit from shingles about art. I feel uncomfortable in this kind of place.

Evie: There's no need to be nervous. I know what I'm doing. This won't take long and you promised to

come with me. If we're going to buy paintings for the new house, it could cost lots of money. I want you making all the decisions with me, so there's no argument later.

Tony: How many times did I tell you there won't be any argument.

Evie: That's what you say now, but later it'll be different, especially if you don't like what I pick. Anything we buy we'll pick together.

Tony: What if you like something and I don't?

Evie: We'll discuss it. I'm sure good taste will prevail.

Tony: Did we have to come to this place? There must be other galleries that aren't as snooty.

Evie: This gallery has an excellent reputation and that's very important, because a lot of the galleries aren't honest.

Tony: What do you mean?

Evie: Some of them sell fake paintings.

Tony: So you sue them, or have them arrested.

Evie: Do you want to spend the next three years in court, while the lawyers get rich at our expense? Besides, what if you don't know?

Tony: Know what?

Evie: That you bought a fake painting.

Tony: Can't you tell if it's fake?

Evie: Not always.

Tony: So you take it to an expert.

Evie: Sometimes they can't tell.

Tony: So you go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They'll tell you if it's fake or not.

Evie: Even they don't know sometimes.

Tony: I don't believe this. You're telling me that those longhairs at the Metropolitan Museum can't tell the real thing from a phony?

Evie: That's right.

Tony: Then who does?

Evie: There's no one who always knows. But there's one way to tell.

Tony: How?

Evie: If the painting has the right papers.

Tony: You mean like a pedigreed dog?

Evie: That's right. For a painting it's called provenance.

Tony: What?

Evie: Provenance.

Tony: Why can't some sharp operators fake those?

Evie: They do. That's why it's so important to go to the right gallery, where they check all those things before they sell a painting.

Tony: How do they know, if nobody knows for sure?

Evie: That's their business. They check back all the way to when it was first painted, and they get proof where it was before they got it.

Tony: You're saying they trace it back to where it was 'til they got it?

Evie: That's right.

Tony: How do you know somebody didn't pull the old switcheroo, when it was supposed to be sitting in Lord Woodpecker's castle?

Evie: That's what they check.

Tony: But you just told me nobody could tell for sure if a painting was fake or not, right?

Evie: Yes.

Tony: So if some guy painted a fake Michelangelo and snuck in to the castle and switched it for the real one, how can you tell?

Evie: It doesn't happen that way.

Tony: Why not? If nobody knows the difference between the real stuff and the fake stuff, what stops them from selling fakes?

Evie: That's why you go to a reputable gallery. Their business depends on being reliable. If people thought they couldn't be trusted, no one would buy anything from them.

Tony: You're telling me we should trust somebody we never met before to sell us a real painting, for a lot of money, and there's no way we can be sure it's real?

Evie: You're twisting everything I'm saying. Now stop being difficult and let's look at paintings. That's what we came here for.

Tony: I'm just trying to figure out how to protect our money.

Evie: We'll talk about it later, if we want to buy anything. Look at this painting. It's by Chagall. . .

Tony: He must of been drunk when he made it.

Evie: Why?

Tony: The cow's purple. Nobody paints a purple cow if they're sober. And who ever saw a cow with wings, except in a fairy tale.

Evie: He paints what he sees with his artistic vision.

Tony: How much does this flying hamburger factory cost?

Evie: I don't know exactly, but I'd guess around a hundred and fifty thousand.

Tony: A hundred and fifty thousand what? Meat patties?

Evie: Dollars.

Tony: Are you out of your mind?

Evie: Why?

Tony: Do you think anyone with his lid screwed on would spend that kind of money on a purple cow, that looks like it was painted by my six year old nephew?

Evie: I don't expect you to understand everything about art right away, but I wish you'd refrain from those vulgar remarks. They show your ignorance.

Tony: I'm the same guy I was yesterday.

Evie: That's what I'm afraid of.

Tony: What do you mean by that?

Evie: You know.

Tony: If I knew, why would I ask?

Evie: I know you'd like to make me uncomfortable, so I'll leave the gallery.

Tony: I wouldn't do that, honey.

Evie: You've already done it at the Ballet, the opera, the Honneger Concert. . .

- Tony: Was that the one where those guys were blowing whistles and banging on garbage cans? It sounded like cats fighting in the tin man's underwear.
- Evie: I didn't think you'd understand atonal music, but you could at least try to appreciate the modern masters.
- Tony: That squeaking? You gotta be kidding.
- Evie: You promised to try new cultural experiences.
- Tony: I thought you meant going to see "Phantom of the Opera" or "Cats."
- Evie: I told you that some of the events would be a little difficult to get used to. . . .
- Tony: That's a laugh. The Russians could brainwash anybody with those tortures.
- Evie: That's not fair. I was doing it for us. . . . So we could get more out of life. . . . and you turn it into something horrible, as if I wanted to punish you.
- Tony: Aw, come on, hon.
- Evie: I was trying to broaden your cultural horizons, so you'd be more confident when you meet new people. . . .
- Tony: I didn't mean to upset you. Take it easy. If this is what makes you happy, I'll go wherever you like. Okay?. . . . Now let's look at some pictures.
- Evie: I never said that I wanted to buy that Chagall. I just wanted to learn about it. I know another gallery where we can get some really nice pictures for a few hundred dollars each.
- Tony: That sounds more like it.

Evie: We'll go tomorrow and buy enough pictures for the whole house.

Tony: I always wanted some sports pictures, you know, like two football teams playing each other in the mud or snow. Everybody cold, wet, filthy....

Evie: I think we want something more elevated.

Tony: Why don't we talk about it over dinner?

Evie: Alright, let's go. I know this nouveau cuisine restaurant that you'll just adore.

Tony: Uh, oh. That means a plate of grass for forty bucks.

Evie: Tony. . . .

Tony: Can't we get a hamburger somewhere?

Evie: Definitely not. Now come along.(Exit)

(Blackout)



2

From the Play : The Cosmic Rider

RENÉ VAN DER KLOOSTER

Short Dialogue – I

- A: look around you, the world is corrupt on so many levels, if not all, of this so-called modern life. Nothing has changed in recent years, even though we were so hopeful. On the contrary, it has only gotten worse, as if one wicked act no longer has to make any effort together with another to put their mutual nature at the service of yet another, and so on... until everything is so corrupt that we cannot see what isn't corrupt anymore, and that we... honestly... cannot see ourselves anymore... tarnished...
- B: blinded by full-grown corruption, indifferent, our society, yes, but surely we are not?
- A: if we think that, then it is even more clear; the only hope that in the end the corruption, after being completely built up, like a structure, will collapse due to too much weight if we will stand on top of it, stamping our feet.
- B: you mean, with the collapse of the corruption, highly anticipated, we will perish, because we tell ourselves that we are not corrupt?

Short Dialogue – II

D: I am here to take capitalism down (*D is The Cosmic Rider*).

B: capitalism?

A: oh my god, is that what you are here for? You came to our earth to help me?

D: and the rest of mankind, liberation is imminent.

A: how on earth do you want to do that? By taking inventory?

D: for sure, and the inventory results in a corruption coefficient.

A: hurrah! You see B., I was right!

D: and a quality mark, the quality mark in turn results from the corruption coefficient.

A: a quality mark?

B: a quality mark?

C: a quality mark for every individual?

D: a digital quality mark, a built-in light under your skin; when it turns on you are corrupt.

C: and where did you plan to place it? Where under the skin?

D: in plain sight of course, somewhere under the skin in plain sight.

A: but only in plain sight when it glows under the skin?

D: yes, therefore it must be a part of the skin that is always visible, but not too prominent.

A: the wrist?

- D: for example.
- B: the neck?
- D: possibly.
- A: the forehead?
- D: a bit too prominent.
- B: the earlobe?
- D: perfect! A subcutaneous earring that lights up as soon as...
- C: marked as a beast then?
- A: but C, surely not by a beast under the guise of humanity!
- C: I think it's reprehensible. What happens when you walk down the street and you come across someone with a glowing earlobe?
- B: judgment on your part.
- A: and rightly so.
- C: ready to throw rotten tomatoes and eggs at such a person, if not stones? I find it reprehensible!



BIOGRAPHY

1

Zapinette's French Heroines

ALBERT RUSSO

Joan of Arc (1412-1431)

Her French name was Jeanne d'Arc, la Pucelle d'Orleans (the Virgin of Orleans – how did they check that? I have no idea. In those days, if you weren't a virgin and unmarried, you were called a slut. So, for the legend, she had to look kosher pure, like Mary, Jesus' mommy dearest.)

Joan lived in the fifteenth century, during the 100 years' war between England and France. Before and after it, and for ages these two fought like cat and dog, invading each other's territory, retreating, then starting all over again to prove who was the mightiest and had the best land. Just like Abel and Cain in the Bageldigook. One bloomin hundred years! How can any country bear that? Think of their poor citizens caught in between! Can you imagine World War II lasting from 1945 to 2045? There wouldn't be anybody left, not to mention the millions of animals and plants, except maybe in the Lil islands of the South Pacific and the jungles of Africa and South America, on account that all the atomic and nuclear bombs would have been dropped on Europe, America, and Asia. Like the mongreloid mollars of Iran who have been promising to destroy Israel for the last 45 years before they would conquer the whole of the Middle East, with the

intention after that of invading the rest of the world. That dream – for him, a nightmare for the population – started with the very first mollar who fatwaed the whole female folk of Iran by imposing the sharia (Miss Google will tell you what it means) to all and sundry, even on Sundays, and turning them into living letter boxes – they are forced to be covered from head to toe, with just a slit open for their eyes, so that they don't keep banging themselves when they have to go outside, accompanied – another sharia law – by at least one MCP, whether it be the father, the brother, a cousin or an uncle. And as a bonus, when they get caught, the gay people are flung over a cliff, with the promise that they will burn in hell, while the martyrs, them who throw bombs amid innocent people, go straight to heaven, where 72 virgins are waiting to pamper them and do all kinds of things too uncushy to mention here.

Oh, I'm adding too many ass-sides! So, you expected my writing to just feel like a lovely bed of roses with the sweetest perfume you had ever breathed? But, didn't you know that they grow with thorns too?

Joan, who was both religious and a psychic, was instructed by the archangel Michael to go and help King Charles VII of France in his battle against the English. At only 17, and dressed as a male soldier – she may not have been history's first trans(formist), but she probably was the most famous one – presented herself in front of the king and impressed him so much that he sent her, without further ado, on a number of assignments. With the help of the Scots, who still can't stand the English, leading the French army, she won several battles. But in 1430, a group of French aristocrats from Burgundy, allied with the English, caught her in Compiègne. She was put on trial by a bishop named Pierre Cauchon (which I would rewrite Cochon, meaning 'pig.') on

the charges of heresy and cross-dressing. She was burned at the stake in the city of Rouen in front of a disgusting and raving mob.

She was only 19. I can't imagine how painful it must have been to be consumed by fire, the pain, the screams, the slow death.

Poor Joan didn't even have the opportunity to get a boyfriend; she was so selfless. Had I been her chaperone, I would have introduced her to a nice soldier who would have loved and protected her, following her wherever she fought.

Now, why do you think certain mobs, especially in parts of the Middle East, Central Asia, and Pakistan today, loooove to see people being flogged and tortured in broad daylight? Like when they wanted to kill Salman Rushdie after he wrote his novel *The Satanic Verses*, or when they regularly cry 'death to America, death to Israel.' They want blood; they want to wallow in it. It was the same when New York's Twin Towers were destroyed by Saudi terrorists. I believe these people have inherited the brains of dinosaurs. I read somewhere that they react in a reptilian way like them awful crocs.

Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793)

Now, stop bickering with me. Yeah, many of these broads were fureners before, but they all became French, and washmore, left a significant imprint on their new country.

Lil Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna – them royals often had names as long as trains – was born in 1755 at the Hofburg Palace in beautiful Vienna on All Souls Day, which was a Catholic day of mourning – ain't that uncanny, when you (should) know what was going to happen at the end of the story! Her mom was the mighty Emperess Maria Theresa,

and her pa Francis I, Holy Roman Emperor. The gal wasn't very bright and couldn't even speak German, her native tongue, properly. She was a lazy bummeress. Ok, she could sing nicely, dance, and play the harp, and she looved dolls.

At the not-so-tender age of 14, Maria Antonia, soon to be called Marie-Antoinette, became dauphine of France on account that she was going to marry the future king Louis XVI. Only eight years after her marriage did she have children.

She was very frivolous and spent fortunes in dresses and jewels. So from now on, I'll call her Marie-la-Toilette.

Both the court and the populace disliked her, and she was accused of being promiscuous and of having many lovers and illegitimate children, which wasn't all true. But she was unpopular, alright, especially among the poor people. When she was told they didn't have enough bread to eat, she answered: "Let them eat cakes then." How stupid and uncushy!

The coffers of the kingdom soon became empty, and she was blamed for this sorry situation on account that she didn't stop buying the most expensive things for her personal enjoyment. And she soon got the moniker 'Madame Deficit.

Really Marie-la-Toilette, what did you have upstairs in the place of a brain, not to mention downstairs? Instead of playing with dolls and young men in your golden retreat 'Le Hameau de la Reine,' behind the Palace of Versailles, you should have learned to know something about your subjects and have empathy for the poorest among them, which was the majority. So many were ill and dying of hunger. I don't think you were a bad person, but you were missing a few marbles, which is unpardonable for a queen.

The French revolutionaries should have tried you and your hubby in a democratic way – yes, you both deserved to be severely punished – and not chop your heads off. That is a vicious and a bad example for the future, on account that thousands of people were guillotined after you. What a bloody revolution that was!

Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923)

She was one of the world's most famous stage actresses. Born in 1844 in Paris 'Latin Quarter, Henriette-Rosine was the illegitimate daughter – a lot of them in those days, now too, but you don't call them bastards anymore; that word stinks – of Judith Bernard, a courtesan (that's a high-class slut) and a wealthy merchant whose name nobody knows. But Sarah claimed that her father's family paid for her education while her mom was traveling with her beaux. The *ladder* placed her with a nurse, first in Brittany, then in the posh suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine. Even though lil Sarah was Jewish, she was baptized as a Catholic.

In boarding school, Sarah, who was only in her teens, acted in a play in which she played the *Queen of the Fairies*. In the meantime, her mommy was hobnobbing with very famous men, including the Duke of Morny, who has the half-brother of Emperor Napoleon III. Thanks to the Duke, Sarah was admitted to a very posh convent school near Versailles. She became very religious and even wanted to be a nun. She was accused of sacrilege on account that she performed a Christian burial for her dead pet lizard. Now, what kind of accusation is that? The gal was a devout Catholic (though she never said she wasn't Jewish, which makes things a bit complicated), and the lizard was a creation of Goddess. The Buddhists have more respect for animals, which is why I prefer them to other religions.

The Duke of Morny decided that lil Sarah should become an actress and sent her to the Comédie Française to learn the ropes. So she started acting, but in the beginning, she wasn't very good at it, so she decided to go to Brussels, where she fell in love with the Prince de Ligne. She soon expected a baby and returned to Paris, where lil Maurice was born. The prince wanted to marry her, but his family threatened to disinherit him.

Sarah got her first break when she acted in *Kean*, a play by Alexandre Dumas. And from then on, her reputation as an actress grew like a meteor. Emperor Napoleon III was so impressed by her acting that he sent her a beautiful brooch with his initials in diamond. The lucky gal! She soon became friendly with George Sand (who was a lady, not a man) and Gustave Flaubert, two famous authors. Alexandre Dumas was, of course, one of her favorites.

When the Prussians declared war against the French in 1870, Sarah, who felt very patriotic, converted the Odeon theater, where she had been so successful, into a hospital. Since she needed a lot of money to manage it and to minister to the many wounded soldiers, she asked – she was a pusher alright – all the people she knew to help her, which they did.

When the war ended the following year, Sarah told the co-director of the Odeon that she didn't want to act anymore. But as soon as he said that he would engage another actress, she jumped like a genie and asked to rehearse the new play. After that, she impersonated the Queen of Spain in *Ruy Blas*, by Victor Hugo. The author and the Prince of Wales were present at the première, and the audience was enthusiastic. Many roles followed, and her career blossomed, so much so that she became quite rich. But she spent fortunes on herself, living in grand style, and having to pay the salary of eight

servants, so that she had to look for ways of earning more money.

She soon managed to give private performances in the homes of wealthy Londoners and was paid much more than she used to get in Paris. Always in London, she was invited to one of the city's most important theaters to act in *Phèdre*, a classical tragedy by Racine. Here again the Prince of Wales came to see her, along with the Prime Minister, Mr Gladstone.

Even though it was in French and most of the attendants didn't understand a word – it's like the talkies for people who can't hear – , with the trembling tone of her voice and broad gestures, Sarah mesmerized the audience. Hey, I should try that: scream my head off in the middle of Place de la Concorde and act spastic like Bumba the monkey, pulling faces at all the car drivers passing by. A television crew might then be alerted and film me, and so, I'd get my fifteen-minute fame, like Auntie Whoa, who became famous thanks to her Campbell's soup cans, reproduced umpteen *oomph* times. That was really clever of her. Nobody had thought of doing that before. It's like Girkin Stoned, the one who wrote that a rose is a rose is a rose, *ten forks and ding dong*. Sometimes the most *nincompoopish* idea can turn into gold. I surely can come up with something like that if I wrack my brains good and hard, especially during classes when I get bored stiff.

Sarah Bernhardt – why did she have to add all them consonants to her name? Every time I have to write it, I make a mistake grumble mambo grumble – she became so famous in England that her portrait appeared in Vanity Fair, and her paintings and sculptures (yeah, the lady was also an artist) were exhibited in Piccadilly. I later learned that she wrote books. She also went to Ireland and Scotland. Finally, she returned to Paris with a cheetah, a parrot, a wolfhound,

and six chameleons. Jeezette, was she going to build a little zoo in her garden to keep all these exotic animals?

In Paris, bad things happened. First, she fought with the theater director – no one could dictate to her – , then a fire nearly destroyed the Comédie Française. But at the Gaité Lyrique she soon performed Alexandre Dumas fils' (the son) *La Dame aux camélias*. It was so well received by the public and the critics that she went on playing the role a thousand times. How could she manage that? Even a robot would conk out; its batteries would be flat after the second performance; they would have to be recharged over and over again, and the machine would end up burning them altogether.

The great actress gave 157 performances in 51 American cities, from Broadway's Booth's theater to Boston, Saint Louis, and New Orleans. The New York high society didn't invite her to their homes on account that her life was too scandalous – yeah, she had many lovers. When macho actors have mistresses, they think it's ok, hypocrats!

During her many trips, she met celebrities and inventors. Thomas Edison was one of them. Then off she went to Canada, Toronto and Montreal. In Europe, she played in front of the King of Spain, the Emperor of Austria, and the Czar of Russia. She also toured Latin America, from Mexico to Chile, Peru, Brazil, the Guay countries – that is Uruguay, Paraguay, etc. – and Argentina. She even trekked to Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii and Samoa – whoa, where the hell is that?

She impersonated both women and men, like in *Cleopatra*, *Joan of Arc*, or *l' Aiglon* ('the eaglet, 'which was the name they gave to Napoléon 's son). And she became a role model for all the women around the world, white, black and blue.

Josephine Baker (1906-1975)

Here is a stunner for you, folks: the great Josephine Baker, who was so humiliated in her country, the USA, on account that she was black! Miserly, fookin racists! Yeah, double fookin shmucks.

The lassie was born Freda Josephine McDonald, though she didn't own any cow in the beginning, that is. When she was a little girl, she remembered how white crocs burnt houses in Saint Louis, where she lived, and how scared she was. She danced in the city's slums to earn a few bucks so that she could eat.

At 13, Josephine got married, but just for one year. Then she wedded William Howard Baker at 15, but that didn't last long either. After that, she was part of a vaudeville troupe and performed in New York City, where the audience loved the show, and soon enough, she was on Broadway, but just as one of the many dancers.

Because she couldn't stand the racial discrimination she suffered in America, in 1925, at the age of 19, she decided to move to Paris.

Josephine soon joined *La Revue Nègre* (terrible to name it "nigger", but then, in France, they didn't think it was insulting) at the famous *Théâtre des Champs Élysées*, and became an instant success with her erotic dancing; yeah, the clever cookie knew how to move her hips and all faster than a belly dancer, which drove the MCPs crazy. She toured Europe, traveling on the luxurious Orient Express, and became a star at the *Folies Bergère*. Josephine often went on stage with Chiquita, her pet cheetah, wearing a diamond collar. Chiquita scared the *bejeezette* out of her musicians. I wouldn't have minded taking the place of that lucky cat and even playing dumb with that necklace on me. No, diamonds

aren't a girl's best friend; it's just cool and chic. My best friend, until now, is my quirky uncle, even if he drives me bonkers at times, and I have to pinch him hard to stop his shenanigans.

The gal hobnobbed with famous people like Hemingway, Jean Cocteau, the Pasha of Marrakech (that's in Morocco), counts, and other Aristocats, with whom she had affairs. So yeah, she was a liberated feline, alright. And who are you to criticize her!!!

She kept singing and dancing like nobody's business, flailing her arms and legs every which way, sometimes *quasark* naked. She was scandalously sensational, and the men adored her like a new goddess. But, at the same time, their wifeys turned green with jealousy but kept a sickly appearance, smiling like Kabonga, the female monkey – some had their jaws blocked and had to be operated on.

One of Jo's best songs, which I still hum, especially when I have to calm down, was *J'ai deux amours, mon pays et Paris* – I have two loves, my country, and Paris. It was too generous of her to mention her birthplace when America treated her so awfully. In fact, after her worldwide tour, she did go back to America, but the press and the audience didn't think she was that great. Degenerates who knew nothing about avant-garde art! She was so sad and disgusted that she abandoned her American nationality and became a French citizen.

The lady, coz she really was one at heart, even if she showed her tits on stage, adopted 13 children of all races and religions, giving the bigots and the racists a damn good lesson of morality and showing them at the same time what she was all about.

Jo even fought in the Résistance, working for De Gaulle's Military Intelligence, both against the bloomin Pétain

fascist who ruled in southern France and the fookin Nazis who were murdering people like a bulldozer squashing millions of ants, coz, by the end of the war, there were about sixty million dead, including the six million Jews, with the elderly and one and a half million poor kids, among them. I call that *dinosaurish monseroids*. Oh, I heard you mumble like a bumble bee: "Them Jews don't stop complaining about their genocide." And I retort: "How would you react if your grandparents and baby sister were gassed or reduced to cinders? I wish you to have eternal nightmares and diarrhea."

Later on, Josephine entertained the Allied Forces all over the Old continent. After the war, she got medals and dozens of other recognitions. Finally, the NAACP awarded her the title of "Woman of the year" and organized a huge parade in her honor. She continued to fight for civil rights. She was even feted by Fidel Castro, the commie president of Cuba, and couldn't care less what the American government thought.

Josephine Baker was the first Black Woman to have her name inscribed under the Panthéon in Paris, with all the great French men. Actually, her remains are in the Monaco cemetery. Princess Grace Kelly was one of her dearest friends and often helped her with charities.

Here's an *ass-side fer y'all*. Open Netflix and watch the series *From Scratch*. It's about a Black middle-class girl who falls in love with a poor Sicilian guy, and her parents at first think he is no good on account that he has no college degree and no stable job. In this case, racism is reversed. I won't tell you what happens next. You will have to write a detailed review of that story; otherwise, I'll flunk you, and you won't have access to the rest of my adventures, ok!

Edith Piaf (1915-1963)

Birdie, that's what her name means in English. Actually, Piaf is slang for 'sparrow' on account that the lassie, who was born Édith Giovanna Gassion, sang so beautifully. Her parents chose her first name in honor of Edith Cavell, a heroic British nurse of World War I. Edith's daddy, Louis Alphonse, was a street performer and acrobat, while her mom, Annetta, sang in a circus and was the daughter of French, Italian, and Berber parents. Berbers are the original inhabitants of North Africa before the Arab invasion.

After her parents 'divorce, little Edith was placed at Madame Gaby's whorehouse – Jeezette, how can a dad do such a thing! And she stayed with these missus till she was 14. After which, her dad took her with him to perform all over the country.

That's when the girl started singing in public. After that, she began to earn her own money, performing in the streets of steamy Pigalle, which was and still is the hangout of prostitutes (female, male, and whatnot). But, thank Goddess, she didn't turn one herself!

She met a guy named Louis Dupont, and soon – Edith was only 17 – she gave birth to a little girl. Unfortunately, the poor child died of meningitis two years later.

During the Second World War, she sang in cabarets and even brothels. She even performed in Berlin. And because of that, she was deemed a traitor. Actually, she helped a Jewish musician, and a Résistance friend of hers claimed that she performed for prisoners of war in Germany. In 1944 she sang with Yves Montand for the Allied Forces in Marseille, so she was finally pardoned.

Louis Leplée wanted Edith to sing in his Pigalle nightclub, which biggies like Maurice Chevalier and Django

Reinhardt frequented. Soon she had her first two records produced. Thanks to her, Yves Montand, one of her many lovers – she was a hot ticket alright – became as famous as she. That was too much for her, and Edith then broke off with him.

After World War II, Edith Piaf became known all over the world. Among many lovely songs, she wrote and performed *La vie en rose* and *Non, Je ne regrette rien*, which even I like at my tender and (very) innocent age. She toured Europe, then both North and South America. They loved her in the United States, which she often visited, and she sang twice at Carnegie Hall.

She also discovered the shorty but great singer Charles Aznavour. The two had a car accident, and she suffered some painful injuries.

Edith married Marcel Cerdan, a world middleweight champion boxer, and they were very much in loove, but the poor guy died in a plane crash, coming back from the States.

After several affairs, the lassie wedded Théo Sarapo, a handsome and much younger hairdresser who also knew how to sing (a bit). They remained together until she died in 1963. In the last years, Edith Piaf suffered *xcrucifyingly*, on account that she had to take a lot of medicine and that, *washmore*, she was an alcoholic.

MEMOIRS

1

Cars

PATTY SOMLO

When I met the man who would become husband, he owned three cars. In much the same manner as I repeatedly pulled out my credit car in exchange for a pair of shoes, assuming I could never have enough, Richard bought Hondas, Nissans, and even a Chevy or two. He thought I might be impressed that even with a double garage, he had to leave one vehicle in the driveway. Unfortunately for him, I didn't know one make and model from another. In fact, I didn't even know how to drive.

The first time he took me for a weekend out of town, we rode in the Honda del Sol. The cute compact sportscar with the Spanish name was red, of course, and Richard kept the body spotlessly shined. The car came with a moonroof, more practical than a convertible for keeping the wind from turning fine hair like mine into a rat's nest.

That memorable Saturday, Richard expertly steered the del Sol around endless curves on narrow Highway One, heading north up the Northern California Coast. The day was surprisingly sunny, so we got sparkling glimpses of the ocean far below the road, crashing onto the rocks.

At some point along the way to the charming romantic town of Mendocino, Richard took a photo of me standing in front of the car. Dressed for a summer day in a sleeveless black top and white shorts, I'm leaning rather possessively against the shiny del Sol, a pose strikingly similar to that of a movie star.

In those early days of our relationship, Richard drove the del Sol almost every time we went out. Whenever he had to park the car on the San Francisco street where I lived at the time, he worried it might get stolen or at least harmed.

Interestingly, the first scratch appeared in the Napa Valley wine country, after we'd stepped out of a crowded, overpriced food and wine store, toting a bag containing our expensive picnic lunch. He was angry, assuming the scratch had been made intentionally by some jealous thug. We had no way of finding the culprit, so I tried to soothe him, promising the damage only he could see wouldn't spoil the wonderful day ahead of us.

As we grew closer, Richard found he needed less cars. The one boring American car he owned, a Chevy coupe, was the first to be sold. After that, he reluctantly let go of the classic Datsun 280Z, and replaced it with a small truck. He had decided that the truck with a camper shell on back would be perfect for us, since we wanted to spend long weekends camping and hiking in the many parks a short drive from town.

Alas, during the three days of our first camping trip in Big Sur on California's Central Coast, we fought. The arguments began not long after we arrived at the campground. I was ready to go on a long hike. Richard wanted to set up the tent and sit around the campfire. By the time we were on our way home, we'd agreed on one thing.

This would be our last attempt at camping. Before long, the camper truck went the way of the Datsun and the Chevy before it.

By the time we got engaged, Richard had downsized to one car. Even though he'd bought the del Sol new, it had problems that no matter how many times he had at the dealer to be fixed were never resolved. In addition, the cute sportscar was too small to carry food and everything we needed for a long weekend or a week's stay out of town, which, though we stayed in cabins instead of a tent, we did a lot. What worked now for Richard's lifestyle was an SUV, a Nissan Pathfinder, with room to spare. As much as he wanted me to learn to drive, though, I made it clear it wasn't going to happen in the Nissan. No matter how many times I tried, I couldn't see out the back well enough to park.

The Pathfinder came in handy, though, when we moved from San Francisco to Portland, Oregon. We had just bought a Queen Anne Victorian cottage on a narrow, tree-lined street, in a wonderful walkable neighborhood. We'd been lucky to close on the house in less than a month's time, when Richard needed to start his new job. Our furniture and nearly everything we owned was being hauled to Portland by a nice married couple in a green and yellow Mayflower van, but they would be taking several days longer than us to arrive. So, we lifted our Queen-sized mattress up to the Nissan's roof, covered it with plastic, and Richard tied the cover down.

On Interstate Five just outside Ashland, Oregon, we heard an ominous whoosh. We eyed one another, before Richard moved to the right lane, and then to the shoulder. Thankfully, the mattress was still on top of the car, but one of the ropes had loosened. The sound we'd heard must have been air diving underneath. Richard tightened the ropes, and all was well with our mattress the remaining four-hour drive.

A year after we settled into the Portland house, Richard still had the Nissan. And I hadn't yet learned to drive. Unexpectedly one afternoon, we found ourselves in an ambulance heading to a suburban hospital, where my beloved husband was about to undergo surgery on his heart.

Since we'd only been living in Portland a short time, we didn't have many friends. This was also a time before ride-sharing services existed. I arranged to have a taxi pick me up at seven o'clock the next morning and take me to the hospital, in time to see Richard before they wheeled him into the operating room.

For four days while he stayed in the hospital recovering from the surgery, I took buses, taxis, and got a few rides, ferrying me back and forth, to spend days and evenings at his bedside. During those days, I realized I couldn't keep going on, taking buses and cabs, or begging for rides. Though I'd tried and failed several times, I promised myself I would finally learn to drive.

The following April, we awoke to a perfectly clear Saturday morning. We had lived in Oregon long enough to know that if the sun appeared anytime in the nine to ten months that rain is more likely, we had to get out of the house. I looked at the map and noticed a slender spit of land, the Long Beach Peninsula in Southwest Washington, just north of the Oregon border.

"Let's go there," I suggested to Richard.

We packed our toothbrushes and a change of clothes, in case we opted to stay overnight. Then we got in the Pathfinder and headed west.

In Astoria, we followed signs to the Astoria Megler Bridge. Halfway across the bridge stretching over the

Columbia River, we passed the sign welcoming us to the Evergreen State, Washington.

The short story is that we landed on the Long Beach Peninsula and fell in love. We fell in love with the wide empty beaches lined with tall smooth dunes. We fell in love with the vintage homes, set along quiet streets in Seaview. Best of all, we fell in love with the fact that a beach cottage could be had for a price Richard and I were able to afford.

Several months later, we toured cottages on the Long Beach Peninsula with a local realtor, in a huge black SUV. Since we already owned a Victorian house in Portland, spending stacks of home equity loan funds to renovate it, we didn't want to pay too much for a weekend house. Stop after stop at small, modestly priced cottages and cabins, we shook our heads each time the realtor, Bill, asked what we thought.

Late that morning, Bill said he had one more place to show us. As an aside, he added that the cottage was a smidge above our price range.

After pulling up and stopping in front of the little blue house, he pointed a few feet away, to the end of the dead-end street.

"That's the path to the beach," he noted.

The sale closed in September. Standing in the living room of the blue batten-and-board-sided cottage, I could hear waves breaking, at the end of the path that cut through the dunes to the beach. Miraculously, the infamous Pacific Northwest rain held off until Thanksgiving. We furnished the place with beds, nightstands and hideous orange lamps, given to us by a local motel owner. Every weekend that fall, we made the two and a half hour drive out to the cottage. It quickly became clear that we needed a car with better gas mileage than the Pathfinder.

The Toyota Corolla Richard bought as a replacement for the Nissan did more than save us money on gas. The compact silver car robbed me of every excuse not to learn to drive.

I could easily see out the back of the Corolla to park. Unlike the handful of times I'd tried driving the Pathfinder, I soon managed to feel I was in control of the Corolla. I practiced on the winding, two-lane Historic Columbia River Highway not far from town, passing lovely farms bordering the road. Many weekends, I drove slowly up and down the quiet streets of Long Beach, Seaview, and Ocean Park, the Long Beach Peninsula's tiny towns.

We rented a red Corolla for a visit to Glacier National Park. In gorgeous Montana, I sped along a rural road, where the speed limit was an astonishing eighty-five.

Finally, I braved Portland city streets, learning to make right and left turns, and eventually, to parallel park. One afternoon, Richard said it was time for me to get my own car.

"You'll never drive, unless you have your own car," he remarked.

I disagreed, in part because I didn't want to spend money on a car. My view on the subject was also motivated by fear. Yes, I could drive and even park. But I had never driven alone, without Richard sitting next to me in the passenger seat, prepared to grab the wheel if I was about to crash the car.

Surprising to me, I started to fantasize about having my own car. Instead of an hour-long, two-bus ride to the dentist's office, I could drive there in fifteen minutes. In addition to the convenience, I began to consider the type of car I might own. As in the animals I loved – otters and seals, beagles and pandas – I was attracted to compact pudgy cars.

We'd seen an ad for a pre-owned Toyota Echo with low mileage, being sold by a suburban dealership. Even though this was the exact car I wanted, I could see two problems. First, the selling price was way above my limit. Second, I was terrified to drive the car home from that distant lot.

Richard assured me we would be able to argue down the price. On the second issue, he promised he would be right behind me when I drove the car home.

Richard did get the price down and I drove the Echo home. When we got back to the house, there was even an empty space waiting for us out front, big enough for both cars.

The check engine light came on in the Corolla one afternoon far from home. We were also out of cell phone range. By this time, Richard and I had moved back to California, exhausted by Portland's nine months of rain. We did, though, miss Oregon's unparalleled wilderness, a short drive in nearly every direction from town. We'd gone looking for substitutes and found one near the Sierras, in Northern California.

That ominous warning had appeared at our favorite trailhead in the Lakes Basin Recreation Area, an hour south of Lake Tahoe. Ever since we'd discovered this place, chockfull of lakes as the name implied, plus the beautiful Yuba River, we had visited every summer at least once. We'd also invested in an inflatable two-person kayak. Though the kayak wasn't as cumbersome as a wooden one, all the paraphernalia, added to our food and clothes, begged for a bigger car.

The check engine light turned out to be warning us that we needed a new catalytic converter, an expensive part. That problem, plus the small space and the Corolla's over one

hundred thousand miles, moved us to search for a replacement. A week later, Richard drove our new pre-owned Honda CRV home from the dealer's lot.

Now we had enough room to take everything we needed when we went out of town. Richard no longer had to worry that our weighed-down Corolla wouldn't make it up the steep mountain roads we loved. The seats were more comfortable for a long drive. We let go of the fear that something might happen a long distance from town.

By the second summer after Richard was diagnosed with stage four cancer, the chemo treatments he'd started in March were taking a toll. We didn't know if he could make it up to Silver Lake, our favorite destination on a favorite trail, but figured he'd manage the shorter climb to beautiful Big Lake. To my surprise and delight, after taking a few photos of Big Lake, Richard looked at me and said, "Let's keep going." As it turned out, we were able to enjoy the tuna sandwiches I'd made earlier in the cabin, sitting on lovely Silver Lake's shore.

That was the last time my husband and I would hike that trail, though we didn't know it then. He might have made it to Big Lake the following summer, but Covid got in our way. The CRV mostly sat in the driveway that year. Once a week, Richard took the SUV out for short rides around the neighborhood to keep the battery charged.

Thirteen years after driving the Toyota Echo home from the suburban lot, I traded it in for another blue car, this one royal blue rather than a silvery sky blue. Unlike the basic Echo with its roll-down windows and uncomfortable seats, my new Honda Fit had all the latest gadgets, including a backup camera. Instead of Richard ferrying me around in the

CRV, I drove him to his every three-week chemo infusions, picking him up at the end of the nearly four-hour treatment.

As the year went on, the chemo and cancer took more of a toll. He had trouble getting up out of the Fit's low passenger seat, holding onto the door frame to give himself a boost.

In October of that year, we reached a point we had long feared. The cancer had grown resistant to the chemo. Richard entered hospice, in which the focus would now be on comfort, rather than treatment.

I started to think it might be time for Richard to quit driving when the hospice doctor told us exactly that. On a brilliantly clear Saturday morning, I filled out an online form and submitted it to the local Honda dealer, expressing interest in selling the car. The dealer shot back a preliminary offer, thousands of dollars below what used CRVs in good condition were selling for. I didn't mind. My days were so full with caregiving, I simply wanted to easily get rid of the car.

Before I had a chance to take pictures the dealer requested for a final offer, Richard mentioned to our neighbor Jon that I was selling the car. Jon told Richard he might be interested.

That afternoon, I signed the pink slip over to Jon and cleaned everything out of the CRV. I had known for weeks that my husband's days were numbered. But removing his walking stick and hiking boots, emergency supplies, and our favorite CDs, ones we'd listened to while sailing up and down mountain roads, signaled that it wouldn't be long.

Some days now when I'm standing close to the dining room window, I can hear the sound that for years let me know my husband had come home. When I hear the

distinctive beep the CRV makes as the alarm is turned on, I look out the window and watch Jon walk to his house, away from what so recently was Richard's car.

Since losing my husband, I am navigating a world I'd never known before. Each day requires something of me that wasn't the case when Richard stood by my side. I must pump my own gas, go to the car wash, and make an appointment for the every two-year smog check. And following Jon's admonishment, I no longer park on one side of the driveway, leaving room for Richard to pull in the CRV when he arrives home.



2

Doll Hospital

JENNIFER LAGIER

My cousin asks why the women in our family are attracted to damaged men who need to be fixed. Tonight, I am AWOL, far from trauma's front lines, holding hands with someone too young to be broken by trench warfare with life. Avoiding a home shared with a guy who revives failed military campaigns replayed for the millionth time, hidden shrapnel working its way through old scars, zeroing in for the kill on a tired-out heart.

I have run up the white flag on love, abandoned my post. Let someone else retrieve the bodies, patch what is torn.



ARTICLES

1

One Tale, Many Narratives: Versions of Sohni-Mahiwal from Sindh to Punjab

POOJA SHARMA

Abstract

This paper looks at the multiplicity of voices and versions in folktales by taking the popular folktale of Sohni-Mahiwal or Suhini-Mehar as a case study. It examines how the narrative in a folktale is adjusted to suit the context where it is being told or shared. It also notes the multiple narratives and voices that surround a tale over a period of time and how successive narrators adapt it to their audience. Through an inter-textual analysis the paper explores strains of continuity between folk cultures that help us understand the uniqueness of folk cultures even as they share narratives.

Keywords: Folktale, Sohni, Mahiwal, Sindh, Punjab

Introduction

The subject of narratives by itself implies the existence of a story or a tale. Storytelling is considered as old as culture itself and storytelling traditions are traced in different cultures across the globe. Some cultures have travelling storytellers such as the Griots in West Africa and the Seanchai among the Irish. Other cultures have embedded storytelling

practices such as the Jewish who have the tradition of telling the story of the exodus over a meal as part of the Passover celebration. In the Indian subcontinent, storytelling is a key practice of folk cultures and it exists in all aspects of life. Folk storytelling is done by specialised practitioners such as *bhand*, *madari*, *kathavachak*, as well as common members of a folk community, who can be the creators and carriers of such stories. Similarly, there is no unitary manner in which they are narrated making the forms multidimensional, innovative and creative.

The realm of folktales has remained largely untouched with few original versions available and even fewer selected compilations. Academics argue that by virtue of use of poetic tools, folk songs and riddles are easy to remember and pass on. (Bedi 7). They are also shorter and hence easy to preserve. Folktales on the other hand are tougher to remember accurately and hence they differ each time they are told. Each individual retelling makes a variation and over a period of time the binding elements in tales may begin to fade. Moreover, old motifs give way to new ones, similar tales mingle giving rise to a new ones, and individual choices and regional preferences make their way into the narrative. Hence, while folktales are innumerable in each folk tradition, the preservation efforts are not as widespread.

This paper looks at the multiplicity of voices and versions in folktales. It also examines how the narrative in a folktale is adjusted to suit the context where it is being told. For this, the popular folktale of Sohni-Mahiwal or Suhini-Mehar has been taken as a case study. The tragic love tales of Punjab and tales of brave heroines of Sindh are popular across Northern India. Among the most famous Sindhi folktales are the love legends, rendered immortal by Sindhi Sufi mystic and poet Shah Abdul Latif who used some of

these folktale characters in his work *Shah Jo Risalo*. Latif uses these women and their trials and tribulations of love and life to voice his mystic message. The seven heroines used by him, also referred to as the seven queens, continue to be cultural icons with their stories told and retold in the folk tradition.

Many believe that the cult of these seven heroines goes back to the Mohenjodaro period as one of the seals recovered from the sites is the Indus Seal depicting seven women. Noted Pakistani archaeologist Parveen Talpur has written about 'Satiyan jo Astaan' or the abode of Seven Satis which is the site of seven graves in Sukkur (Pakistan). (Talpur). While it is hard to ascertain which seven women these were but many find connections between this ancient line and the tales that have survived through works of Sufi Saints like Shah Latif in Sindh and Bulle Shah in Punjab, as well as compilations and translations by Europeans like Elsa Kazi and Richard Temple.

Understanding Folktales

As a genre within folklore, the term folktale implies a short narrative with no known individual authorship and which has been passed orally in prose form. (Abrams 101). The factor of unknown authorship is forgone in cases where a tale of known origin is told and retold orally and widely. Folktales are a key element of folk narratives and include myths, fables, heroic legends, jokes, and fairy tales. In India, folktales accompany people wherever they go – across cities, state or borders – and the process of creation as well as transmission is both simultaneous and continuous leading to multiple versions, overlapping tales and a dense mesh of narratives that are hard to segregate.

The entry on folklore by Thompson Stith in *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* gives the term an inclusive conceptualisation bypassing elaborate discussions on narrative genres. It states the characteristic feature of folktale as being traditional, passed from person to person, mostly orally. The folktale is passed by memory and hence may have some additions or changes. Stith does briefly discuss some forms of folklore but adds that it is purely for convenience and to be used as loose terms that allow variations according to cultures, countries and contexts. (Leach & Fried 409).

In an article on prose forms of folklore, Bascomb attempts to define and classify myths, legends and folktales. He proposes the term "prose narratives" to include these three, that he admits are inter-related, and others such as reminiscences, anecdotes. He also distinguishes them from proverbs, riddles, ballads, tongue twisters based on elements related to form. However, he restricts folktales as an exclusive prose category and ascribes it to the category of narratives that are regarded as fiction. In doing the latter he separates folktales from myths and legends which he classifies as largely regarded as truth. (Bascomb 4).

AK Ramanujan provides valuable insights into understanding folktales. In the collection *Folktales From India* he describes a folktale as a "poetic text" or a "travelling metaphor" to indicate that each folktale is a carrier of cultural contexts and each new telling of a folktale leads to new meanings. "Folktales are told not only to make children eat more or put them to sleep. They are often told to keep adults awake... Like work songs, these tales beguile the time and ease the monotony of long labour by engaging fantasy. While doing so they also carry subliminal, often subversive meanings." (Ramanujan xxiii). He also suggests looking at

reading folk traditions as pan-Indian and interactive. While documenting one version of selected folk tales, he also says that other versions of the same tales in same or different contexts is very likely to exist.

Sindhi Suhini-Mehar

Sindhi folktales carry within them elements of music as well as dramatic presentation. Jetho Lalvani uses the term 'Lokgatha' for Sindhi folktales which he defines as a folk form in which a folktale is told through simple folk rhymes. (Lalvani 242). The subject matter of such Sindhi folk tales include themes that are religious, adventure and bravery, love exploits, or historical. For the purpose of this study, select folk tales have been used as documented by Sindhi scholars. Besides the seven folktales that are believed to have been originally Sindhi (Sasi-Punhu, Moomal-Rano, Umar-Marui, Noori-Jam Tamachi, Suhni-Mehar, Lilan-Chanesar, and Sorath-Rai Diyach).

Suhini-Mehar is a tragic love tale that has elaborate narrative traditions both among Sindhis and Punjabis with each tradition having its own distinct version. The Sindhi version, based on Latif's composition, is available in documentary form on the official channel of Government of Sindh. (*Dastaan Suhini*). In this version, Suhini is the daughter of Jarkat Samtio and Mehar the son of Gehwar whose original name is Sahar. The legend is placed during the period of Dilu Rai, a small ruler at the start of Soomra dynasty and makes Luhano Dhoru, a tributary of Indus around Shahdadpur city, as the stage for finale. In this version, Suhini is getting married to Dam and the wedding party is waiting to cross the river as milk ceremony is yet to take place. Mehar, whose cattle farm is nearby, offers milk. When Suhini drinks this milk as part of the ritual she falls in love with Mehar. She

begins to visit Mehar each night across the river. Her clandestine meetings are revealed to her family members who forbid her from going again. But Suhini does not desist and one night the pot she uses to cross the river is switched by her mother-in-law. Suhini does not check the pot and proceed to cross the river. The unbaked pot soon breaks in the turbulent waters. Sohini begins to drown and she calls out Mehar who gathers fisherfolk to save her. But by the time they are able to bring her out of the river she is already dead. Mehar buries Suhini and builds a tomb at her grave. After a few years he too dies and is buried in Shahdadpur.

According to another Sindhi version of the tale, Mehar is a spiritually inclined young man. In this version, Mehar is visited by four holy men who ask him for milk. They leave after having milk and promising to visit him again on the way back. People from a wedding party now arrive at his door asking for milk for a ceremony. Mehar gave them the milk left by the holy men. The bridegroom Dom refuses to have milk but the bride Suhini does and instantly falls in love with Mehar. She refuses to let Dom touch her and pines for Mehar whose hut is across the river. She begins to visit him at night and invites everyone's ire. This version is marked by two small incidents before the final denouement. One related to Suhini crossing a saint when on her way to meet her lover. The saint chides her for her blind love and a combatant Sunhini points out that the saint's devotion to god was flawed as he was disturbed by her. Another incident relates to Suhini noticing a blemish on Mehar's eye. As she points it out to him, Mehar asks her not to visit him again as her love had dimmed and she was now beginning to see his flaws. (Farooqi).

Punjabi Sohini-Mahiwal

Punjabi folk narrative offers a rich body of tales around diverse themes, subjects and characters. In the words of RC Temple, "In the Panjab the folktale is abundant everywhere. It lives in every village and hamlet, in every nursery and zenana, and wherever the women and children congregate." (Temple vii) These tales are an essential and organic part of the Punjabi folk and are told both on special occasions by professionals as well as in routine life as a part of shared cultural code and as means of entertainment and socialisation. According to Wanjara Bedi, folktales are known as '*battan*' in Punjabi. He says that besides entertainment these are employed to emphasise high social ideals, extol courage, inspire populace in their daily fight against injustice, and provide insights into human values. Bedi argues that some of the Punjabi folktales go back to the Rig Vedic and even Sapt Sindhu era and cites examples of Harappan seals and images in this regard. According to him various historical influences led to the creation of a heterogeneous body of Punjabi folk tales. (Bedi 13).

Sohini-Mahiwal is an iconic folktale that has been adapted and retold over several media in various forms. Hashim Shah, Fazal Shah Sayyad (1827-1890), Qadiryaar (1802-1892), are among the poets who used the tragic romance for long poetic forms. "The first authentic version of this story is found in the 19th century when Fazil Shah wrote this love tragedy under the patronage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh whereas Shah Hussain of Lahore dates the story to somewhere near the 10th century... The story has been sung and danced in all its fullness centuries before it was formally written by Fazil Shah." (Khullar). According to the version provided by Sukhdev Madpuri, Sohini is the talented daughter of potter Tulla in Gujarat. The pots painted

beautifully by her catch the eye of Izzat Beg, a Bukhara merchant, who falls in love with her when he sees her. Izzat Beg takes up employment under Tulla and earns the name Mahiwal as he tends to cows and buffaloes. As the whiff of their affair spreads, Sohini is married off and the two are separated. Mahiwal, now a fakir, finds Sohini and two decide to meet each night with Mahiwal crossing the river each night to meet Sohini. However, Mahiwal is incapacitated as an animal bites him in the thigh, so Sohini swims across the river using a solid clay pot. Sohini's sister-in-law sees her crossing the river one night and replaces her pot with an unbaked one. Next night Sohini realises the pot isn't the same but still proceeds to keep the rendezvous with her lover. Her pot breaks in the stormy river and as she cries for her, Mahilwal attempts to rescue her. The two drown in the river, hence uniting in death. (Madpuri). This version also exists in the Sindhi version with minor variations, however, one of the Sindhi versions as discussed earlier introduces significant changes in mood and narrative keeping the broad storyline the same. The Punjabi version invariably dwells on Sohini's beauty, artistic talents, and courage.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis of the two versions provides valuable insight into the two folk cultures as well as the way folktales travel and adapt. In the Sindhi version, the final action takes place around Indus or Luhano Dhoro, a tributary of Indus. In the Punjabi version, the action takes place around Chenab river.

The key elements in the Sindhi version include Suhini getting married to Dam and the performance of a milk ceremony after which Suhini falls in love with Mehar who has provided the milk. In this version, it is Suhini who crosses

the river each night to meet her lover. She is the one who drown in the river one night calling out to her lover. Mehar dies later and is believed to have been buried at Shahdadpur in Sindh, where several landmarks are believed to be related to this tale. There are several sub-plots in the Sindhi version, which foreground the Sindhi folk sensibilities. Sufi saints often make an appearance in these sub-plots and Mehar himself is depicted as a spiritual man. He offers the milk to saints first who are impressed by his kindness and bless the milk which makes Suhini fall in love with him. In another sub-plot Suhini is on her way to meet her lover when she encounters a saint who chides her for disturbing him. A discourse ensues between Suhini and the saint, in which Suhini argues that her love is purer as the Saint – in his pursuit of divine love – got distracted by her.

In the Punjabi version Izzat Beg's transformation from a merchant of Bukhara, first to a cow herder earning him the name Mahiwal and then to a *jogi* or *fakir* gets considerable importance. He is the one who leaves his entire identity for love. Oh her part, Soni or Sohini rebels in her forced marriage, refusing to fulfil her duties as a wife and pining for Mahiwal. In the Punjabi version, it is Mahiwal who crosses the river to meet Sohini but is forced to stop after he meets with an accidents and injures his leg. Following this incident, it is Sohini who begins crossing the river. In both the versions it is the female family members who replace the pot causing the drowning, though in the Punjabi version both Sohini and Mahiwal meet a watery death.

Conclusion

The versions of this folktale represent the folk sensibilities of the people. On the Sindhi side love finds a spiritual dimension with Sufi saints often using it as an allegory to

voice the longing for god, and ideas of purity of soul and intension. On the Punjabi side too, Sufi saints used the tale to voice divine love but they did not turn a blind eye to the physical attraction. Sohini and Mahiwal are shown pining for each other in this version and their physical beauty and attributes are equally highlighted. Similarly, in the Sindhi versions Sufi saints make appearance in sub-plots and get considerable voice. On the Punjabi side, sub-plots highlights the trials and tribulations of the beloved and their repeated attempts to rebel against all social norms.

The above analysis thus illustrates how one tale can become the carrier of several narratives and voice different aspirations of the people. It also shows a continuity of narrative traditions between folk cultures that have grown in close proximity. It indicates a prolonged and active exchange of folk material leading to the creation of syncretic narratives.

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2

Dalit Autobiography and the “Assertion of Selfhood”

SHUCHITA TRIPATHI

The pioneering revolutionary steps taken by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar against untouchability in the twentieth century along with the heated debate with Mahatma Gandhi on the issue of caste system in India, resulted in creating a huge discourse around dalits. It propelled the attempts of liberation, the urge to break free from societal oppression practiced against them. Until now the upper castes having access to education had produced copious amounts of literary works whereas the dalit history and identity had got subjected to dismissal. However, the Dalit literary movement started and strengthened around this time giving rise to the genre of dalit autobiographies wherein they could express their angst; present to the world their ordeal in their own language. Daya Pawar's *Baluta* is one such text, probably the first autobiography by a dalit in Marathi published in 1978, which graphically depicts life in Maharashtra – both in village and city. By referring to this text and a few other secondary sources, this paper will attempt to establish the genre of dalit autobiography as an enunciation of identity that is forcefully subdued over centuries by firstly discussing exploitative caste practices and the author's firsthand experience with them. Secondly, by indicating the credibility and accuracy of such works given the erstwhile reason and thirdly, it will imply its stance as an assertive subaltern

literary piece of work that although compressed under the umbrella term of 'postcolonial' actually has its independent consciousness.

The religious hegemony in Hinduism which managed to divide and systematically designate the *ati shudras* as 'untouchables' not only rendered them as outcastes but also incessant atrocities against them and straitened circumstances made their lives an unavoidable misery. This scenario remained out of literary circles and history to a large extent till the mid twentieth century. The denial of education had made them accept their situation as the only available option but during the nineteenth and twentieth century the subsequent efforts made by Jotiba Phule and Dr. Ambedkar respectively, helped in educating dalits which immediately evoked in them a sense of selfhood. Through their writings they tried to assert and establish their identities which had been missing till now by presenting their real life accounts of painful existence, facing exploitation. In the autobiography *Baluta*, the title itself refers to a price in the form of harvest share that was annually paid to mahars mostly along with abuse in return for services they had to offer throughout the year without any other payment; whether the work was to run around welcoming important persons, tending to animals, dealing with animal carcass, announcing deaths from one village to another or playing instruments at weddings etc. Amongst several instances of insulting behavior, rude remarks, avoiding touch, denial of drinking water or entry in a house and ridicule at learning, Pawar opens up about the effect of this suffering in his life, "This history will not be erased. Perhaps it will go when I die. This stain of helplessness on my face? It dates back to that time. However much I scour my face, even to the point of bleeding, it will not be wiped away" (65).

The incidents in a dalit's life when narrated by him have the immediacy of experience and continuous agony that is ingrained in his life is brought forth in clear terms. These writings are away from mainstream literary works as they aim to unveil anguish of humiliation. Once visiting Mumbai with Marathas, Daya Pawar was not allowed to enter their house and had to wash his face outside and keep sitting in the building's shadow (139). This injustice has long been overlooked although there might have been a few efforts in earlier centuries where people tried to seek equity by highlighting the relentless bias and even now situations aren't completely favorable. The idea of continuous insults thrown at a 'lower' caste person on a daily basis can also be seen from couple of instances in K.A Gunasekaran's Tamil autobiography *The Scar*, where he was slapped across the face for unknowingly crossing the prescribed distance limit while walking and once while talking to an upper caste person(43, 51). Being a mahar in Pawar's case and a parayar in Gunasekaran's case guided the view and treatment towards them despite the fact they were highly educated. Moreover, these incidents in an individual's life point towards the "collective consciousness of a community" as "'I' in these autobiographies is not an individual. These autobiographies are the moving sagas of human suffering and helplessness" (Bhongle 160).

The names of these castes might be different in different areas, but caste practices that confine them into the category of 'untouchable' function in a similar manner with an approach of repressing them. Deriving and citing from hegemonic brahmanical texts like *Manusmriti*, the upper caste ostracized these people by deeming them as polluting agents. Utilizing their power to define them in inhuman terms, unfit for social mingling, they invented brutal punishments for

those who crossed prescribed norms and limits. Pawar expresses his anger towards the root cause of castes and narrates an incident wherein on the last day of SSC which was called student's day, every teacher, principal and peon played the role of student. The students were asked to teach. When he was asked to give a lecture, he attacked *Manusmriti* as the evil that was responsible for the wretched state of dalits. The Brahmin teachers as students tried to counter him but he kept on giving befitting replies energetically (203).

Further, from these examples it can be deduced that the direct dealings with exploitation in dalits' life when presented by them in their own literary creations tend to be dissimilar to other works written about them. This departure is due to the fact that in autobiographies they are projecting themselves rather than getting 'represented' and this increases their credibility and accuracy. The debate on this topic has now been in prominence for a very long time because it can be asserted that works like *Baluta* are written not from the point of view of an author intending to produce a landmark piece. Rather they are the voices of oppressed that are given a channel and they utilize that medium to vent out their anger, frustration of ceaseless dishonor forcefully made an inevitable part of their lives. This depiction of overtly hostile facets of their lives makes the whole of Dalit literature autobiographical, and it has the "authenticity of experience" (Bhongle 159). It is a form of protest, a valid expression of indignation and presentation of their real life incidents of encounters with inequality.

When compared to other literary works by non-dalit writers like Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* or modern novels like *The God of Small Things* it becomes apparent that these books cannot be read "with any hope of hearing an authentic dalit voice" (Bhatnagar 104). In autobiographies like *Baluta* or

The scar, the emphasis on asserting identity is the central point. Written in native tongue they have a colloquial touch which preserves originality to a large extent even when they are translated into English. Both dalit and non-dalit readers can feel the pangs of unhappiness as it is the victim who is talking and the window into his mind delineates his thoughts and emotions without any veil. On the other hand if a non-autobiographical text on dalits' life is looked at, a different approach implemented by the author given his/her background comes to focus. For example in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* the whole upper caste comes together to make Velutha a victim. Since he is an untouchable, he isn't allowed entry in certain parts of the house, denied the right to cover upper body and finally everyone overlooks the fact that he is a human as well and might have self-respect. In order to preserve her family's name, Baby Kochamma accuses him of molesting Ammu and kidnapping children which results in his getting beaten up into pulp and eventual death. However, his character is played with and it isn't the central focus: only sometimes he appears as a victim and he isn't shown acting or questioning as such. When Ammu sees him coming out of the river (Roy 333), "even his nakedness, a symbol of his position, is erotically transformed. Roy's portrayal of Velutha is a good example of what happens when an upper caste...attempts to capture a dalit life story in literature" (Bhatnagar 98). This kind of illustration of lives of marginalized individuals indicates the presence of emotion of pity and human empathy in the author along with mentions of regular methods of exploitation in the name of caste, it is comparatively difficult for an untouchable to identify with such characterization. The inherent difference lies in an onlooker's feeling of sympathy and the victim's emotion of going through the pain himself. The former tries to capture

someone else's voice whereas the latter enables one to speak for himself.

So, that is the issue revolving around 'authenticity' of texts. It can be noted simultaneously that the production of these, as mentioned earlier, was hugely driven by Ambedkar's nonstop struggle for establishing equality and for that sake educating the dalits. The Mahar movement led by him that spurred many people to give up the slavish tasks that they were expected to do without any reward in return, appears several times in *Baluta*. Amidst Gandhi's viewpoint of clinging to caste system in the name of tradition and that of Ambedkar to get rid of such an evil in order to lead a peaceful life with respect, mostly the latter has been resorted to as well as imbibed by most so called 'lower' caste people whether they became learned or not. Influence of this philosophy is clearly seen in this autobiography as people were greatly impressed by him and sort of worshiped him as the rescuer (Pawar 254, 257). It is obvious how such endeavors by a great leader instilled the victims with courage as now they had somebody to look up to and they realized that they could escape their confined existence – an effect that upper caste could not fathom completely as they were just the witness and not the ones experiencing all these changes.

Additionally, dalit literature is usually included under the category of postcolonial in modern times because this genre supposedly covers all literary outputs by marginalized people from earlier colonized countries. The problem of postcolonial is that one term is used to refer to literary works belonging to a wide range of categories, having different intentions and written in different languages. The perspective of subaltern is the dominant aspect in this genre but the inability of this one umbrella term to give importance to several forms of literary creations has been pointed out at

times. 'Subaltern' in postcolonial theory was first used and popularized by certain critics in this field for referring to those considered inferior or marginalized, therefore it undoubtedly comprises the people who were tormented by selfish ventures of colonization. However, any other community or individuals agonized by any other kind of oppressive regime become its constituents too. The 'othering' is done in both the cases in order to claim one's superiority. As imperialists were confident of their supremacy over Orientals, the upper castes have strived by every means of hegemony to put forward their mastery and dominance as superior humans. From the earlier point, the politics of representation can be derived as an important aspect here as the failures of one person speaking for an 'other' become evident. G.N. Devy in his book *Of many heroes* suggests that "the subaltern perspective likes to look at all literature as parasitical" (118). That is why the question of identity of a subaltern is at stake here, as amidst assortment of diverse languages, sentiments and forms of writing, each work of art (in this case related to literature) loses its individuality.

It is crucial to understand in this context that even when the genre of dalit autobiographies is simply classified as Indian Literature, its essence or innate sense of an independent identity is compromised. There are a large number of social, political and economic consciousnesses in India but they are unlike. The consciousness of dalit literature isn't the same as that of a novel or essay written purely out of aesthetic purpose or even of a work that fits in with the exact idea of postcolonial literature and counter attacks or questions the west. The self-consciousness of their positioning and anxiety of centuries of injustice developed as Dr. Ambedkar tried to organize and lead them to emancipation. He provided "a sense of selfhood to the

untouchables... This new writing on the assertion of selfhood is extremely appealing, disturbing and challenging. The writers in this movement show a clear awareness of belonging to a distinct literary culture and history" (Devy 119). All of this is indicative of the fact that despite dalit literature being placed under different generalizing titles; its independent consciousness makes it stand out as a self-reliant branch of literature.

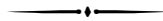
Through *Baluta*, Daya Pawar posits this consciousness by telling his life story and indirectly that of a community in his mother tongue thereby narrating all incidents right from his childhood till his second marriage. This autobiography is a statement of a dalit's confident realization followed by assertion of identity. Amidst childhood games, ghost stories, his shortcomings; the lucid description of unpleasant, miserable lifestyle given his caste status illustrates the inseparable trauma that becomes a part of life just like other daily occurrences. His education made him look through the practices wherein they were denied water or made to sit facing other direction in school. "Seeking refuge in the world of books" (59) he was filled with repulsion for his life and "wanted to get away...but those who seemed to be leading the kind of life I wanted for myself would have nothing to do with me. This was my conundrum" (47).

Thus it can be conclusively stated that dalits raising voices against the atrocities regularly committed against them is a positive outcome made possible by revolutionary steps of many reformers who strived to ensure education for all the underprivileged sections. They could channelize their opinions and understand prevailing complexities. By gaining access to existent history and other information, they could infer hegemonic presence of brahmanical documentation and its aftereffects in their own lives. As a result they could

respond to available narratives by presenting their stance through autobiographies, specifying and establishing their identities by writing about authentic experiences of exploitation. Emergence of this literature as a new constantly widening genre that escapes the disappearance which it could have faced when placed under 'postcolonial' henceforth helps dalits in creating an alternative history and definitive space for themselves.

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INTERVIEW

1

Heart-to-Heart Conversation with K. V. Raghupathi

H.M. DEVA KUMAR

K.V. Raghupathi, a former academic, born in 1957 in a Telugu speaking family in Andhra Pradesh, he holds a Ph.D. in English Literature and writes in English. Poet, novelist, short story writer, and critic, he has so far published thirty books. His first passion is poetry. Began writing seriously in the early 1980s. Since then, he has published thirteen poetry collections, two novels, and two short story collections besides edited eight critical works and six books on Yoga spanning over four decades of journey through writings. He is a recipient of several awards for his creativity.

Deva Kumar: *How do you look at your journey as a poet at such a young age? Did you know you wanted to be a writer? Do you remember the circumstances under which you began to write poetry?*

Raghupathi: No. I wanted to be a reader. I am a pretty good reader. I never wanted to be a writer. I never thought of it, nor dreamt of it. I thought I could end up my life like an ordinary employee. I never even thought of ending my life as a teacher at a university. Of course, I taught at three universities. When I wrote the first book *Desert Blooms*, published in 1987, I never thought it was there

in my consciousness. It is in poetry form. In our country, few readers have the poetic sensibilities to read and appreciate poetry in a foreign tongue. That is the first quality of being a reader to read and appreciate poetry. So, the book has never been read except by the publisher, Professor P. Lal. It has to wait for three decades to discover a couple of readers like the publisher. A decade later, I found a great reader in Brazil who wrote me back after reading it telling me that he has never read a book like that in his life. He is a bibliophile. He told me that he was excited to read that book and it has made a profound effect on him. This is the highest compliment I can think of.

Deva Kumar: *Does your poetry come from passion or reason or from somewhere else?*

Raghupathi: Passion is sustaining and it maintains enthusiasm for things that have meaning for us. But it cannot be a source of writing poetry. Conversely, the phenomenon of inspiration occurs in a moment, it is fleeting. Although fleeting, it is powerful and uplifting. I am passionate because it influences my personal life. Nobody has sown the seeds of this passion for poetry. It has happened naturally. When it happened, I never stopped. Why should I stop something that grows naturally in the soil? So, the journey started. But this journey started with a quest for truth. Hence, my first book acquired that distinct philosophical tone and this spirit of inquiry and pursuit have lasted long in my poetic career.

With poems, I can express myself more fully than with any other form of writing. Poetry can be a way to process feelings, work through difficult experiences, and gain new insight into oneself. Through writing

poems, you can examine your thoughts and feelings from different angles and perspectives.

Deva Kumar: *Tell me whether poetry is a born quality or a talent that can be acquired.*

Raghupathi: Poetry can be both an acquired skill and an innate talent. With formal education, anyone can arrange words, ideas, and emotions into poetry. It involves a lot of hard effort. However, some poets are more naturally able to write moving poems effortlessly expressing themselves, even with no formal training. This poetry born naturally with little effort carries a lot of force, grace, and elegance.

Deva Kumar: *Do you write as a way of beating back the loneliness? Because you are single, and not married. Or do you write for different reasons?*

Raghupathi: Sounds interesting. I am not writing for the reason you have stated or some other reason – or one that I don't even suspect. True, I am alone but not lonely. There is a difference between being alone and being lonely. The latter is depressive and suicidal. I enjoy my solitude. It is a blissful time that nature has bestowed on me. I am happy with myself and I do a lot of things. Not all are blessed to be alone in the world. It is difficult to be alone. Many people are confused about it and think of being alone as a curse. Absolutely not.

Deva Kumar: *You have been writing for four decades. Is there a connection between each work or do they stand differently?*

Raghupathi: Each work is independent, although in all works there is a sincere pursuit of truth. Each one gives you a distinct experience.

Deva Kumar: How do you manage to bring out such enormous body of work? Let me know your work schedule.

Raghupathi: I don't have a ritual of writing schedule as many writers have. Writers have diverse ways of writing schedules. I don't seem to have cultivated it. There is no particular time and schedule. I sit before the laptop and do my work when I feel the urge. If I begin a work, I see it to its end without a cease. One thing I must tell you is that I have a passion for writing. It came to me while I was young, like the leaves of a tree. I never stopped the creative force. I allowed it to live within me. Or should I say, I live with it? Both ways are reciprocal. Four decades of a journey through writing! Wonderful and fascinating! Whether in the profession or out of the profession as I am now, it has made no difference to me. While in the profession, I continued writing despite several preoccupations. Now, in my post-retirement life, I have become vigorous as time is short. I need to make a lot before I exit the world.

Deva Kumar: Could you write after the work?

Raghupathi: You mean post-writing.

Deva Kumar: Obviously, yes.

Raghupathi: Yes. I do a lot of editing after the first draft with intervals. That would give me a fresh look at the vocabulary to achieve near perfection. Sometimes, I refashion the sentences if I am not satisfied. I think it is a law for the writers who have to look at their pieces umpteen times.

Deva Kumar: What is the physical act of writing like for you? Would you ever work on a word processor?

Raghupathi: Earlier, I used to write with a pen in the diaries. Now technology has grown. We have systems with advanced access to numerous sources. So, I stopped writing in the diaries and sit before the system and directly enter the input. It saves me time.

Deva Kumar: *How do you think being an editor of your own writing for four decades affected you as a writer?*

Raghupathi: I am not sure. But I learned how important being critical of my own work, and being an editor of my own work, which I don't think I would have known before. It polishes your language, your scholarship, and your presentation. Ultimately, this counts a lot at the end of a work. Being an editor of my own writing has never affected my writing. Indeed, it has helped me immensely in the long run of my writing career. People say, I write for myself, and it sounds so awful and so narcissistic, but in a sense if you know how to read your own work – that is, with the necessary critical distance – it makes you a better writer and editor. When I teach literature in the classroom, I always speak about how students have to learn how to read their own work; I don't mean enjoy it because you wrote it. I mean, go away from it, and read it as though it is the first time you've ever seen it. Critique it that way. Don't get all involved in your thrilling feelings and all that.

Deva Kumar: *Are there editors who are helpful critically? Have you ever shown your writing to people, I mean, other writers and language experts? Were there any other friends who read your poems and helped you?*

Raghupathi: I have never done that. I know it makes all the difference. Others have their own writing styles. You know two styles of two writers cannot go together.

Similarly, a sentence can be written in three or four styles. But each style must fit into the shoes of a writer. If you get the wrong one, then you are better off alone. But there are editors so rare and so important that they are worth searching for. Ultimately, it is the writer who has to decide which form of style fits him or her. Recently, I have one such reliable editor from Brazil who has not spoiled my feelings. Of late, I showed my latest writings. He has made markings in the text with improvements in the comments box, leaving the discretion to me. It is a fine job we do together. A fine collaboration. He is superlative for me. Cool. Dispassionate.

Deva Kumar: Do you get more pleasure out of writing the first draft, or in the actual revision of the work?

Raghupathi: I get more pleasure in the actual revision of my work. When you look at your work repeatedly to get near perfection, you derive pleasure and happiness.

Deva Kumar: There is truth and beauty in the romantics and delightful journey of Robert Frost in your poetry. How do you manage to achieve such sublime states?

Raghupathi: Yes. There is truth and beauty of the romantic in my poetry. Like Frost, I am a close observer of both nature and people and portray their fundamental elements. He consciously uses meter in his poetry, whereas I don't. Frost uses nature to a great extent, particularly the rural scenes in his poetry not in anything cruel with so much realism. His descriptions tend to be earthy and sometimes reach high aesthetic peaks. Though he has an excellent power of creating characters, there is also a suggestion of a friendly rivalry and an interplay between nature and man in his

poetry. In my poetry, there is a spiritual connection between nature and humans. I use things and objects in nature to transcend the earth to understand and comprehend the truth. For this reason, to me writing poetry is a transcendental experience. It is not an intellectual exercise. Most often, you find it as intuitive.

Devakumar: Unlike poets like Shiv K. Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra, and others, you started writing poetry at an early age; you say, in the mid-twenties. You have also been a prolific writer, and you have covered all genres, as your literary output shows. You have written and published two novels and one is on the way, two short story collections, and one is in the pipeline. Are there any genres that you would like to dabble in? Say, for instance, translation and drama. I haven't discovered any work of these genres in your output. Are you planning to write in these genres?

Raghupathi: True, my literary output does not carry the two genres you have pointed out. My fellow poet and friend, Dr. P. Raja, also prompts me to write a play. Well, if it is in English, I am sure nobody will enact it. There are no theatres for English plays and there are no enlightened audiences to watch and appreciate. Perhaps such plays may draw the attention of a couple of scholars at the university. Beyond that, I find it is not productive. As for translation, I haven't attempted it so far. I must shamelessly admit that I am not proficient in my mother tongue; Telugu and I have read a little literature. Right from my student days, I have never had an exposure to reading my vernacular literature. Well, if such a situation arises, I will first translate my works into Telugu.

Devakumar: How about the idea of ever considering writing in your mother tongue? Leave alone the translation.

Raghupathi: I have already answered. I am not an accomplished reader of literature in my mother tongue. However, I feel the question of the medium in creative writing is quite an irrelevant and out fashioned argument. It does not carry any worth the salt now. One should write in a language that comes to him/her naturally. So, I write in English for two reasons, one is I feel comfortable in it, and the other is I want to reach the wide readers in the world.

Devakumar: *A word about your age. You are sixty-five plus. Does it hinder your writing?*

Raghupathi: So, what! If I am sixty-five plus. I never think of my age. I never feel the weight of years upon me. Age is nothing to do with writing. The day passes off quickly as I do my work with both hands and retire at night and I have little time to think about it. So, I feel younger every day as I get up in the early hours with the great expectation of doing what has been left behind and what is ahead of me. I don't have much time on my hands. Time is fast sliding. Let me quote Robert Frost's oft-quoted venerable lines from the poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening": "The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,/But I have promises to keep,/And miles to go before I sleep,/And miles to go before I sleep." This dictum guides my life and journey.

Devakumar: *This takes me to another interesting aspect of your poetry, style, and technique. I would like you to comment on the importance of technique and does it in any way, suppress your outpouring, your emotions, and feelings when you become conscious of it.*

Raghupathi: You are right. Every reader would ask such a question about technique and style when one is writing

poetry. But such a question does not arise when you are writing fiction. This often arises because we have been consciously taught about it in the classroom while teaching poetry by English teachers. Therefore, it is planted in the consciousness, which cannot be so easily erased. This problem does not arise when you are teaching contemporary poetry devoid of technique. Mostly it is written freestyle. Nevertheless, if you are a conscious practitioner of writing poetry, you become conscious of word choice and its lyrical element. After all, the lyrical element also counts in a poem because a poem is primarily a song to be read or belted. Hence, the poet becomes conscious of the word choice. I would say don't seek a meter, but seek feelings and thoughts; don't seek feelings, but seek language. Ultimately, the expression counts a lot at the end of writing a poem. How you express your feelings and your genuine responses to the things and objects in nature and the world is pivotal. Language is what poetry is all about. It is finally language/expression. If you forget it, then you are not a poet. Emotions and feelings need to be disciplined, very stringently. I think the poet has to be self-critical in the absence of a critical environment. One has to patiently wait for the words. Sometimes it takes hours and days and weeks. Our environment is not critical because many readers do not know what a poem is and how it works. Somebody writes a poem or two and publishes in a journal, and calls himself/herself a poet. There are people who keep on scribbling and publishing, adding the number – this is my fourth collection, fifth collection, eighth collection, and so on. The editors of the journals we have in our country do not review such poems for the simple reason they do

not know what poetry is. They feed whatever stuff they receive in the journals. This is a great disservice to poetry. Therefore, you see all kinds of third-rate and fourth-rate poets amidst the jungle.

Devakumar: Are you comfortable being called a 'nature poet', 'romantic poet' or 'mystic poet' or 'spiritual poet', or 'poet-philosopher'?

Raghupathi: I have never labelled myself. You can call me by any label you have used. Finally, I don't mind what you call me as long as I keep writing.

Devakumar: You seem to have an extremely informal and cordial relationship with your students. You are very loving to everyone. Everyone is accessible to you. You do not seem to impose inhibitions on the students. You give freedom to all with no discrimination. Has that contributed to your poetic career and your personal feelings as such?

Raghupathi: Yes. I was amenable to all students while I was in the service. True, I never imposed any restrictions on them. I never carried any superiority complex. My interactions with the students and scholars helped me become a better teacher. It never came in the way of my writing. I think teaching helped me to be a better writer. It is also the other way round too. Writing also helped me to be a better teacher.

Devakumar: What has been the response to your poetry?

Raghupathi: I don't know about this. Over sixty critical articles have been written and published on my poetry in various journals. This is encouraging, a positive sign for my poetry. But whether people read me or not, they cannot ignore me as a poet. I am a poet, whether people like me or not. I am least interested in prejudices that have never affected my writing of poetry.

BOOK REVIEWS

1

The Musings of the Dark: Assertion of Appalling Savagery

ABU SIDDIK

(The Musings of the Dark | A Collection of Poems | Moumita Alam | Authorspress, New Delhi, 2020 | ISBN: 978-93-90155-59-0 | Page: 142 | INR: 295 | \$ 15)

Moumita Alam is a poet from West Bengal. Her debut poetry collection *The Musings of the Dark* is, according to the poet, 'a protest against the humanitarian crisis from the abrogation of Article 370, the Delhi riots, and the Shaheen Bagh movement to the unbearable sufferings of the migrant labourers due to the unplanned Covid-19 lockdown'. The book is a powerful poetic assertion of dissent. Dissent against what? Against state-sponsored violence against Kashmiris, violence against anti-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) protesters at Shaheen Bagh, violence against migrant labourers, daily labourers during Covid 19 pandemic. She also voices her dissent against structural violence of casteism, fascism, violence against women and weaker sections of society – the poor, the minors, the marginalized, the minority, the underprivileged, victims of rapes, riots. Darkness, deaths, diseases, shocks at human rights violations, poverty, denial, disdain, blood, bullets, pain, suffering, demand for justice, a quest for casteless and a classless society, drapes her world.

Her poems are tinged with notes of sadness, bitterness, anger, despair. 'The womb of nights are barren/ with no embryo of lights?' ('Good Night', 107). They are raw, violent, bold, direct and powerful. But she argues, asserts, resists, and prevails in the end with her unflinching belief, 'Revolution will come for sure at the dead of the night' ('Prayer for Revolution', 55). Alam's poetry crosses the boundaries of castes, classes, creeds and continents.

The Musings of the Dark has four sections: 'The Lost Paradise' has 27 poems; 'Shaheen Bagh Poems' are 15; 'I Can't Breathe...' has 39 and the last section 'Love, Lost and Lust Poems' has 18. But the said categories blur if we closely look at the issues her poems unearth. Some poems are political, some social, and some inimitably personal. Poems included both in 'The Lost Paradise' and 'Shaheen Bagh Poems' are hallmarks of her protest against political violence unleashed by the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A in Kashmir and the passage of CAA. The poet is deeply shocked, shattered, and in response to the said trajectories she records her wounds:

"Don't let the bloody fascists dictate
Our hearts
let's prove them
land they can rule not our hearts."

(*To my Friend Who Lives in Imposed Graveyard*, 22)

Or

"we often end up our journey
at our starting point
Still we carve to travel our times
with galloping hooves and stars in our eyes.
Some end half circle path with bullets in chest
And pallets in eyes"

(*The Journey without Destination*, 35)

In the name of development fascist rulers imposed Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) on Kashmiris and

denied their right to freedom and self-determination, making the 'heaven on earth' a forgotten land of 'half-widows, orphans,/ cloven vaginas, bleeding breast' ('Development', 44), a land where 'bullets are far cheaper than chocolates' ('For the Boy Who could have Lived More', 38).

Alam's Shaheen Bagh poems challenge police brutality against peaceful protesters against CAA at Shaheen Bagh. She records the communal killings taken place in the ghettos of Godhra, in the valley of Narmada, in Muzaffarnagar, in Nellie or on the bank of Jhelum, in the forest of Bastar, in Kucheipedar or in the lush land of Nandigram, Marichjhapi, in Jaffrabad, Maujpur, Chand Bagh. 'All the cities of mine are smelling warm gun-powders/ the sirens of the khakis, and that killing shout' ('Where is my City?', 50). Her irony is apparent in 'Busiest Persons', only the grave diggers have a hay day. They tirelessly dig the grave for the 'million hands, legs, eyes, stomachs, intestines' of the dead routinely found in Kashmir, Syria, Palestine, Libya, Iraq, Yemen. She mocks 'the dead conscience/ Of the left, right, centre, liberals' (p. 51). She protests against the so-called nationalist fads, the bhakts who openly chant in frenzy, 'Goli Maro/ Khatam Karo/ Rape Karo'. They don't want Azaad, Maryam or their synonyms. Her pain and anger find expression in such lines:

"The would-be Azaad wobbled every time
 THEYspurned at his mother's protruding belly
 THEY only broke the neck of Maryam
 to teach parents a lesson of nationalism"

(*'Azaad and Maryam'*, 62).

Alam's Covid poems portray woes of the wretched of our land – the poor, the daily wagers, the migrant labourers. Drawing room lovers bathed in cologne may celebrate government's 'stay at home' order. But what will a hawker do?

“I dream every night to sell three melons more
to have two roti extra
and be able to buy a cotton
frock for my daughter”

(‘Grave in Home’, 71).

The tragedy of Dharmveer who had to cross 2000kms by cycle for ‘one gulp of boiled rice’ from his mother at home, died at midway, and a ‘petal kissed his dead lips’, ‘In big cities the makers live in graveyards/ And the lumpen dead souls/ have big buildings’ (78), the loneliness of the old and young, ‘The roads are full of empty hearts and dreamless eyes’, (80), ‘nights and the days all are/ sewn in the monochromatic silence’ (100), ‘No kiss. No smooches. No hug. No sex.’ (‘self-Quarantine’, 96), the misfortune of Mangoo Ram who is walking from Delhi to Munger without food or water and in one day he may be found ‘like the carcass of the cows’ by the roadside, (86) – hammers at our conscience. Her ironical attacks on the stupidity and stolidity of Indian educated, literate, ill-literate mass who bang thalis, beat dafliis, clap and clap to ‘defeat the sounds/ of millions losing job’ during a pandemic is a bitter pill of reason and conscience:

“and we are madly happy
banging thalis, glasses, cylinders
bedpan, potty seats, sprained pots,
used unused mugs of toilets,
stools, and the confused madman of the roadside
with no utensils
is dangling his penis in delight;”

(‘The Great Indian Thali Banging’, 93).

‘the wailing of the doctors, nurses/ for the gloves, masks/ ventilators, test kits’ is silenced by the chaos. ‘Millions of diyas and candlesticks are/ burning in my city/ the darkness of the night seems more dark/ today!’ (‘Cities in

Blackout', 84). And her attacks on the insanity of Indian mass come complete with her asking: 'Unperturbed by the noise or crying the cow is chewing grass', 'peeing on the same food it is eating,' 'pooping on the very place wherein it's sitting.' 'Is not the cow a great teacher?/ or are we not the master of the cow?' ('The Cow', 108). Freedom is 'cosmetic'. It has lost its way leading us to an arid land of blood, betrayal, hatred, where freedom equals beastly living, tongue-tied, head drooping, or helplessly agreeing with everything like Faulkner's Darl in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) who reckons the mockery of 'love' his family bestows on him and protests in madness yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes.

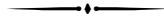
Alam's 'Love, Lost and Lust poems' is too intimate. Of course, there is a protest against patriarchy, against her 'chained sky', 'I looked up to the sun/ but the sun is man' ('Mother', p. 54), 'she is a good girl/ she never asks for sex/ orgasm or no orgasm/ does not matter/ she is a good girl/ we possess her all' ('Our Relationships', 135), 'Now it is your responsibility son/ The burden changes hands and/ another man's son become the/ Papa's son/ his own daughter was a responsibility./ the papa felt relieved for the first time/ After her birth/ Now he has only son and son' ('Homecoming', 133). But there are also agonies of a loved heart betrayed by her love. 'I sign the final divorce paper/ but the paper is burnt/ It can't kill the memories/ the memories chase my breath.' ('Move On' 132). Her appeal to her love is to love her as a human being, not to 'tear apart the hymens to satisfy only/ your male ego', not to 'scratch the skins like/ a butcher skinning off a dead goat', 'Do learn, oh boy/ a female body/ has many more than/ two silky roads with/ the Carfax in its centre.' ('Do Learn how to Love', 126). She paints the wounds a divorcee has to undergo. In fact, lust engulfs the males she is familiar with. They pine for her bad luck, and as if to fill

her empty sky they want 'hard sex'. What a betrayal of the benevolent!

Alam is also concerned with the environment 'We poisoned the rivers/ destroyed the forests/ shot the flying birds/ and killed our brothers to/ celebrate colours of victory', 'on the pond by the mango garden where the birds/ had their kingdom/ We built palaces to make us / proof against bird's song' ('The Lost Decade', 98).

Alam's collection is attuned with Faiz Ahmed Faiz's immortal lines, '*Bol, ye thora waqt bahut hai/ Jism or zaban ki maut se pahle / Bol, ke sach zinda hai ab tak/ Bol jo kuch kahna hai kah le*'. Alam is a powerful voice. But she could have been more precise.

The cover of the collection is impressive and has an aesthetic appeal.



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