

Let Us Tell a
story
Monday Musings

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STORY
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A Presentation by
English Teachers' Forum
Himachal Pradesh

Edited by
Praveen Kumar & Janesh Kapoor

Concept
Janesh Kapoor



AUTHORS P R E S S

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*Dedicated to the Loving Memory of
Professor Anil Wilson
(1947-2009)
Our Teacher and Mentor*





Painting by Vivek Sood Kuthiala

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Painting by Vivek Sood Kuthiala

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

PRAVEEN KUMAR & JANESH KAPOOR

It has been an exciting journey for the English Teachers' Forum, Himachal Pradesh ever since it came into existence in 2018, and the present anthology is the culmination of the collaborative spirit that has always been the hallmark of this academic body. Covid-19, which swept through the world in 2020 and held its ferocious sway for almost two years before subsiding to some extent, gave us an opportunity to explore alternative ways to remain creatively and academically engaged. And thus, emerged the idea of holding online story-reading sessions, featuring short stories written by our revered teachers and colleagues. While a few of them are already established names, having been the recipients of numerous literary awards for their outstanding contribution to the world of literature, it took a bit of persuasion to convince others to come on board, and let their dormant creative spark come alive and brighten the world. And once they decided to take the plunge, they came up with remarkable stories in their very first attempt. In order to make the reading sessions more rewarding it was decided to have a discussant for each presented story. This gave the attendees an opportunity to enjoy the creative pieces along with their brilliant critiques, making the whole experience exhilarating and rewarding.

The anthology has a total of twenty-two stories, each having a unique flavour, writing style, linguistic idiom, rhythm, thematic concerns, and emotional intensity. While "Cleansing the sacred 'Kund'" has a beautiful amalgam of history, legend and fiction, "The Party" is a woman's narrative, which captures the complexities of the fragile protagonist's travails and emotional trauma; "Women" as the title itself suggests revolves around women, three to be precise, whose unfulfilled desires for love and sexual gratification leave a vacuum in their lives; "Mook Prem" brings a fresh perspective on the complexities of human relations, especially when the parties involved are a step child and her parents, people's perceptions of such relationships, and the possibilities of the margin of error between the general perception and reality; "Twelve Years Later" highlights the vexing issue of eve-teasing and its insensitive handling by family, friends, teachers, and society, leaving the targeted individual scared and scarred for life; "Terror" is a study in

prejudice, which often stems from social conditioning and goes a long way in sowing the seeds of distrust, fear, hatred, and unfounded antipathy, leaving in its trail a weakened social fabric; “The Tear” is a melancholic tale portraying sensitively the plight of a poor family which, like so many other families, was confined to their crowded, cramped space called home during the Corona times. But despite the many challenges the family faces at each step, the characters still retain optimism, probably the greatest asset the poor possess in abundance, and this is what brightens up an otherwise sad narrative; “Apocalypse” is a dark tale of brutalization that the traumatized, emotionally drained daughter has to face at the hands of her father; “A Snow Trail”, replete with childhood innocence, charm, fun and bonhomie, takes a disastrous turn when a few individuals dash the fond memories of the narrator’s beautiful past with their indifference and nonchalance; “Radhe Radhe” deals with existential questions, the void one feels when one fails to have a single meaningful, loving relationship with a fellow human being, and the challenges one encounters when one refuses to succumb to social stereotypes; “Mama” is about an innocent child who doesn’t understand societal norms and the pressures they exert on an his mother, making her life miserable. He fails to understand why his widowed mother can’t live like any other woman – wearing jewels and makeup; “The Hole in the Wall” highlights the sad reality of child labour. Compelled to live a life of poverty and squalor, the child protagonist deals with the harshness of life by immersing himself in fantasy, but his fantasy world doesn’t hold for long and comes crashing down towards the end of the story; “A Girl as Old as Thirty” raises a very pertinent issue relating to the social stigma and mental anguish that a girl and her parents have to contend with if she crosses a socially-acceptable age bar for marriage; “And Then the River Flowed” is a self-reflexive tale about the creative struggles every writer undergoes at some point in life, and the possibilities of evolution that may lie hidden in a state of temporary stagnation; “Chhatri” deals with the identity crisis of the female protagonist who leads a loveless life and is treated by everyone only as a body and not a living human being. The lost soul however, sees the possibility of a resurrection of her identity when an empathetic human being makes an earnest attempt to touch her soul without trampling on her body; “Why Fear When I am Here” affirms the value of faith in our lives. God is not only merciful but also benevolent, and anyone who puts in sincere efforts in one’s personal and professional life is bound to receive God’s love and grace; “Billiaan” is a brilliant story which articulates the issues of

gender, patriarchy, authority, erosion of authority, inter-generational power dynamics, the complexities of family structure, and irrational fears; “Nirvana” as the name itself suggests, focuses on the themes of self-realization, spiritual enlightenment, and the power of intuition in reaching a higher state of consciousness; “Balance” is a painful tale revolving around gender discrimination, family expectations, especially from the daughter-in-laws, petty family feuds that sometimes get amplified leading to such tragic consequences as suicide, and the eventual disruption such extreme steps cause in the lives of their loved ones; “The Mad Mystic in Heaven” is an unusual tale that challenges the hierarchical structure in which the gods and goddesses and human beings are believed to exist. It explores the possibility of a mortal human transcending his earthly limits through rigorous purification and refinement of consciousness vis-à-vis the fallibility of gods/goddess in certain contexts. It may also be read as a political allegory; “Bimla ‘Paagal’” is a sad tale of a woman who is used and betrayed by her own partner, and left to rot in this uncaring world. The world is full of Bimlaas who end up losing their dignity and sanity in the face of ruthless exploitation, eventually dying of neglect and heartbreak; and finally, “Nanga Aadmi” stands out as an intense narrative of trauma and helplessness the voiceless poor are fated to experience. It is a scathing attack on the hypocrisy of the political class and the existence of soul-crushing social disparities that tend to annihilate one’s self-esteem.

English Teachers’ Forum, as the name itself suggests, comprises teachers of English, but in order to accommodate linguistic preferences of the contributors, offer space to varied literary voices, and make the writings available to a more diverse audience, we invited entries both in English and Hindi. The collection even features three translated stories, viz. “Women”, “A Girl as Old as Thirty”, and “Terror” -- written originally in Hindi by three prominent literary voices of Himachal Pradesh and translated into English by equally illustrious academics. The whole idea of having a bilingual collection augmented by story-by-story critical analysis, and select live responses of the audience has positioned the anthology in a unique space. We are hopeful that the readers will find this anthology academically and aesthetically pleasing for its freshness, variety, intellectual rigour, and appeal to finer human emotions.

1

CLEANSING THE SACRED 'KUND'

ABHYUDITA GAUTAM

The erstwhile dominion kingdom of Devgarh or the Devgarh Valley as it was popularly called was known for the extensive agricultural lands that cultivated vegetables and fruits on the sprawling plain fields. While traveling on the straight road that ran through them, one could feel a refreshing whiff of the fragrance effusing from fruits laden trees in the mango and litchi groves, on both the sides. Devgarh Valley was known far and wide for its productivity, was adorned with green houses, dotted with modern homes and irrigated by the countless water canals. The soil was fertile, and was believed to be so as it had been irrigated by the sacred waters of the holy 'Kund'.

The famous 'Kund' of the Devgarh Valley, came into being when Queen Rukmani of the Devgarh State had laid down her life for procuring water for her kingdom. The head priest of Devgarh had dreamt that only the sacrifice of a member of the Royal family could quench the thirst of this parched kingdom. The valley had not witnessed rains for years altogether making it a drought prone area where one could only see fissured land stretched till far away.

Heeding to the divine dream of the priest, it was declared that the Queen had herself stepped forward for this inimitable act of sacrifice. The King was the head of the kingdom; the sons were too young; so, the Queen decided to lay down her own life for the sake of the kingdom.

The people from all around Devgarh, had gathered to witness this great feat of their Rani, as she bid farewell to her sobbing sons, wailing husband and weeping women as the onlookers attended the complete burial ceremony. Queen Rukmani was buried alive in the wall, which was converted into a temple where the 'Kund' presently existed, brimming with the sacred waters.

The temple priests had begun a 'yagya' simultaneously, making sacred offerings to the consecrated fire and chanting mantras, so that the sacrifice of the Queen may be accepted by the Gods, leading to prosperity and affluence of the kingdom.

After the Queen was buried completely, it poured down heavily for hours, as if the skies shed tears for this brave, beautiful and blessed Queen. Devgarh Valley was resonating with the sounds of the people chanting the Queen Rukmani's name. The clouds thundered and the dried streams overflowed with rainwater.

The day after her sacrifice, the people of the village saw water trickling from the foot of a small hill, just near her burial site. The news reached the King's ears and he too came to the mentioned spot to witness this miracle. Within two days, a large pond or 'Kund' was formed; filled with pure and sacred waters coming from an unknown source deep beneath the lake.

The 'Kund's' formation was as enchanting a news as was the spotting of the Gold Fish in the 'Kund' that day. This Gold Fish was gliding smoothly in the lake waters. The priests declared that this was no one else but the Queen's incarnate and this fish would remain immortal till eternity. The Gold Fish was a symbol of prosperity that was brought by the Queen to the Kingdom. The King's subjects considered this as a holy omen. The tale of the 'Kund' and the Golden Fish now travelled far and wide, as pilgrims thronged to this place to bathe in the sacred waters of the 'Kund' and also to have a glimpse of the beautiful Gold Fish as well.



The source of the 'Kund' was believed to be underground and perennial. A small channel was directed from the 'Kund' to the fields which allowed the sacred waters to run into the soil and make it more fertile. The land was barren before Queen Rukmani's sacrifice; people starved as the land produced little or no crops.

However, as the modern agricultural methods were adopted, the waters of the 'Kund' became polluted and contaminated with the chemical residues. People misused and abused the waters of the 'Kund'. The flowers and other worship materials were strewn all over the surface of the water. The land was cultivated with the modern techniques, fertilizers were used and hybrid seeds were sown to increase the produce. With the building of the dam, the waters were diverted into the fields.

The productivity increased but so did the diseases. People of the valley now complained of sickness that could not be cured even by the sacred waters of the 'Kund'; earlier its waters served as a remedy for almost every health issue that the people faced.

The Golden Fish too, had disappeared, or in the priest's words, "had disappeared as the people had polluted the waters"; the translucent waters had turned blurry with the dirt and filth. The priests of the temple had even urged the elected representatives to clean the 'Kund' but their requests fell on deaf ears.

Years went by and the valley prospered economically, but the people suffered. They were entrapped in the vicious circle of unending medical problems and treatments. To their respite a wing of the renowned chain of hospitals, The Swasth Charitable Hospitals, which was known for providing the best health services worldwide, had been set up in the Devgarh Valley. The doctors of this hospital were individuals who wanted to serve the needy and the underprivileged and wished to offer their services in the rural and interior places. Most of them had retired or had dedicated their lives for the poor and the sick.

Karmanya

A young Doctor Dr. Karmanya, a British citizen, had recently joined the Swasth Hospital of the Devgarh valley. He had gained his education from London and was working in a renowned hospital when he decided to quit his job and come back to India when he heard that the Swastha Hospital was being opened up for the people of his own village. This was an opportunity for him to come back to his roots. He had never been to India but had heard about his homeland from his parents and grandparents.

Karmanya had just shifted to a rented accommodation near the hospital, beginning a new life, surrounded by the village homes and the residents who lived around his house. The home that he had moved in was the old house of the erstwhile Royal family who had shifted abroad years ago. People were glad to know that the old and dilapidated bungalow that had lain vacant for years now had a new tenant. Even though people had spread rumours about the same being haunted, they chose to keep mum regarding this.

After settling down in his new home, Karmanya got to work in the Hospital during the day and in the evenings went for leisurely strolls and casual walks around the valley. The caretaker of his house was a village

man named Chet Ram, whose earlier generations had been employed to look after the royal house for years. Chet Ram would accompany Karmanya during the walks, often introducing him to the villagers who would look at the handsome Karmanya in awe. He was a kind and humble soul who would talk to the children who met him in the fields, greeted the oldies of the village sitting in the front yards of their homes and fed the street dogs who wagged their tails welcoming the new resident of their area.

One day, Chet Ram narrated the story of the 'Kund' and the Gold Fish to Karmanya and told him how the Gold Fish had disappeared and the 'Kund' waters were now polluted drastically. Karmanya was enthralled by the story and decided to visit the temple and the "Kund" the very next day. On reaching, he looked at the 'Kund', which was a lovely turquoise blue in colour but the basin of the 'Kund' that was once visible, could not be traced anymore. Karmanya was mesmerized by the small turquoise coloured pond that had such an intriguing legend behind it. But he was sad to know that the Gold Fish could not be seen in the 'Kund' anymore.

He visited the temple and paid obeisance to the idol of Queen Rukmani that was installed at the raised platform at the extreme end of the huge Temple Hall. Karmanya looked at the idol and wondered how the Queen could gather the courage to lay down her life for the sake of her kingdom, leaving her young sons... and her family behind. What a selfless act of sacrifice!

Curious, Karmanya spoke to the priest to know more about the reason due to which the beautiful blue waters of the 'Kund' were now blurred with muck and filth. The priest apprised Karmanya about the situation: how Queen Rukmani had made the supreme sacrifice of her life to bring water to this kingdom and how it got contaminated with the adoption of new farming techniques. "People have developed shortsightedness, basking in the warmth of the financial boon brought in by the farming techniques, not observing the rise in health problems", he said.

Karmanya was well aware that the Swastha Charitable Hospitals was a British chain of hospitals that are opened only at places where the rise in the diseases and number of patients have shown a sharp increase. As he got to know about in London that one such branch has been set up in his ancestral area, he decided to come back and serve his village. He took a deep breath and came to the conclusion that it was not the cure or

treatment being provided by the hospitals but the prevention of diseases which had to be worked upon.

Karmanya decided that to take steps for the cleansing, conservation and rejuvenation of this sacred turquoise coloured Pond, it was necessary to bring in the machineries required for the flushing of the dirty water and scrubbing the basin. Karmanya spoke to the environmentalists and the NGOs who were involved in river cleaning projects. They assured Karmanya of providing the machines and the technicians who would operate them. The Villagers also came forward to help Karmanya in this endeavour.

The news of Karmanya's efforts reached the government and it decided to take up the matter of the cleansing of the 'Kund'. It was named 'Kund Purification Project'. It would look into the setting up of pumping stations, recycling plants for collecting and reusing the flowers to make colour dyes and cleaning the 'Kund's basin. The people of Devgarh and the state were elated on the news. The staff of the Swastha Hospital too lauded the efforts made by Karmanya and donated for this cause generously.

The work began. The priests of the temple too started a 'Yagya' simultaneously for the successful completion of the project. But, the next day, the project work got disrupted as one of the cleansing machines developed a snag. It could be corrected only by diving into the lake and repairing it. Karmanya, decided to take the plunge into the water and, after a while, the machine restarted. People cheered. But Karmanya didn't appear again.

The Devgarh Valley was lashed with rains again after years as it resonated with the sounds of Karmanya's name.

The lake waters had engulfed Karmanya. His body wasn't found even after the lake was cleaned. The project ended the next day. However, the search operation to locate him was unsuccessful.

It was later confirmed that Karmanya Singh was the great grandson of same Queen Rukmani of the Devgarh Valley, who had sacrificed her life years ago to bring the water to the lands....

The family had shifted to London years ago. It was further revealed that his parents had passed away long back and he was their only surviving son. He had gone back to India as was wished by his parents

before their death. The house that he lived in was his own ancestral house....

The priest of the temple wasn't surprised to learn about Karmanya's identity. This time he had dreamt that only a male member of the Royal family would bring fortune and good health to Devgarh again.

The project was completed in a few days. The waters of 'Kund' looked clear blue. The people vowed to adopt organic farming on their lands, and refrain from using chemicals.

One fine day, a young girl who was playing around the turquoise coloured 'Kund', saw a Gold Fish dashing through the waters. She called her friends and the priest too came rushing to watch this marvel, the Gold Fish. By the evening, everyone gathered around the 'Kund'. The long lost Gold Fish had reappeared!

However, this time there was not just one but two fishes. There was another Silver Fish, following the Gold Fish around the pellucid waters of the 'Kund', as people looked delightedly at the two symbols of prosperity and good health in the sacred "Kund".

The priest looked and smiled.

Rukmani and Karmanya would live till eternity in their heaven, the 'Sacred Kund'.



Review of “Cleansing the Sacred ‘Kund’”

HEM RAJ BANSAL

“Cleansing the Sacred ‘Kund’” stems from the inner desire to clean the sacred places. At a time when there are cleanliness drives such as the “National Mission for Clean Ganga” or “Namami Gange” and a romantic search for the mythical Saraswati, the story comes up well in time to resonate with water purification projects and especially sacred water sites. History and literature abound in such examples where human sacrifice would result in the magical appearance of water. Angry deities’ pacification invited human sacrifice and the propitiation would result in divine favour or in avoiding divine retribution. In Japan, the legends talk about hitobashira (‘human pillar’) in which virgin girls were buried alive to safeguard the building against enemy attacks or natural calamities.

The story is a fictionalised version of the Rukmani Kund and traces the idea of human sacrifice. Folk literature of various places is abounding with legends of varied sorts and the story of Rukmani’s sacrifice for making the otherwise drought hit area fertile is very moving. The story presents Rukmani herself proffering her body to quench the thirst of the entire valley of Devgarh, a fictionalized name for Barsand in Bilaspur. An unquestioning faith is shown in the priest whose mystical/divine vision makes it incumbent on Rukmani to become the victim. However, the societal/patriarchal expectations from a woman were so high that it would have been thought improper had the son or husband offered themselves for the sacrifice. Rukmani complies with the notions of gender performance through this act. Moreover, the idea of a loyal wife and a doting mother also drive home the feministic concerns of the story.

Though the human sacrifice in the story is personal, the concern remains largely philanthropic as it is for the community. The shedding of tears by the family as well as the grief-stricken people is very telling and touching. The sudden appearance of the Golden Fish in the sacred water of the kund after the sacrifice of Rukmani is viewed as a sign of prosperity and immortality is associated with the fish as it is seen as the incarnation of the queen Rukmani herself.

The author also takes a dig at the modern man's unquestioning faith. The scattering of flowers or other puja/worshipping material and the shifting away from organic farming to an inorganic one does not only cause water pollution but also in the burgeoning of the diseases. The healing power of the water no longer offers any salvation to the diseased or the sufferer. Ironically though the valley becomes fertile, the people begin to fall ill and suffer from many health problems. The water loses its divine/cleansing/healing power due to the negative human intervention.

Karmanya as a young British educated doctor feels drawn towards his roots and chooses to serve his people than live his life lavishly. His act of leaving a job in London and serving his village and area folk becomes an act of communal sacrifice. As a third generation diasporan, it is quite touching that he had formed a picture of "imaginary homelands" through the stories that he had heard from his parents and grandparents. Interestingly, the pull of the homeland is very strong in him and hence makes him stick to the service of the people.

Chet Ram acts as the missing link between Karmanya and his ancestors. While Chet Ram's narrating the tale behind the formation of the Rukmani Kund fills Karmanya with awe, the disappearance of the "Golden Fish" equally disturbs him. Feeling the need to cure not the patients first but to breed out the root cause of the rising number of patients makes him restless. Cleaning the water, planting the trees, or working with the NGOs for the conservation of water becomes his top priority. As the Kund Purification project sets off, a snag in the machinery makes Karmanya dive into the water but never to return back.

As it unfolds further, Karmanya's sacrifice does not only lead to the cleansing of the sacred kund again but also the reappearance of the golden fish. The "Golden Fish" in the story symbolizes prosperity, fertility and happiness. This arrival of the golden fish is invariably linked with the purification of both water and mind. The author drives home the idea that unless due attention is given to the conservation of environment, humans will have to face the consequences.

Though from the perspective of tourism, sacred rivers or lakes become places of paramount significance, the possibility of cleaning the lesser-known water resources is also the need of the hour whether they have any mythological bearing or not. So, cleanliness drives are a must for every lake, river or pond irrespective of any sacred/mythological significance.

In the legend, it is Rukmani, a woman who sacrifices herself for the welfare of the people. However, in the story a male of the same family performs the sacrifice. In the legend, the king had sacrificed his daughter-in-law but, in the story, it is the queen herself, King's wife who does so. By doing so, the author subverts the gender binaries and sets the balance right. In the legend, the king's offering of his daughter-in-law appears to be a more sagacious choice for him than that of his son. However, the story balances that gap.

If we look at the story, when the machinery breaks down, it is doctor Karmanya who plunges into the water for repairing the snag and not engineer Karmanya. It seems unconvincing to have a doctor repair the machine; an engineer would have been a better choice because a doctor treats disease of the body and not the snag of the machines. Though rationally it seems incompatible with the skills of Karmanya, on the level of beliefs/devotion/spirituality, it sounds convincing as a selfless act of human sacrifice for the larger benefit of the public. The name symbolism in the story makes it more convincing as the name 'Karmanya' implies a person who is duty-bound. Similarly, the name Rukmani also signifies someone "who is adorned with gold" and it speaks for the appearance of the Golden Fish in the pond after Rukmani's sacrifice.

Abhyudita's story, thus, does not only revive an old legend but also sensitizes about the need to keep the water resources clean. The dumping of the puja material at the sacred water sites requires timely intervention. Disposal of ritual residues should be in an environment-friendly way and Dispose Well is such an organization which treats leftovers of the rituals in a way that respects the sentiments of devotees and also does not harm the environment.

Audience's Live Response

Namrata Pathania: A wonderful mixture of history and fiction...really interesting story Abhyudita Ma'am.

Anupama Singh: Though I had heard tit-bit of this legend, but today the whole story was narrated marvellously and the fiction nearing reality was amalgamated in a magnificent manner...and the way you presented was wonderful Abhyudita Ma'am.

Sangeeta Singh: The story highlights the pull towards our roots and legends. Beautifully written and narrated Abhyudita Ma'am.

Gitanjali Mahendra: I enjoyed the story, Abhyudita. The analysis was very good, Hemraj sir.

Rajan Kaushal: Beautiful story and wonderful analysis.

2

THE PARTY

ANIL WILSON

There was a sudden spurt of pain in her side. She stopped for a while to give respite to its insistence. Another one, she thought, and soon every inch of her body would be shrieking for attention. Well, she thought, at her age what else could she expect? And she went on with her work. It was Christmas Eve, and she had so much to do. Though her eyesight and hearing were failing her, her sense of smell was just about holding out. It told her that the cake was ready. Another Christmas cake, another year gone by. She stopped her painful movements to give room to the rush of memories: "Vy, I would have married you, if for nothing else, just for the wonderful cake you bake," her husband, Kelly, had said to her one Christmas Eve, perhaps three decades ago. One loses count of years when one is so old. Things become dim and hazy. Yet the remark still stood out so very clearly in her mind. She remembered it because he had looked so handsome in his new blue suit. Yes, the new blue suit -- she remembered it so well. The whole scene connected with that suit was etched in her mind.

She shook herself off those memories. There was no time for reminiscences with company expected soon to spend the Christmas Eve with her. After so many lonely Christmas evenings, today, once again, there would be laughter and gaiety in her house. She had to hurry. There still was so much to be done even though all the foodstuff was prepared. Everything had to be in place in time and she had no one to help her. Kelly used to be a great help right to his last day, especially during the Christmas week when he helped her with all the preparation. But on that bygone Christmas Eve she had not allowed him to work with her. "Your new suit will be ruined," she had told him and then blew out her anger on her work in the kitchen.

"Perhaps it was my mistake," she thought. "I had no business to be where I was not expected to be. Then I would not have seen him in that compromising position with her... What the eye sees not, the heart does

not grieve over." She smiled to herself: "Yes, she had forgiven him, but not till after..."

"O well, I better get the China out," she thought. It would take some effort as it was in the lowest shelf of the cupboard and she had great difficulty bending down.

"An interesting side-light of that dreadful episode," she always thought, "was the discovery that though she had been married for so many years, she had never imagined that love making was such a ludicrous affair to an onlooker." She moved about, dragging herself from one place to another, making sure that everything was in its place, making ever so slight adjustments in the bric-a-brac around the room. She arranged the chairs around the dining table.

"How many people would there be tonight," she asked herself. So many times, since morning, she had asked herself that same question and had always forgotten the answer she had given herself. Yes, there were the old Mr. and Mrs. Shaw. Of course, not so old as she herself was but just as lonely, or perhaps even more than her. The Shaws had each other to talk to, but only when they were in a state of truce which was not often.

She could go on chatting for hours with Kelly telling him about the aches and pains she felt and what the doctor said about them. She would tell Frank, her son, what a naughty little boy he had been when he was a child, intent upon breaking everything in the house. Even today when anything slipped through her stiff fingers and broke, she thought of poor Frankie to put the blame on. She never tired of telling him how smart he looked in the photograph taken in his air-force uniform, which had reached her a day after his plane had been shot down.

She turned around and shuffled into the bed-room. "Must take out the cotton table-sheet," she said to herself, "these new-fangled plastic ones were no doubt very functional but for a proper Christmas party it had to be the traditional white cotton." She opened a drawer and after carefully rummaging inside it, took out a well washed, well ironed white sheet. Satisfied that this was what she wanted, she made her way slowly back to the dining-cum-drawing room.

Yes, there were also Raghu and Suriya. She had known that it would not be easy for her to make them accept her invitation. They were still young; their daughter Indira, had just started college. What, with all the commercial establishments trying to cash in on the Christmas spirit with their candle-light dine-and dance affairs, why should they accept her invitation? To a simple party? But she made up her mind to make them spend this evening with her. They could certainly spare one

Christmas Eve for her-- they had so many more to come. As for herself, she imagined that Kelly and Frank were already making fun of the way she stuck on to her creaking bones. So, before extending the invitation to Raghu and Suriya, she took them back to the days when they had just got married -- a runaway marriage, an elopement. Those were the days of the all too often communal flare-ups. Both the major communities were looking for the runaways of each other's communities. A terrible time she had had, hiding Raghu and Suriya in her small, cramped store-room for a whole fortnight. After that they escaped to a hill-station for three months while tempers cooled off back home. Exactly nine months later Suriya had given birth to a daughter. Vy had fondly hoped that they would name the child after her because she was sure that the child was conceived in her store-room. But no, they named her after the prime minister, perhaps because she was a symbol of secularism. Now when she reminded them of those 'store-room-days', she found them to be visibly uncomfortable. Moments of youthful passion leave embarrassed memories. And so, when she invited them, they just could not bring themselves to refuse her. She giggled to herself. Yes, she could be crafty when she wanted to. But Indira would not come. She had come rushing into her apartment: "Granny, I can't come, I just can't come. O please, please do try to understand, it is so important to me, you know." She had been invited to a party where that famous singer -- what was his name, was performing. "It is a chance of a life-time, granny, I can't miss it." And Vy understood. There would be many more Christmas Evenings for Raghu and Suriya, but for Indira, at her age, Christmas came just once a year. That is how it had been for her when she was young. She was pretty, yes. Some even said very pretty. There certainly was no shortage of admirers. But Kelly was the terribly jealous type. And she loved him too much to see him disturbed. She knew what jealousy could do. Many years later it was she who was consumed by jealousy. She had put a burning iron on the trousers of his blue suit because they reminded her of that terrible afternoon. No, that did not satisfy her. So, in her own way she decided to get even with him -- she went to bed with Lenny. It was not an earth-shattering experience and she had not cared to repeat it. In any case, it had calmed her down and made her forgive him. Many a time she had wondered: was that the only time Kelly had been unfaithful to her? There was no way of knowing. Strange, she thought, two people live with each other so closely, so intimately, and yet all they know about each other is what they choose to reveal to each other.

Yes, Lenny was coming too. He was a bachelor once again -- one dead and one divorced. Perhaps he was on the lookout for a third -- no

lecher like an old lecher! Yet, he had that very likable quality: always jovial, always lively, always making things interesting, and so very helpful. He had been a very wonderful friend, always there when he was needed. His usual joke was that he had put all his savings in a wager; that Vy would outlive him and that he would wait for her in the hereafter to collect his winnings. At their age death was no longer what one had to go through. At least it was so for her. Not macabre or frightening. It was more of a matter-of-fact detail Frank and Kelly were waiting for her on the other side, and getting a trifle impatient.

She decided to sit down and rest for a while. Then began to wonder if she had put the beer in the fridge. Come summer, come winter, Raghu drank only beer and that too after it had been properly chilled. She stood up, waited for the pain to pause before she pushed ahead. It was such a nuisance, this forgetfulness. Took so much of her energy to do the things she had already done. Mr. Shaw would perhaps have some too, but after a lot of cajoling and after appealing to his wife to let the Christmas spirit make her indulgent. Lenny would have rum, to keep his toes warm, as he said. She had a bottle, saved up from God knows how many years. Kelly had not been very fond of it; it went right to his head. So, other than very special occasions, he generally avoided having any strong drinks. She walked back to her chair and very slowly lowered herself into it. Nothing to do now but wait. It was getting cold; she must get a hot-water bottle if she was to be comfortable. The room was sufficiently warm but her old fingers would refuse to move if they were not kept warm. She got up again. The new surge of pain wants to outdo all the others, she thought with a grimace. As she switched on the electric kettle, she decided to unbolt the door as very often she did not hear the doorbell. By the time she had done this, the pain became unbearable. She sat down. With old age even the pains often lost their sharp edge. This one, however, reminded her of her youth: of the time when her son Frank was born. The pain and the pleasure -- the physical pain almost unbearable; the emotional pleasure made it bearable. The final burst of pain -- just too much, shooting through her body, pulling at every muscle, every joint, straining at the very roots of her being -- and then as he was born, the sudden release, the immediate relaxation.

The electric kettle gave a shrill, piercing whistle -- inviting, demanding attention. But Lenny had lost his bet. She was suddenly free of all aches and pains. The wait of Frank and Kelly was over.

Narrated by Kulbhushan Sharma

The Aggregate of Memories: A Reading of Prof. Anil Wilson's "The Party"

ANU JAIDEV

"The Party" by Anil Wilson is a short, short story. It is a paean to Papa Hemingway in terms of its masterful selective detailing of the ice-bergian kind: the simple elegance of the enunciated narrative rests on the gravity of the submerged mass.

At the first reading, one is struck by the self-assured felicity of the narrative. It is relaxed, open, confident, comfortable and disarming. At the structural and formal level, the story takes so much in its stride without faltering (a lifetime, to be precise); even as it presents the reader with the travails and troubles of its rather fragile and reluctant protagonist.

The text offers an interesting take on the narrative's engendering of the character with the character's engendering of the narrative. It is a woman's narrative, and hence always connected and connecting with others around her. The individuation of her perceptions is articulated as precisely that, it is not allowed to be the isolated individuation of her experiences. In that it comes as close to being a 'female text' as it can.

In the following critical reading of the story, I shall simultaneously utilize perspectives from critical literary gerontology, gender studies, and the discourse of the body and literary temporality. Gender studies evaluate constructions of masculinity and femininity in literary texts. Critical gerontology evaluates how age, aging and ageism forms part of literary narratives, and indeed how much of literature celebrates youth and ability and thus perpetuates a rather warped worldview.

Simone de Beauvoir in her book *Old Age* (1972) talks of breaking the 'conspiracy of silence' around what she calls this 'forbidden subject': the subject of aging and how it is almost never part of social discourse. Diana Wallace in her study "Literary Portrayals of Ageing" suggests that literary representations of older people are important in that both shape as well as have the potential to counter perceptions about age and ageing. The othering and indeed the erasing of the old could be countered through sensitive portrayals of old age and aging. The proverbial 'foreign

country with an unknown language' (May Sarton) after all is the country which most eventually come to inhabit. It is important to imaginatively engage with the fact of our own ageing. It is also important to recognize the subjectivity of those who are already 'older' in order to understand the ways in which age and ageing are culturally constructed.

The discourse of the body is important in that the body is not necessarily intra or extra discursive, but in that it is quite literally the site of the exercise of power. Discourse is not merely a matter of reflection or contemplation, it is also em-bodied.

The narrative hinges on memories of Christmas Eve parties and cakes, past and present, converging on a single visual trigger of a memory: Kenny's blue suit and its attendant associations.

Vy is the reluctant protagonist and subject of the story and the narratorial voice is closely aligned with her. Vy, in the moment of the story, is old. She reminisces while she waits for friends to arrive for her Christmas Eve party. The story is an aggregate of her reminiscences, birthing through her in cold print, with her dying. Vy's name has an almost Beckettian play upon 'why' which ties in with her reluctance to deal with her husband's transgression as well as her son's passing. She'd rather not deal with either. The interior monologue of the character is captured here in terms of a series of seemingly random thoughts and memories. The aggregation of memories ranges from the ordinary and every-day to the life-altering and traumatic. The nature of the recall is what it is because it cannot be and is not, shared. It is simply a churning in the mind, not meant to be said aloud. It remains, by definition, un-avowable.

And yet, the imprint of what she has undergone is singed into the pathologies she experiences in her mind as well as in her body. The churning is never just a contemplation in the mind: it registers in the body as well. There is amnesia, and failing sight and hearing loss, and the difficulty in movement. There's also the stabbing, shooting, debilitating pain, which can immobilize her. And yet, there is one sense that is intact: the sense of smell. She can revel in the aroma of the cake she is baking as well as catch some wafting odours from her past. She can decide not to focus her hearing and even obfuscate her vision; but smells are ambient-- and inescapable.

Vy inhabits her past and present simultaneously as the narrative stretches back and forth in temporalities. From the twilight of her life,

she looks back on triumphs and failures of her life with a degree of composure. There's a matter-of-factness about her, an understated quiet confidence, which does her credit. She's not the trailblazing feminist, nor the wizened old dame, but just an aging woman, managing her everyday existence.

Negotiating the aging self is not easy. But Vy demonstrates that while faculties diminish and fail, there's still the inexplicable life-force that wills people to live. The debilitating pain erupting in her side dictates her slightest movements. It is ironically, both a marker of life and death in the story. She needs to take a break ever so often. Ordinary tasks like taking out the china and finding that special cotton table-sheet are difficult for her, but she carries on.

Memories of earlier Christmas Eve parties inform the need for this one. Do bear in mind that this party comes after many, many lonely Christmases for her. The cake's aroma perfuming her house brings back memories from years long past. The past inhabits the present, those who have passed on have a lingering after-life, not only in terms of the forever after, but in terms of the memories that survive them. The memories evoked here are not all pleasant ones: in fact, the text makes it absolutely clear that there is no such thing as an unencumbered clean and pleasant memory.

Memories galore. Kelly, the handsome husband in his new blue suit is also the adulterous betrayer out of it. Vy, does not confront Kelly, (even though she walks in on him when he is with the woman she doesn't deign to name.) She slots the incident in the category of the "ludicrous".

"Perhaps it was my mistake," she thought. "I had no business to be where I was not expected to be. Then I would not have seen him in that compromising position with her... What the eye sees not, the heart does not grieve over." She smiled to herself: "Yes, she had forgiven him, but not till after..."

The story turns the power/knowledge paradigm on its head. Knowledge is not seen as empowering here, she wishes to erase what she has witnessed. Or more accurately, remove herself from the scene of the incident. She gets mad; then she gets even. Eventually however, she is able to take the transgressions great and small, endured and committed, in her shuffling stride.

Memories of Frankie, her son, are similarly evoked. Frankie's special picture in his Air Force uniform that Vy has memoried, is connected with the news of his plane being shot down. And yet, that is not what she is prepared to focus on. For her it is as if Frankie is just around. In her mind still a boisterous boy, whose antics can be blamed for anything she drops inadvertently. Memories are enmeshed with the pleasant and unpleasant bits, and people don't get to pick and choose. No matter how hard the need to erase and forget.

It could be argued that her husband's transgression must be central to her personal crisis. To which one would say that the story does not read that way. One is not trying to downplay the significance of the transgression, merely to put it in perspective. Of course, she is not happy about it. The several whys bother Vy too much and not enough. In the midst of all these questions her nonchalance betrays a rather underwhelming realization.

She realizes that adultery for her has been incidental: and perhaps for Kelly too. Keeping faith and betraying trust usually involves the same individuals. None of it is pretty, but there are more serious griefs to deal with, like the passing away of an only child. Like the incapacitated, weak, aging body that can still outweigh every other emotional concern.

With age, however, comes at least the necessary deference and regard of others which can be quite useful. She can strategically bring up the fact of Raghu and Suriya's elopement to her advantage and their embarrassment. Power gleaned from knowledge is what can be exercised on others. The self is far too fragile, and any ruthless scrutiny renders it collateral damage: wisdom indeed leads a bitter life. Hence the yearning to revert to a state of innocence. "What the eye sees not, the heart does not grieve over."

And yet, the grief here is not inordinate. Significantly, the narrative pitches Vy's experiences not as catastrophes frozen in time but as moments in the great transition that is life. The narrative actually manages to cast a cold eye on life, on death, and moves on. It is, (to borrow what Virginia Woolf said of *Middlemarch*), a text for grown-ups.

It is interesting to observe how Vy negotiates her identity as the betrayed (and betraying) wife, the grieving mother, the sheltering elder, the honorary grand-mother and the long-term friend. There's no earth-shattering drama here, either in Vy's experiences or in her responses to them, and that, precisely, is the point. There is a quiet dignity in the lives

of women -- and men, despite their failures and shortcomings. Not every life culminates into an amplified swan song, and that is all right. Vy is here. Rickety joints, aching limbs et al., but she is here. And that is enough.

The sundry narratives that occupy her mind coalesce together in the one moment in which she reminisces her untold, unshared story and lets it die with/in her with the final pang of pain. The moment of her death is ironically also the moment of the story's closure and birthing. The feminist triumph of the story, one would argue, lies precisely in its refusal to cast the moment of adultery as the defining experience for Vy. It's just one difficult bit in a long and full life.

George Eliot makes an observation in *Middlemarch*: “[In youth] each crisis seems final. Simply because it is new.” A lifetime of crises and triumphs teaches Vy resilience, even in the face of the finality ushered in by an overwhelming bout of pain.

As she switched on the electric kettle, she decided to unbolt the door as very often she did not hear the doorbell. By the time she had done this, the pain became unbearable. She sat down. With old age even the pains often lost their sharp edge. This one, however, reminded her of her youth: of the time when her son Frank was born. The pain and the pleasure -- the physical pain almost unbearable; the emotional pleasure made it bearable. The final burst of pain -- just too much, shooting through her body, pulling at every muscle, every joint, straining at the very roots of her being -- and then as he was born, the sudden release, the immediate relaxation.

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Vy drops out, the narrator picks the threads and closes and seals the warp and weft. The different country too ultimately is no country for old men -- or women on a permanent basis. Vy however, manages the Yeatsian ambition of being gathered in the artifice of eternity by becoming her own story.



Audience's Live Response

Irene Rattan: Such a mesmerising story by Wilson sir. Excellent storyline.

Mahi Yogesh: A beautiful story by Sir Wilson capturing passions and emotions so ingeniously. Fine lovely details - store room days, people living together know about each other only what they choose to tell each other. I would want to read the story. Thank you for reading it out, Kulbhushan.

Savita J.B. Singh: Interesting story! Characters were well etched...

Kamayani Vashisht: Your analysis brings to the story and its understanding, so much more!

Namrata Tiku: Such a nuanced and layered analysis Anu!

3

WOMEN

ARUN BHARATI

“Chachi... O.. Chachi. i. i...” Kamli called out as she saw Dwarka walking on the narrow path in the distance. Dwarka stopped suddenly. Shading her eyes from the rays of early morning sun, she looked back and said:

“So you’re up! Be quick, or we’ll be returning in the scorching heat.”

“Just wait for a moment,” said Kamli and disappeared into her house. Dwarka put aside the sickle and the rope she had in her hand and sat down on a small boulder on the upper side of the track.

The sun had arisen. Its rays had spread all over the mountain peaks in the distance. Most of the women folk of the village leave their homes in groups at this time to collect green fodder and they return before the sun comes high up.

Dwarka woke up rather late today. Her brother-in-law’s son Bishnu had come to visit her the previous night. He had come after a long time and both of them kept talking late into the night. By the time she woke up in the morning most of the women had already left for collecting green fodder. She hurriedly washed her face and milked the cows. Picking up her sickle and rope, she glanced towards Kamli’s door and found it closed. Kamli must have already left, she thought and she closed her own door and stepped out.

A loner by nature, she was not very friendly with other women of her village. Her sister-in-law had already died and her old brother-in-law lived separately with his three children. But the children loved Dwarka as their mother. Bishnu was particularly fond of his Chachi.

Kamli too addressed Dwarka as her Chachi. Dwarka had no child of her own. She was married at the age of thirteen. Her husband was

nearly fifty. By the time she could understand the meaning of marriage the husband died.

Three or four terraced fields, two cows, two small mud-plastered rooms and a few brass utensils — her life was largely spent in looking after these. Her brother-in-law and his wife lived separately with their two sons, Bishnu and Karma, and a daughter, Meera. Her sister-in-law died two years after Meera's birth and the kids started looking for a mother in Dwarka. Dwarka too found a purpose for living in these kids.

Last year Bishnu had gone to the town and found a job. Karma had taken charge of cultivating the fields. Meera got married this year. Whenever Meera visited her parental home, she spent most of her time with her Chachi. The conjugal bliss seemed to have completely transformed her. Youth seemed to spill out of her like a branch of *Kachnaar* laden with flowers, attracting and tempting all who saw her.

Dwarka never got time to think of what youth really was. Even though she was nearly thirty-five she felt at times that her body was aflame with desire, and her nerves tickling. Her body would feel heavy. She felt like riding a swing and singing songs of love. But she would check herself. It's a sin for a widow even to think of all this. How could a widow do what was proper for a happily married woman? She must not.... With great difficulty she would suppress the ache in her heart.

As she sat there, she started thinking, 'Is the age of thirteen an age to be married off. And after all what was the difference between my father and my husband? Only of the bodies and not of age.' She thought of her drunken husband and how he used to pound her body every night. Her tender body could hardly bear this. How his mouth smelt of the cheap country liquor--- oh! Good, he died.

"Let's go, Chachi," Kamli suddenly surprised Dwarka.

"Yes, yes, let' go. You took so long."

"Oh Chachi, just made myself a cup of tea, that took some time. Anyway, we still have enough time. I've heard Bishnu also came last night?"

"Yes, even I got late last evening because of him. He stayed for long narrating his experiences in the town. Oh, he has changed a great deal. No longer the old thin and lanky Bishnu. He has turned into a sturdy young man." Bishnu's copper-like face appeared before her eyes, and his

trimmed thin brown moustache, his neatly done hair and his muscular body and the biceps of his arms.

“How long will he be here?”

“Ten-fifteen days. You can surely meet him.”

“What has he brought for you, Chachi, from the city?”

“For me? Oh, he’s crazy! You know what he has brought for me — a suit, bright red, bangles and a ribbon, that too red. And he said, “Chachi, now you won’t lack anything. I have started earning now. I was moved to tears and I smiled. With great effort I made him understand that this colour only a *suhagin* can wear, one whose husband is alive. I asked him to give those things to Meera.”

By this time they had reached the pasture and started cutting grass for fodder.

Kamli was Dwarka’s daughter-in-law in distant relations. Her young husband had died last year in a truck accident. Kamli became a widow in the prime of her youth. She remained in a state of shock for some time. There was no one in the family. No brother-in-law or sister-in-law to take care of her. She had no child either in the five years of her married life. Suddenly her life had become totally barren.

Bishnu was five years younger than Kamli’s husband. When she got married Bishnu was thirteen or fourteen. Clad in his button-less shirt and striped underpants, barefoot, he used to stare at her constantly. One day Kamli’s husband said, as he saw Bishnu staring thus, “Say, how do you like her?” Without saying a word Bishnu ran away, holding his loose underpants, and sniffing his running nose. Kamli laughed heartily.

“Why? What makes you laugh like this?”

“Nothing, Chachi. I just remembered an incident about Bishnu.”

“About Bishnu? What’s it?”

“When my husband was alive Bishnu used to come to our house and stare at me constantly as if I were some strange creature. One day he asked Bishnu, “So, do you like her?” And Bishnu just ran away. Since then till the day my husband met with the accident Bishnu has never come to our house. It’s almost a year since I last saw him.”

“He has grown up into a handsome youth. Tall, stout and muscular, just like your husband.” Kamli felt a pang in her heart. She

threw her sickle aside and, burying her head in her knees, she started sobbing.

“Aye, are you gone mad? Just look at me. I have been living in widowhood for the past twenty years. This is all the will of God. As He wishes! Come, don’t be mad, let’s go. The sun is getting hot. Let’s hurry up.”

Kamli wiped her eyes and heaved a deep sigh. Suddenly she felt empty within, and lifeless. Listlessly she got up and started cutting grass.

“Sarasti...! O... Sarasti!”, Dwarka was tired calling out to her. “I wonder where the girl has vanished,” Dwarka mumbled to herself.

Suddenly she saw Bishnu with a pitcher of water on his shoulders coming from the natural spring of water. His body was shining like copper in the morning sun. He was wearing vest and underpants. And she was surprised to see Sarasti follow him with a pitcher on her head as well. Bishnu stopped and whispered something to Sarasti as she came closer. Dwarka couldn’t hear anything but she started observing them carefully.

All of a sudden Bishnu placed his pitcher on the boundary of a field. Then he lifted Sarasti’s pitcher also to place it on the boundary. Like a happy doe Sarasti romped into the fields of maize. Bishnu also ran after her. Some commotion for a while, then quietly both of them disappeared.

Dwarka was standing at a height so she could see it all. She rubbed her eyes, then she saw — the pitchers were there on the boundary.

“So, that is why this girl is not to be seen these days! She started musing. ‘Her husband was right, poor fellow. Her conduct is not proper. But she got spoilt after marriage only. They say her husband was impotent. That’s why with her brother-in-law... what wild passion! Yes, the flame of passion will indeed consume!... But no! In her own family, oh God! Brother-in-law is like brother... but... but...”

She was stunned. She felt as if she was being engulfed by invisible flames from all sides. Her body was aflame, nay scorched. Her legs were trembling, her fists clenched, her palms sweating. Bishnu... Sarasti... fire.... Twenty years of widowhood suddenly vanished. The blood running in her veins suddenly became that of a sixteen-year one. Hot like a furnace — boiling. Steam... fog... sparks. Her eyes closed. Her breath

sounded like bellows. As if she had stopped suddenly in the middle of a steep climb.

“*Are*’ Chachi, what’s the matter? What are you muttering right in the morning?”

She was startled by Kamli’s voice.

“That... there... Bishnu... Sarasti? No, but you...” She didn’t know what to say. In confusion she stared blankly at Kamli.

“What’s wrong with you Chachi? Your face is so red... eyes red... are you all right?”

Kamli inspected her from top to toe but she couldn’t understand anything. Dwarka felt as if her eyes were piercing her.

“No, nothing. I was just looking for Sarasti.” Last evening, she had said that she would have her morning tea with me. God knows where she has disappeared so early in the morning. There is still no sign of her.”

“But, Bishnu and Sarasti? You were muttering something about Bishnu and Sarasti?”

“Oh, yes, Bishnu also takes his morning tea with me,” Dwarka flicked the side of her shirt as if an ant were creeping on her. Suddenly she saw Sarasti heading towards her.

“So you have come? I have been waiting for you for quite some time.”

“You know Chachi, I had to go to get water first.”

“Has Bishnu left?”

The pitcher on Sarasti’s head shook a little. Some water spilled out and drenched her face.

“Yes... he went away a long time back.”

Kamli looked suspiciously at Sarasti. Dwarka felt guilty for having asked about Bishnu. Sarasti was staring vacantly at the desolate path.

“Chachi, may I ask you something?”

“What?”

“How did you manage to live so many years without a husband?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“No, please tell me.”

“You seem to have gone mad.”

“Chachi, tell me, did you never miss him?”

“What would I miss? I was thirteen when I got married and I was hardly fourteen when my husband died.”

“Then?”

“Then what? I became a widow. A widow, for whom it is a sin to talk to a man even in her dreams. But you....”

Dwarka looked with surprise at Kamli whose eyes were fixed somewhere far away. Her face was colourless. There was a sound at the door. Dwarka was distracted.

“Chachi, O Chachi!”

“Who’s there? O, Bishnu!”

“Yes, Chachi.”

Bishnu came in. He was carrying a big bag.

“Let me have a cup of tea, Chachi. Oh! Kamli Bhabhi!” Bishnu was embarrassed to find Kamli around. Kamli’s eyes almost got glued to Bishnu’s muscular body. She desired to run her fingers on his biceps. His broad chest, hairy...

Kamli’s eyes were scanning his body. Bishnu nervously looked away. He dare not look straight into her eyes.

“When are you leaving?” Dwarka asked, blowing into her *Chulha*.

“Right now. Just dropped in to have a cup of tea with you.”

“So when do you come next? Do come on Holi this time.”

“All right.”

There was silence in the room. The crackling of the logs in the *chulha*, Kamli’s eyes, Dwarka’s blowing into the fire, and Bishnu’s aimlessly looking out continued till the tea was ready.

“Take care of yourself in *pardes*,” instructed Dwarka as she offered him a cup of tea. Kamli too longed to say something to Bishnu by way of advice but failed to utter a word.

Bishnu quickly gulped his tea.

“All right Chachi, take care. Do tell Karma if you need anything. He’ll write to me.” Dwarka’s eyes were filled with tears. Bishnu bent down and touched her feet, Dwarka blessed him caressing his head. Looking towards Kamli, Bishnu folded his hands.

Kamli and Dwarka kept on looking at Bishnu as long as they could see him moving away on the narrow path amidst the tall pine trees. Sarasti too kept looking at him from her courtyard.

As Bishnu slowly disappeared in the distance the three women felt an aching void possessing them.

Translated from Hindi by Pankaj K. Singh

Narrated by Leena vaidya

Critical Analysis of the Story “Women”

SUNAINA JAIN

When men are oppressed, it is a tragedy, when women are oppressed, it is a tradition.”

-- *Bernadette Mosala*

The status of widows, especially in rural India, has been miserable as they form the most vulnerable group. Despite efforts done in the direction of widow remarriage and rehabilitation, the ground reality of widows being pushed to the margins of the society and deprived of chances of living a normal life, has not changed much. The story “Women” traverses the lives of three women – Dwarka, Kamli and Sarasti and underpins women’s oppression due to circumscribed gender roles assigned to them. Two of these women are young widows and the story captures their travails. In subtle ways, it brings out the repressed sexual desires of these women due to societal impositions.

The story, told in third-person narration, portrays characters that live in the present but their past informs and shapes their lives. The story begins with a dialogue between two women – Dwarka and Kamli and the readers are subsequently apprised of their quotidian lives. The rural setting of the story gives a glimpse of the daily struggles of women as they eke out their living by working in their small farms and carry out mundane household chores.

Dwarka is a thirty-five-year-old childless woman who became a widow at the age of fourteen. Her husband was a middle-aged man who died just a year after marriage. His death caused Dwarka a great deal of troubles as she had to survive all alone in the world but at the same time, this tragedy was also a blessing in disguise as it was a loveless and incompatible marriage in which her husband considered her no more than a commodity to be used to satisfy his sexual urges. The story highlights exploitation of women in forced child marriages from which there is no escape route for them. Such child widows passed their entire lives in oblivion as they were considered pariahs by the society and their widowhood was seen as curse and their dark shadow could taint others’ lives too. Dwarka, in the story, becomes a loner. She, being childless and

widow, remains aloof and lives in her cocoon. Her only respite from everyday drudgery is the affection of her brother-in-law's children, especially Bishnu and Meera, who look for motherly tenderness and love in Dwarka and Dwarka, in turn, showers her unconditional love on them. However, it is strange that a robust youth like Bishnu (who works in the city) remains unaware of the prevailing norms of the society and brings red suit, bangles and ribbon, all of which are insignia of married women. Dwarka, like other young women, wants to enjoy the pleasures of youth, and "her body was aflame with desire, and her nerves tickling. Her body would feel heavy. She felt like riding a swing and singing songs of love. But she would check herself. It's a sin for a widow even to think of all this." Despite the fact, Dwarka is not able to subvert codified gender roles imposed on her; she questions the absurdity of her matchless marriage with a man of her father's age and in fact, feels relieved at the death of his drunkard and ruthless husband.

The story portrays another widow Kamli, Dwarka's distant daughter-in-law, who became a widow in the prime of her youth, as her husband was killed in a truck accident. The readers get to know through Kamli's dialogue that Bishnu is four or five years younger than her dead husband and as a young boy, he often showed childish impetuosity by staring at Kamli in awe. As he has grown into a sturdy young man, Kamli gets attracted to his muscular body but being a widow, her longing for love and sexual gratification cannot be made manifest as defying traditional gender norms has no impunity for women.

The story introduces another woman Sarasti but unlike Dwarka and Kamli, she does not believe in suppressing her youthful urges and breaks the code of conduct by being romantically involved with her unmarried brother-in-law. She has another reason to violate the code as her husband is impotent and cannot satisfy her bodily desires. However, because of society's hypocritical standards, questioning of man's virility is a sin but labelling a woman for seeking love outside marriage as characterless or branding her as barren, is justified. The storywriter shows Bishnu and Sarasti indulging in love game as Dwarka becomes a mute spectator – aghast, shocked and flabbergasted. "Her body was aflame, nay scorched. Her legs were trembling, her fists clenched, her palms sweating. Bishnu... Sarasti... fire..." But this shock is then metamorphosed into her own burning desire for love which she has to keep under check as Kamli enters the scene and she stands transfixed, but does not betray her thoughts to Kamli.

The story is a sensitive portrayal of the repressed desires of women for love and sexual gratification, but whereas Dwarka and Kamli buttress the same inside the fort of the societal restrictions, Sarasti's desires are fueled by Bishnu's reciprocation. The two pitchers resting on the boundary of a field have been used ingeniously by the storywriter to convey the sexual thirst of young lovers and also the crossing of boundaries as they make a transgression to satiate their desire for love and physical intimacy. The story gathers weight and gravitas through oblique thematic hints thrown into it and like Ernest Hemingway's Iceberg technique, deeper issues concerning rights of women are highlighted. The title of the story is generic but it serves the purpose as the women characters in the story are not just individuals but also representatives of women in general who face subjugation at various levels.

Audiences' Live Response

Rajan Kaushal: Wonderful story and superbly narrated.

Kulbhushan Sharma: Quite evocative and beautiful story Pankaj Ma'am. I am reminded of Arun Bharti ji.

Gitanjali Mahendra: Leena you narrated the story so well. Ma'am Pankaj is a brilliant translator.

Kamayani Vashisht: That the story has commendable merit is evident in the fact that Ma'am Pankaj chose it for translation...

Anu Jaidev: Pankaj ma'am, beautifully nuanced story. It completely reverses the gaze and how! A very fine and seamless translation. Respect, always!

4

मूक प्रेम

दीपा चौहान

'मम्मा! मम्मा! देखो पुराने घर में रहने के लिये कौन आया है?'

मेरी सात साल की बेटी हाँफते हुए घर में आई और मेरी अंगुली पकड़कर मुझे पुराने घर की ओर ले जाने लगी।

'अरे बाबा! छोड़ ना बेटा। क्या है? क्यों शोर मचा रही हो?'

'मम्मा, मेरे स्कूल में पढ़ने वाला विक्रांत अपने परिवार के साथ पुराने घर में रहने के लिये आ रहा है।' बाल सुलभ जिज्ञासा और उत्साह से भरी स्वीटी मुझे पुराने घर की ओर ले जाने लगी।

'कौन विक्रांत... अच्छा!'

मुझे याद आया ये शान्ता बहन का परिवार है। ससुर जी ने शान्ता बहन को कुछ समय के लिये पुराने घर में रहने की इजाजत दी थी। पिताजी बहुत ही दानी प्रवृत्ति के पुरुष थे। अपनी पुश्तैनी ज़मीन से बहुत सारी ज़मीन धर्मार्थ एवं सेवार्थ कार्यों जैसे शिवालय, धर्मशाला, चिकित्सालय एवं पाठशाला के लिये दान कर चुके थे। कोई भी व्यक्ति कुछ मांगने आता तो उनका यही प्रयास रहता कि उसकी हर संभव मदद करें। वो अक्सर कहते थे 'देने से कभी कमी नहीं आती।' अब चूँकि उनके चारों बेटे अपने नये एवं अलग घरों में रहते थे तो पुश्तैनी मकान खाली रहता था। शान्ता बहन के पिता कभी ससुरजी के पास काम करते थे और क्योंकि वो आदमी बहुत नेक और इमानदार थे तो पिताजी भी उन्हें महत्व देते थे और अक्सर ही उनकी आर्थिक तौर पर मदद किया करते थे। उन्हीं की बेटी शान्ता बहन अपने परिवार के साथ आज यहाँ रहने के लिये आयी थी। वो पिताजी को चाचा-चाचा कह कर कुछ समय के लिये पुराने घर में रहने की इजाजत मांगने लगी। उसका कहना था कि जैसे ही रहने की दूसरी व्यवस्था हो जायेगी, वो घर खाली कर देंगे। अब क्योंकि घर बहुत बड़ा था और पिताजी का दिल भी, तो घर का एक हिस्सा बिना किसी किराये के उन्हें रहने के लिये दे दिया गया।

सामने देखा तो गाड़ी से सामान उतारा जा रहा था। बलवन्त भाई मेरी तरफ आये और कुशल-मंगल पूछने लगे। 'बहन जी, आपके बाल बच्चे ठीक हैं? भाई साहब कैसे हैं?'

'सब ठीक हैं भाई। शान्ता बहन दिख नहीं रही।'

'लो ये आ गयी।'

'अरे भाभी नमस्ते। कैसे हो तुम लोग?', शान्ता बहन बोली।

'हम ठीक हैं और तुम लोग?'

'बस क्या बतायें। अब आपसे तो कुछ छुपा नहीं है। एक तो बड़ा परिवार ऊपर से कमाई का साधन नहीं, इसीलिए यहाँ आये हैं कि कुछ काम काज शुरू करें और बेटे को भी स्कूल बस से आने में परेशानी होती थी, तो वो समस्या भी हल हो गई।'

'तुम्हारे पास कितने बच्चे हैं?'

'एक ही बेटा है।' शान्ता बहन ने गर्व से बताया।

तभी मैंने देखा नौ साल की सहमी सी एक लड़की चार-पांच साल के लड़के को ले कर आ रही है। लेकिन लड़का है कि उसकी बात मानना तो दूर उसे गाली देकर उस पर चिल्ला रहा है।

'क्यों री सोनी इसको क्यों रूला रही है?' शान्ता ने गुस्से में कहा।

'मम्मी ये मिट्टी में कपड़े गंदे कर रहा था, मैंने मना किया तो जिद कर रहा है।'

'कपड़े गन्दे हो गये तो क्या, धुल जायेंगे। अब तू जल्दी चल आज बहुत काम है।' शान्ता ने गुस्से से कहा।

'ये लड़की कौन है?' मैंने पूछा।

'ये? सोनी, इनकी पहली पत्नी की बेटा।' शान्ता ने मुँह बना कर जवाब दिया।

'नमस्ते।' लड़की ने हाथ जोड़ कर बड़ी तमीज़ से कहा।

'नमस्ते बेटा।'

'अच्छा, भाभी अब घर भी व्यवस्थित करना है। अब तो मिलते रहेंगे।'

शान्ता बहन बलवन्त सिंह की दूसरी पत्नी थी। उनकी पहली पत्नी बच्ची के जन्म के दो साल बाद गुजर गई थी। पत्नी गुजरी तो बच्ची की परवरिश का सवाल खड़ा हो गया और क्योंकि प्रश्न पुत्र-लालसा का भी था। तो कुल मिला कर दोनों समस्याओं का एक ही हल निकला, पुनर्विवाह! इस तरह शान्ता बहन और बलवन्त सिंह का विवाह हुआ। स्वभाव से

तेजतरार शान्ता का व्यवहार बच्ची के साथ प्रारंभ से ही अच्छा नहीं था। बच्ची भी सौतेली माँ के सामने डरी सहमी रहती। बलवन्त भाई बहुत सीधे और पत्नी से दबकर रहने वाले पुरुष थे। पत्नी के सामने कुछ बोल जायें या उसकी बात को पलट दें, ऐसी हिम्मत वो अपने सात साल के वैवाहिक जीवन में कभी नहीं जुटा पाये थे।



शान्ता बहन और उसके परिवार को हमारे घर में रहते एक महीने से ज्यादा वक़्त हो चुका था और अब ये बात किसी से छिपी नहीं थी कि वो सोनी के साथ दुर्व्यवहार करती थी। लेकिन इस सब में हैरानी की बात ये थी कि बलवन्त सिंह भी सोनी को बुरी तरह मारते थे। शान्ता बहन बड़ी चालाकी से बलवन्त भाई से सोनी की शिकायतें करती और उसे मार पड़वाती।

जाड़े की शाम थी, सुबह से बारिश हो रही थी। आज और दिन की अपेक्षा ठंड बहुत अधिक थी। रूम हीटर से ही कमरे में आराम मिल रहा था। रजाई से निकलने का मन नहीं हो रहा था। तभी मामी-मामी की आवाज सुनाई दी। दरवाजे पर जा कर देखा तो सामने सोनी थी। उसने सूती फ्रॉक और आधी बांह का पतला स्वेटर पहना था। पैरों में हवाई चप्पल थी।

'अरे बेटा तुम्हें ठंड लग जायेगी। अंदर आ जाओ।'

'मामी, पापा और मम्मी जी कहीं गये हुए हैं। उन्होंने कहा था कि अगर चार बजे तक वो घर नहीं पहुँचे तो मैं आप के पास चली जाऊँ। वो आ जायेंगे तो घर चली जाऊँगी।'

'अच्छा! तुम्हारी मम्मी जाते वक़्त मिली थी, मुझे लेकिन मुझे तो कुछ नहीं बताया उन्होंने। हो सकता है भूल गई हों। कोई बात नहीं बेटा, तुम अन्दर आ जाओ।'

'जी मामी!'

'स्वीटी अन्दर वाले कमरे में अपने टॉयज़ से खेल रही है। तुम भी उसके साथ खेल लो।'

सोनी को देखकर स्वीटी बहुत खुश हुई और उसे अपने टॉयज़ दिखाने लगी। मैं किचिन में स्नैक्स बनाने लग गई और उनकी बातचीत भी सुनने लगी।

'अरे दीदी, आओ मैं आपको अपनी डॉलस दिखाती हूँ। ये मेरी फ्रेंड्स हैं। ये पिंकी है, ये मिनी, ये एलिस और ये सबसे प्यारी सिन्ड्रेला है। इन सबका नाम दुकान वाले ने बाबी रखा था। देखो ना सबका एक ही नाम।'

'अरे वाह बहुत सुंदर नाम रखे हैं तुमने।' सोनी ने गुड़ियों को देखकर कहा।

स्वीटी बड़े गर्व से अपने खिलौनों का खजाना दिखा रही थी। इतनी बड़ी-बड़ी और प्यारी गुड़ियों को देखकर सोनी के चहरे पर मुस्कान बिखर गयी। वो जिस प्यार से गुड़ियों को सहला रही थी उस से ऐसा लग रहा था जैसे वो वैसी गुड़ियों को पाने का सपना रखती हो।

आखिर दुनिया में कौन सी ऐसी बच्ची होगी जिसका मन गुड़िया को देख कर उसे पाने के लिये लालायित नहीं होगा, और जिसने तो खिलौनों का अभाव देखा हो उसकी प्रसन्नता का तो कोई पारावार ही नहीं रहता।

'अरे वाह स्वीटी, तुम्हारी गुड़िया तो बहुत प्यारी है!'

'देखो इनके साथ कॉम भी मिली थी और ये शूज़ा ये बाजू आगे पीछे भी करती है। रात को ये सोती भी हैं, आंखें बंद करके।'

'अरे वाह सिन्द्रेला तो सचमुच सबसे प्यारी है। जैसे परियों की दुनिया से आई हो।'

'ये बहुत दूर से लाये हैं पापा। दिल्ली से। गुड़ वाले गांव से। वहाँ बड़े-बड़े मॉल होते हैं। डी एफ एल मॉल है ना, वहाँ से लाये हैं सिन्द्रेला को। मुझे तो टी वी वाली सिन्द्रेला भी बहुत अच्छी लगती है। इसलिये इसका नाम सिन्द्रेला रखा है मैंने।'

'सिन्द्रेला के बाल तो बिल्कुल अंग्रेजों जैसे हैं।'

'हाँ तो, सिन्द्रेला भी तो अंग्रेज थी, वो लंदन में रहती थी।'

'अच्छा!'

दोनों बच्चियाँ बातचीत में पूरी तरह मशगूल थीं। सोनी को ऐसे खेलता देख मुझे अच्छा लग रहा था क्योंकि अधिकांशतः मैंने उसे घर का काम करते ही देखा था। जिस उम्र में लड़कियाँ गुड़ियों से खेलती हैं उस उम्र में उत्तरदायित्वों के अतिरेक से उसके कोमल हाथ बरतन मान्जने, झाड़ू लगाने और कपड़े धोने से अपनी कोमलता खो बैठे थे। जो उम्र परियों और राजकुमारियों की कहानियों से भरी होती है उसमें सौतेली माँ के होने से ऐसी किसी भी मनमोहक वस्तु या स्वप्निल जहाँ के लिये कोई स्थान नहीं रह गया था। ऐसा लग रहा था जैसे वो पहली बार किसी गुड़िया को अपने हाथों में लेकर इतने पास से देख रही थी। मुझसे रहा नहीं गया मैंने पूछ ही लिया, 'बेटा तुम्हारे पास भी कोई गुड़िया है?'

'नहीं मामी', बच्ची ने संकोच से कहा, 'हमारे घर पर कार, बन्दूक वाले खिलौने ही आते हैं।'

'तुम्हें गुड़िया पसंद है?'

'जी!', बच्ची ने झिझकते हुए कहा।

'मम्मा आपने मेरे स्नैक्स बना दिये? मुझे भूख लगी है। स्वीटी बीच में बोल पड़ी।'

'अभी लाती हूँ।'

मैं दो प्लेट्स में स्प्रिंग रोलस ले आयी।

'सोनी दीदी मेरी मम्मा बहुत अच्छे स्नैक्स बनाती हैं। मम्मा से अच्छे स्नैक्स कोई नहीं बना सकता।'

'लो सोनी बेटा ये तुम्हारे लिये।' मैंने प्लेट सोनी की तरफ बढ़ा दी।

'नहीं, मामी मुझे भूख नहीं है।'

'अरे ये ज्यादा नहीं है बेटा।'

'दीदी आप भी खाओ, बहुत टेस्टी हैं।' स्वीटी ने कहा।

'मामी नहीं मुझे नहीं खाने।' सोनी इन्कार में सर हिलाती रही।

'क्या हुआ? खा लो बेटा थोड़ा सा।' मैंने ज़ोर देकर कहा।

'नहीं मामी।'

'मम्मी डांटती है क्या? मैंने पूछा मगर सोनी चुप रही।

'अच्छा तो घर ले जाकर खा लेना भाई के साथ। ऐसे ठीक है?'

'जी।' बच्ची अभी भी कुछ संशय में थी।

छह बज चुके थे। तभी शान्ता बहन की आवाज सुनाई दी। वो सोनी को बुला रही थी।

'अरे मम्मी जी आ गईं। ओह! खेल-खेल में भूल ही गई थी। मैं बहुत लेट हो गईं।' मासूम सी बच्ची के चेहरे पर डर के भाव साफ दिख रहे थे।

जैसे ही सोनी घर पहुंची शान्ता बहन की उसको लगाई जाने वाली डांट सुनाई दे रही थी। वो उस पर बहुत गुस्सा कर रही थी जिसे सुन कर मुझे मन ही मन उस पर बहुत तरस आया। बेचारी बिन माँ की मासूम बच्ची।

रात के साढ़े नौ बज रहे थे। मैं स्वीटी को सुला रही थीं। सर्दियों की रात में आवाजें और साफ सुनायी देती हैं। शान्ता बहन फिर किसी बात पर सोनी पर नाराज हो रही थी। 'मम्मा! ' स्वीटी की आवाज से ध्यान टूटा।

'मम्मा, सोनी दीदी की मम्मी ने उन्हें कल भी बहुत मारा था।'

'क्यूँ?'

'उनसे कांच का गिलास टूट गया था। वो बहुत रो रही थी।'

'ओह! बेचारी।'

'ममा एक दिन पहले भी जब मैं उनके घर डॉल लेकर खेलने गयी थी तो उनकी मम्मा ने उन्हे बहुत डांटा था, फिर उनके पापा ने उनको कमरे मे बंद करके बहुत मारा था। मैं तो डर कर घर भाग आई थी।'

सुनकर मुझे बहुत गुस्सा आया। मुझे तो मन से उन दोनो पति-पत्नि से घृणा होने लगी थी। दिल कर रहा था कि पिताजी से कहकर इनसे घर खाली करवा दूं। ऐसे बुरे लोगों का घर में रहना किसे अच्छा लगेगा। रोज रोज का शोर और कलह और बच्ची का रूदन सहन की सीमा से पार हो रहा था।

'मम्मा, सोतेली माँ क्या होती है? सोनी दीदी की मम्मी सोतेली है क्या?'

'हम्म...'

"उनकी ममा कहां चली गई?'

'बहुत दूर।'

'पर क्यों?'

'पता नहीं!' मुझे सूझ नहीं रहा था कि इन बातों का क्या जवाब दूं?

'मम्मा आप मुझे छोडकर कभी मत जाना। मुझे सोतेली माँ से बहुत डर लगता है।'

ये कहते हुए स्वीटी मुझसे चिपक गई। उसकी आवाज में मुझे खोने का डर था।

'नहीं बेटा, मैं तुम्हे छोडकर कभी नहीं जाऊँगी।' मेरी बात से स्वीटी को कुछ आराम मिला ओर वो आश्चस्त हो कर सो गई।

शान्ता बहन फिर किसी कारण से सोनी को बुरा भला कह रही थी। सोतेली माँ कितनी निर्दयी, निष्ठुर और संवेदनहीन होती हैं। कैकयी जैसी स्त्री भी स्वयं परमेश्वर को अपने सोतेले पुत्र के रूप में पाकर स्नेह ना दे सकी, ना उनसे न्याय कर सकी और सोतेलेपन की पराकाष्ठा का पर्याय बन अमर हो गई। माता और विमाता का भेद कोई बदल नहीं पाया फिर चाहे वो स्वयं विधाता ही क्यों ना हों। प्रभु को भी मानव देह मे आकर दुमाता से प्रेम ना मिल पाया।

एक स्त्री, माँ होने पर जो ममतामयी हृदय अपनी संतान के लिये रखती है, अपना आराम और सुकून भूल कर अपना सर्वस्व उस पर सहर्ष लुटा देती है। वही प्रेम, वात्सल्य, त्याग और बलिदान की प्रतिमूर्त स्त्री, विमाता होने पर परायी संतान के लिये पाषाणहृदय हो जाती है। पराये जाये को दर्द मे देखकर उसका दिल नहीं पसीजता, उसे पीड़ा में देख उसका कलेजा नहीं फटता। शायद इसिलिए माँ निश्छल प्यार और अनुराग की ऐसी निर्झर नदी होती है जिसके स्नेह की अविरल धारा अपनी संतति के लिये कभी सूखती नहीं। ये प्रकृति का नियम है कि मनुष्य तो मनुष्य ब्रह्मांड के समस्त प्राणियों मे माँ ही अपनी संतान से अप्रतिम ममता

रखती है; टिटिरि की तरह वो ये समझती है कि वो अपने बच्चे पर आने वाले हर संकट, हर मुश्किल को दूर करने में सक्षम है, फिर चाहे वो मुश्किलों का आसमान ही क्यों ना हो। पिता पर प्रकृति ने ऐसी कोई बाध्यता नहीं रखी है। वो प्राणदाता अवश्य होता है किंतु जन्म के बाद के उत्तरदायित्वों के लिये वह स्वतंत्र है। भावनात्मक बन्धन के सन्दर्भ में वो माँ की तरह बेबस और जकड़ हुआ नहीं होता।

'माँ है तो पिता भी है, माँ नहीं तो पिता, पिता नहीं रहता।' हाँ यही तो कहती थी मेरी स्कूल की सहेली रश्मि विमाता के आने पर पिता भी बदल जाते हैं और वो उसी की आँखों देखने लगते हैं उसी के कानों सुनने लगते हैं, और तो और, उसी के दिमाग से सोचने भी लगते हैं। माँ के जाने से जीवन ही बदल जाता है। वो बताती थी कि कैसे सयुक्त परिवार में रसोई में ताई और चाचियां खाना बनाती ओर परोसती। परिवार के बाकी बच्चे जब मन करता हक़ से जाकर अपनी माओं से खाना मांग लेते, पसंद की सब्जी ना होने पर माँ से रूठ जाते और फिर कैसे उनकी माँ उनको मनाती और उन्हें दूध-मक्खन के साथ खाना देती थीं। वो सोचती थी अगर माँ जिन्दा होती तो उसे भी ज़िद्द करने और रूठने का हक़ होता। अगर कोई मनाने वाला ही ना हो तो कोई रुठे किस से? वो और उसका भाई सहमे हुए से खाने के लिये बुलाये जाने का इन्तजार करते और कितनी ही बार ऐसा होता की तब तक उसके भाई को नीन्द आ जाती। कैसे उसका छोटा भाई शाम सात बजे से कहता 'दीदी भूख लगी है, चाची से कह दो ना कि आज खाना जल्दी दे दे।' कैसे वो ताई-चाचियों को खुश करने के लिये कभी बरतन मांज देती कभी रसोई में झाड़ू लगा देती। बदले में सब कहते, 'देखो रश्मि कितनी समझदार है, कोई जिद नहीं करती, बिन कहे काम भी करने लगती है।' सब तारीफ़ के दो शब्द तो कह देते पर प्यार का एक निवाला कोई ना देता था। उसने बताया था कैसे एक बार उसका भाई उस से आकर कहता है, 'दीदी आज मोनू लड्डु खा रहा था। मुझे भी लाकर दो ना।' जब रश्मि ने कहा कि उसे मांगते डर लगता है तो फिर उसके भाई ने रोते हुए कहा था, 'दीदी चलो ना माँ के पास चलते हैं।' ये कहते-कहते वो कितना रोई थी उस दिन। आखिर एक दिन उसके पापा ने दूसरी शादी कर ली। पढ़ाई में अच्छी होने के बावजूद आठवीं क्लास में उसका स्कूल ये कह कर छुड़वा दिया गया कि ज्यादा पढ़ने से लड़कियाँ बिगड़ जाती हैं। कुछ साल बाद उसकी शादी हो गई और फिर धीरे धीरे रश्मि मेरे ज़ेहन की तहों में जाने कहां खो गयी। लेकिन आज इस तरह की जाने कितनी ही बातें मुझे याद आने लगी थीं। विस्मृति की धूल जो अतीत की यादों पर पड़ी थी सोनी के आने से वो धूल उड़ने लगी थी। सालों के अन्तराल के बाद आज फिर से मुझे रश्मि नज़र आयी, सोनी में इन्ही ख्यालों में जाने कब नीन्द आ गई।

अगली सुबह मैंने संजय से सोनी के साथ हो रहे बुरे बर्ताव का जिक्र किया। उन्होंने कहा, 'ये उनका निजी मामला है। अगर हमने रहने की जगह दी है तो इसका ये मतलब नहीं कि उनकी पर्सनल लाइफ़ में इंटरफ़ेयर करें। वैसे भी बलवन्त भाई मुझे समझदार आदमी लगते हैं।'

'जो पुरुष अपनी पत्नी के कहने पर अपनी पहली पत्नी की नौ साल की मासूम सी बेटि को मारे वो क्या समझदार हुआ? सच कहा है किसी ने माँ के जाने से बाप भी पराया हो जाता है। बच्चों के प्रति पिता की निष्ठा और प्यार पत्नी के कारण होता है।'

'ऐसा नहीं है कि पिता को अपने बच्चों से प्यार नहीं होता। बस उसका प्यार माँ की तरह करुणामयी और ममतामयी नहीं होता। मेरा मानना है कि भगवान ने माता पिता दोनों को एक अलग और खास उद्देश्य की पूर्ति के लिये बनाया है। दोनों एक दूसरे से बिल्कुल भिन्न हैं, इसलिये दोनों का प्रेम भी भिन्न है। जहाँ माँ की गोद में बैठकर बच्चा भावनात्मक संबल पाता है वहीं पिता का होना एक ऐसी छत्र-छाया है जिसके होने से बच्चे को अभयदान मिलता है। माता और पिता के प्यार को अगर एक ही कसौटी पर मापोगे तो पिता का मूक प्रेम कभी नज़र नहीं आयेगा। अच्छा एक बात बताओ क्या तुम्हारे पिता तुम्हें प्यार नहीं करते? क्या मैं स्वीटी को प्यार नहीं करता?' संजय ने बड़े शान्त स्वर में कहा।

'करते हो।' कैसे कहती लेकिन मेरी माँ अभी जीवित है और मैं भी।

'छोड़ो इन बातों को सबकी लाईफ में अपनी समस्याएं होती हैं। जाओ अच्छी सी चाय बना कर ले आओ साथ में पियेंगे। फिर मुझे कोर्ट जाना है।'

'लेकिन बलवन्त भाई....'

'लगता है बलवन्त भाई और दूसरी शादी करने के गुनहगार सभी पतियों की तरफ से जज साहिबा के सामने आज मेरी पेशी लगी है।'

हम दोनों खिलखिलाकर हंस पड़े।

रविवार का दिन था। आज पुराने घर की सफाई करवानी थी। सुबह के दस बजे थे। संजय ने बताया कि मजदूर आने ही वाले हैं, इसलिये मैं जाकर रूम्स खोल आऊं। नीचे वाली मंजिल के ताले खोलकर मैं ऊपर वाले फ्लोर पर जाने लगी तो सोनी के रोने की आवाज़ें सुनाई दीं। शान्ता बहन बाहर मिलीं मैंने सोनी के रोने का कारण पूछा, तो उसने बताया की सोनी ने उसके नये सूट का कुर्ता प्रैस से जला दिया है जो उसे कल शादी में पहनना था। उसके पापा को पता चला तो वो बहुत नाराज हो रहे हैं।'

'मगर तुम उन्हें रोकती क्यों नहीं, वो तो उसे बुरी तरह मार रहे हैं?' मैंने कुछ नाराज होकर कहा।

'ना बाबा ना। उन्हें रोको तो वो बहुत नाराज होते हैं। अब उनकी बेटि हैं, मैं ठहरी सौतेली माँ। मेरा मुँह तो बंद ही रहता है।'

उसकी धूर्तता पर मुझे बहुत गुस्सा आया। इस बंद मुँह से निकलने वाले अपशब्द हम रोज ही सुनते थे।

मैने ठान लिया आज जो हो जाये मैं अपने घर मे एक मासूम बच्ची पर ये अत्यचार नहीं होने दूंगी।

मैं तेजी से उस कमरे की ओर बढ़ने लगी जहाँ से आवाजें आ रही थी। 'कमरा अंदर से बंद है, पीछे से', शान्ता बहन की आवाज आई। मैं अब तेजी से कॉरिडोर की तरफ से होते हुए बाहर वाले रूम में गई क्योंकि उस कमरे का एक दरवाजा उसी कमरे में खुलता था जहाँ अभी बलवन्त सिंह सोनी को मार रहे थे और वो दरवाजा हम बंद रखते थे। 'क्या हुआ भाभी?' शान्ता बहन पीछे से फिर बोली। मैंने दरवाजे की सिटकनी खोल जैसे ही दरवाजा खोला अन्दर का दृश्य देख कर मैं आवाक रह गई। बलवन्त भाई ज़ोर-ज़ोर से अपनी हथेलियाँ ताली की तरह पीट रहा था और सोनी ज़ोर ज़ोर से रोने का शोर कर रही थी। साथ ही बच्ची को हंसी भी आ रही थी। मुझे कुछ समझ नहीं आया तभी दोनो की नज़र मुझ पर पड़ी। बलवन्त भाई ने हथेलियाँ पीटना बंद किया ओर सोनी ने रोना चिल्लाना। अचानक मुझे सामने देख बलवन्त भाई किंकर्तव्यविमूढ़ से बुरी तरह झेंप गये थे। उनकी दशा रणभूमि मे धराशायी कर्ण पर प्रेमश्रु बहाती कुन्ती जैसी थी जिसके सामने मानो पाण्डव आ खड़े हो गये हों, जैसे सत्य को छुपाने के दोष के लिये आज फिर युधिष्ठिर अपने शाप के साथ आ गये हों, ऐसा शाप जो न केवल उनके लिये हो वरन समस्त पुरुष प्रजाति के लिये हो या फिर समस्त पिताओं के लिये। बरसों से छुपाये उस सत्य को आज बाहर आने का द्वार जो मिल गया था।

तभी शान्ता बहन भी आ गई। बाप-बेटी के चहरे पर चिंता और संशय की रेखाओं के बादल और स्याह हो गये। जिस स्वांग को उन्होने बड़ी कुशलता से रचा तथा उतनी ही दक्षता के साथ चरित्र के मुखौटे पहन सबको भ्रमित किया था, उनकी वास्तविकता छुपाये वो मुखौटे आज उतर चुके थे और उन छद्म रूप के पीछे के असली चरित्र देख मैं निशब्द और चकित रह गई।

'बलवन्त भाई बस भी करो!' मैंने ज़ोर से कहा। 'छोटी बच्ची है, गलती हो जाती है। अब इतना भी मारता है क्या कोई?' मैंने गुस्सा दिखाते हुए कहा। 'सोनी बेटा इधर आओ।' डरी सहमी सोनी मेरे पास आ गई। मैंने हाथों से उसके सर को सहलाया और पुचकार कर चुप कराने लगी। 'शान्ता बहन तुम भी कुछ समझाओ बलवन्त भाई को।'

मुझे नहीं पता मैं क्या कह रही थी? क्या कर रही थी?

तभी स्वीटी आ गई, 'मम्मा आपको पापा बुला रहे हैं।'

'चलो!', ये कहते हुए मैं स्वीटी को लेकर सीढियां उतर गई।



समीक्षा: 'मूक प्रेम'

देवेन्द्रा गुप्ता

“मूक प्रेम” सामाजिक यथार्थ पर रची गई एक मार्मिक कहानी है। युगों से लेकर आज तक हमारे समाज में असंख्य परिवारों के बच्चे सौतेलेपन का दंश झेलते आ रहे हैं। इस कहानी में परंपरागत सौतेलेपन की गंभीर समस्या को लेखिका ने अपने ढंग से यथार्थ के धरातल पर उतारा है। अपने आज के परिवेश में एक ऐसे ही परिवार को केंद्र में रखकर इस कहानी का ताना-बाना बुना गया है। भले ही यह विषय साधारण प्रतीत होता है, लेकिन यदि वह अपने अंतस को स्पर्श करने में सक्षम हो, तो उसको सार्थकता स्वतः सिद्ध हो जाती है।

अपने अनुभव के आधार पर कहानी रचियता ने निश्चित तौर पर एक नवीन दृष्टिकोण रखा है। कहानी का आरंभ एक सामान्य संवाद के साथ पात्रों का परिचय भी कर देता है। यह संवाद कहानी की सूत्रधारा मम्मी और नन्ही बिटिया स्वीटी का है। जैसे ही घटनाक्रम आगे बढ़ता है तो दूसरे परिवार का आगमन होता है जो इस कहानी के केंद्र में है, जिसमें कुल चार सदस्य हैं। बलवंत सिंह पिता, शांता बहन मां, सोनी व विक्रांत उनके बच्चे। मासूम सोनी सौतेलेपन के सताए हुए उन असंख्य बच्चों की तरह आहत है जिसका बचपन माँ के ना होने से समय से पहले ही नियती के हाथों छिन गया है। परिणामवश जिसकी स्थिति अत्यंत दयनीय है। कहानी के विशिष्ट पात्र हैं स्वीटी के दादा, जो अति विनम्र, दानशील, धर्मात्मा व दयालु प्रकृति के व्यक्ति हैं और सबके मददगार भी हैं। उनके पुराने घर में ही बलवंत सिंह का परिवार रहता है। संवाद और पात्र विषय वस्तु को जो जीवंतता प्रदान करने वाले तत्व हैं जो जिज्ञासा और उत्साह बनाए रखते हैं। “मूक प्रेम” कहानी में लेखिका ने पात्रों में सहज संवाद के अनेक अवसर तलाशे हैं जो कहानी को अन्तरंगता और निरंतरता की ओर बढ़ाते हैं।

कथावस्तु को आकार और विस्तार देने के लिए यथासंभव प्रसंगों की योजना लेखिका की कल्पनाशक्ति और तथ्यात्मक प्रवृत्ति को दर्शाती है। प्रसंगवश रामायण से विमाता के रूप में कैकयी का उदाहरण हो या महाभारत में से सत्य को छुपाने के लिए कर्ण और कुंती का चित्रण हो अथवा कल्पना के धरातल पर अतीत के झरोखों से सोनी के समकक्ष रश्मि की चलचित्र की भाँति स्मृतियां, सभी कहानी को संगठित कर सुदृढ़ आधार की ओर ले जाती हैं।

सूत्रधार के रूप में मम्मी कहानी में अध्ययन विद्यमान रहती है वह हर विषय पर अपनी प्रतिक्रिया देती है। उसका गुस्सा और झुंझलाहट उसे बेचैन करते रहते हैं। बलवंत और शांता के प्रति उनकी कटुता और सोनी के प्रति सहानुभूति पूरी कहानी में दिखाई देती है वह मां और सौतेली मां में अंतर देखती है कि जो मां अपनी संतान पर सर्वस्व लुटा देती है। वह जब सौतेली बनती है तो कैसे इतनी कठोर निष्ठुर और कुटिल हो जाती है -- ये प्रश्न बार-बार उसे

कचोटते रहते हैं। वह क्यों अत्याचार और दुर्व्यवहार की प्रतिमूर्ति बन जाती है? वह पिता के रूप को भिन्न-भिन्न दृष्टि से देखती है।

लेकिन जब उसका पति संजय पिता के प्रेम के पक्ष में तर्क देता है। तो कुछ हद तक सहमत हो जाती है। सोनी का पिता बलवंत पत्नी के सामने विवश व लाचार दिखता है। सोनी उसकी अपनी पुत्री है फिर भी उसका पक्ष नहीं ले पाता, कलह से बचने के लिए वह सोनी की बाल सुलभ इच्छाएं भी पूरी नहीं कर पाता। उसका बचपन छिन गया है। अन्य बच्चों की तरह उसे भी खेलने की लालसा है लेकिन उसकी इच्छा अपने घर में कोई मायने नहीं रखती। वह हर समय मां की मार फटकार व दुर्व्यवहार से डरी सहमी रहती है।

उधर बलवंत पुत्री को पत्नी के जुल्मों से बचाने के लिए एक अनोखी तरीका ढूंढ लेता है। उसकी पत्नी आए दिन उससे सोनी की शिकायतें करती है वह उसे पीटवा ने के लिए पति को उकसाती है। बलवंत भी सोनी को पत्नी से अलग कमरे में ले जाकर पीटने का ढोंग करता है। सोनी भी चिल्लाने का स्वांग करती है।

दोनों दबी-दबी हंसी में अपना नाटक जारी रखते हैं। उधर शांता के मन में बड़ा संतोष होता है। पत्नी को भ्रम में डालकर पिता अपनी पुत्री पर मूक प्रेम की वर्षा ना जाने कितने वर्षों से करता आ रहा था। उसने बेटी का सानिध्य और स्नेह पाने का यह नया रास्ता ढूंढ लिया था, जिसका रहस्य केवल पिता पुत्री ही जानते हैं। हर रोज का यह रोना-चिल्लाना-पीटना सुन-सुनकर स्वीटी की मम्मी व्यथित हो जाती थी। इसका रहस्योद्घाटन फिर एक दिन ऐसी घटना के साथ होता है जब वह सोनी को पीटते हुए पाकर अचानक मुड़कर उनका दरवाजा खोल देती है। वह दृश्य देखकर आवाक सी खड़ी हो जाती है, क्योंकि घटना ने नाटकीय मोड़ जो ले लिया था। सोनी और उसके पिता अपनी चोरी पकड़े जाने पर हतप्रभ से खड़े थे। इतने में शांता बहन का प्रवेश सूत्रधार को भी तुरंत उस पिता पुत्री के नाटक में शामिल होने का संकेत देता है। यही भ्रम, संशय और रहस्य इस कहानी का चरमबिंदु है जो कदाचित्त इसे सामान्य विषय से विशिष्टता की ओर ले जाता है।

कहानी में पात्रों के अनुरूप भाषा का व्यवहार और वैचारिक पलों में भाषा की गरिमा का निर्वाह किया गया है। इसकी शैली में लेखिका के व्यक्तित्व व मौलिकता की झलक दिखाई देती है। भाषा में हिंदी के अतिरिक्त अंग्रेजी व उर्दू की शब्दावली का समावेश शब्दों, संवादों व वैचारिक परिवेश के अनुकूल किया गया है। 'मूक प्रेम' कहानी का शीर्षक प्रतिकार प्रतीकात्मक है। कहानी का विषय सामान्य होते हुए भी एक नवीन दृष्टिकोण प्रस्तुत करता है किंतु कुछ स्थानों पर ऐसा प्रतीत होता है कि बलवंत शायद अपराध बोध से ग्रसित है उसके पश्चाताप की परिणति पुत्री के मूक प्रेम में होती दिखायी देती है। पत्नी के सामने उसकी विवशता और पुत्री से विमुख रहना भी एक अन्य नाटक है जिसे वह मुखौटे बदलकर रोज़ खेलता है। कभी यह भी लगता है कि शांता को सोनी के प्रति ज़ालिम और क्रूर बनाने के लिए

बलवंत भी कुछ हद तक उत्तरदायी है। परिस्थितियों से समझौता करने व पत्नी के भय के कारण मासूम सोनी की भलाई व अधिकारों की बलि देने में उसका भी सहयोग रहा है।

समग्रत कहा जा सकता है कि विषय-वस्तु, पात्र संरचना, भाषा शैली तथा कथा प्रवाह की दृष्टि से यह कहानी सफल रही है। उद्देश्य पूर्ति, नाट्य विधान व नवीन दृष्टि का उद्घाटन कहानी को एक प्रथम स्थान पर प्रतिष्ठित करने में निश्चय ही एक सराहनीय कदम है।



Audiences' Live Response

Abhyudita: What a story! And great narration.

Rajan Kaushal: Great Deepa ma'am...for a while we felt as if the story was being performed in front of us. Especially the dialogues were superb.

Anupama Pathak: Nice story Deepa.

Irene Rattan: Well-chosen words, Deepa.

Girija Sharma: A wonderful slice of life story, narrated very well indeed!

5

TWELVE YEARS LATER

DIPALI SHARMA BHANDARI

Just as Manjari picked the books to go to her class, Kamla came with a message from the office. Apparently, there was a call for her. Manjari walked the corridors, wondering... 'Who even calls on landline in this era of video calling...?'

'Hello', a voice she couldn't place said.

'Hello', she tentatively replied, trying to connect a face to the voice.

'Manjari here...'

'Anil...', there was a pause, 'How are you? I can't believe I finally located you!'

Manjari looked around and forced a smile. She spoke loud and clear into the phone, 'I am good. When did you come back?' Everyone went back to their files or phones.

'I came home this week. Wanted to talk but had no idea how to contact you.'

'OK' Manjari said, mindful of the inquisitive ears around her.

'I tried calling your old number...'

'We had it disconnected two years ago. Landlines have become totally obsolete...' she faked a smile, '... Wait; let me take your number. I have a class right now. Will call you later'. She fished a pen out of her bag and scribbled his number on the cover of her register. Thanking the Superintendent, she lied, 'Old friend... just back from Canada.... Planning a class reunion....' and ran for her class.

She breezed through 'The Road Not Taken', reminiscing of a time long before she could seemingly remember... when was the last time she had seen Anil? What had he said! Why had he called? And how did he

get her number! Had twelve years passed already? She collected her books and went to the canteen. She asked Vicky for a cup of tea and slowly dragged herself to her favourite corner. She stared uneasily at the number scribbled on the register. She had said she would call. She picked her phone and dialed the number, pausing between each digit. Then she cleared the screen and went out into the garden. 'If I don't call him, he might call again on the office number'. She didn't want that. She dialed his number again. Anil picked the phone on the first ring.

'Hello...'

'Manju...' Anil said.

'Call me Manjari', she snubbed him.

'Sorry Manjari', Anil began, 'You don't know how long I've been trying to contact you. I asked everyone.... Not one gave me your number... you even disconnected the landline.... I searched you on facebook too... no luck. Then I went to your old home... your landlady told me your parents had shifted to Rampur and you were working in a government school in Himachal. You don't know how many schools I called and how many Manjaris I talked to....'

'Why?'

'Please forgive me Manjari.' Anil broke.... 'I want to meet you....'

'I don't want to meet you, Anil. Please don't call me again.... ever...' and Manjari disconnected the call.

The phone pinged. Manjari went purple when she saw a message from Anil. Two days and twenty unseen messages later she called Anuj.

'Hi Manju! *Ki haal...?* Long time...'

'Yeah. Busy days... Exams ahead...'

'Hmm.... My elder one is in eleventh too...'

'You don't need to worry about Arshi.... She takes after Sarita, not you.'

'Ha Ha!', Anuj laughed.

Manju laughed too. Then she said quietly, 'Anuj, Anil had called. He is back.'

Anuj stopped laughing. 'What! When?'

‘Two days ago.’

‘How did he get your number?’

Manju filled him in on the details...

‘How dare he? After all he has done!’ said Anuj. ‘Do you want me to talk some sense into him...’

‘No Anuj. I just needed to talk to someone about it. He can’t do any worse than what he already has.’

‘Let me talk to Sarita if we can manage a weekend getaway. We’ll try to come on Friday.’

‘Thanks Anuj.’

Manjari disconnected the call and busied herself in her terrace garden. The bougainvilleas were in full bloom. She buried her fingers into the warm potting soil and started preparing the colourful terracotta pots for her succulents. She thought of the garden in her old home...roses, lilies, jasmines, the yellow *champak* and marigold. She played with her dolls in the garden with her friends. Once a *bulbul* had nested in the bush.... three nestlings... then overnight the nest was crawling with ants. She and her friends wrapped the half-eaten featherless young *bulbuls* in leaves and buried them under the rosebush...She had cried for days.... Anuj had laughed when she told him ... he even told everyone else in class!

They were young then. Classmates. Best friends. Anil had transferred two years later. And then there were those awkward years when boys remained boys while girls grew into young ladies. One day Manjari was called to the staff room. Mrs. Vyas had a letter in her hand and started scolding her. Manjari was standing red-faced. Later Anil confessed that he had slipped the letter in her notebook during prayer. Manjari was upset but she did not tell anyone. Finally, she confided in Anuj. Anuj and the class held an intervention and warned Anil. This was the year of the board exams. Anil tried to talk to her many times but Manjari made sure she was never alone. Mrs. Vyas had called her parents and told them about the love-letter. After board exams, her parents shifted Manjari to a Girls’ college. Anil stalked her and Manjari constantly ignored her. Anil finally joined an engineering college and left the city. Before leaving, he went to Manjari’s home and declared his love for her. Manjari’s father was so angry that he slapped him. Anil went away. The next week Manjari received a letter in the mail. Anil had

threatened that she will not be able to show her face in the society once he was done with her.

Manjari had spent the next three years in fear. Gradually her fear gave way and she started laughing again. Two more years passed. She was returning home one evening when Anil approached her 'Manju, I love you. Please talk to me'

'I don't. Please let me go.' She said, her heart pounding. His threat at the back of her mind...

'Manju... I am going to Canada next week. I want to talk to your parents about us'

'No! I don't love you and I don't want to talk to you. There is no "us". You made life miserable for me all these years. What makes you think I love you?' She mustered all her courage and shouted.

'Manju...'

'Don't call me Manju!' She pushed him and ran home. Anil ran after her

.....

Manju washed her hands. She poured a glass of water for herself and switched on the fan just as the phone rang. It was Anil. She picked the call and answered calmly, 'I don't want to talk to you or meet you. Do not call me again. I have registered a complaint against you. If you call me again you will be sent back to the prison where you belong.'

Manjari wiped the sweat off her face with her *dupatta*. A tide of pain came swirling around her and she winced. She felt a thousand ants crawling all over her. Anil had done what he had said. Even twelve years later people are not comfortable watching her leathery face...

“Twelve Years Later”: A Review

VIVEK NEGI

The story “Twelve Years Later” by the writer Dipali Bhandari is directed at the evil of eve teasing and stalking, the school going girls face, but cannot disclose it to their families. The fear of being misunderstood by their families, norms of honour and character assassination by the society forces the girls to keep this abuse to themselves so that the bigger objective of education does not come to a halt. It is Manjari who receives a scolding rather than Anil by the teacher on the letter landing in her hand. The family of Manjari does support her but a conditional one of making her continue with the studies at a girls’ college. Anil keeps on stalking and dares to visit Manjari s house with a marriage proposal. He is slapped by her father. There follows a respite in Anil’s activities, but his return leaves Manjari scarred.

Manjari reconstructs her life twig by twig showing her resilience and mettle inside. Anil is sentenced to twelve years imprisonment. Manjari completes her education amongst piercing stares of insensitive society every minute, every day, every glance and carves a corner for herself as a teacher where she finds her space. She rediscovers the beauty of life in hard bougainvillea and cactii.

The story is such that every teenager relates to, in the aspect of surge of love feelings one bathes in during adolescence. The initial plot construction gives an impression of a love affair entanglement of Anil and Manjari and the reader unaware of the beastly action of acid throwing on Manjari that Anil has done; does find a soft heart for Anil -- the lover who the reader thinks is a rejected lover due to the blows of destiny. The gradual revelation with the development of story immediately makes the reader despise Anil -- the criminal. One starts comprehending the connection between the three ants-gnawed innocent bulbuls in the nest in the garden and the innocent acid-attack victim Manjari.

The return of Anil after twelve years brings back the pestering but finds a strong defiant composed Manjari this time. Though Anil’s mindset remains undeciphered as to whether his return is that of an

obsessive lover or a repentant Anil yet the reader finds Manjari's decisiveness justifiable, as it is only she who has undergone the immense suffering -- mental, psychological, physical with the society beside as a mere spectator throughout her ordeal.

The story is striking indeed.

6

TERROR

GURMIT BEDI

The two boarded the bus at Paraur, a place between Malan and Palampur. They were both turbaned Sikhs, robust and tall. Both were wrapped in blankets. They cast their eyes all around as they boarded the bus and sat down on the seat right behind the driver. There were about twenty people in the bus. Two or three women and the rest men. None of them Sikhs. Only these two were Sardars.

The interior of the bus was dimly lit but it was pitch dark outside. The passengers sat bent over with the cold. One of the Sardars turned his neck to look back, as if to inspect the passengers. Then he put his hand inside his blanket and began to move it back and forth. At this, the plump lady sitting behind him trembled with fear. She looked at her neighbours with terrified eyes. The horror on her face froze their blood.

'It was in the papers today that extremists have begun to infiltrate Himachal,' a passenger at the back whispered in another's ear, his voice quivering. The person sitting behind him saw him whisper. He prodded him with his finger and leaned his ear close to the man's lips. By the time the bus reached Arla, every traveller but the driver, conductor and the passenger sitting to the left of the Sardars, had come to know that two extremists were travelling in the bus. At any time now they would push the driver aside and take control of the steering wheel, or stop the bus someplace and kill all of them.

The alert eyes of the passengers were fixed on every movement of the Sardars. They saw one of them begin to cover his face with a white handkerchief, even as his eyes ranged this way and that. He covered his nose and mouth and knotted the kerchief. Only his two eyes were visible now.

'He is hiding his identity,' one old man surmised.

'Now he will order the driver to stop,' a well-built passenger warned another with his eyes.

Oblivious to all this, the driver was busy driving and the conductor, sitting on the front seat, had his eyes trained on the road ahead. Both were unaware of the potential danger. The person sitting next to the Sardars lolled to one side in his sleep. Then the Sardars began to speak with each other. Their voices were drowned by the noise of the bus. The masked Sardar nodded his head in agreement with the other. The bus was now passing through a stretch bordered by thick trees on either side.

'They seem to be ready,' a woman murmured clutching her child to her chest.

Just then the other Sardar bent down and began to remove something from his bag.

'I'm sure there is an AK-47 in it. Extremists carry their AK-47s in bags slung on their shoulders, don't they, and conceal them with their blankets. There's no need to load them again and again. You just have to pull the trigger and turn the barrel around. He will also do this now,' said a young man who had read about the workings of an AK-47 in the newspapers. He choked with the fear of impending death.

'Why are they bent on killing us? How have we wronged them? Sardars were made to fight against injustice. What kind of Sardars are they who are preparing to kill innocent people,' a woman passenger was about to break into sobs.

'There's not one man in this bus, who can face them boldly,' another woman passenger glanced timorously at all the men. They were pale with fear; as if their blood had frozen in their veins.

Suddenly, a crackling sound was heard and the two Sardars drew close to each other. Then some chewing sounds were heard. One of them nudged the other and both exchanged smiles. Still smiling, they turned around and looked carefully at the passengers. The passengers could only see their eyes. Four intense imposing eyes. Then they both straightened their necks and seemed ready to get up from their seats.

Everyone, except the driver and conductor, was petrified.

'Please stop here, brother. We have to get down here,' one Sardar said politely. The driver applied the brakes instantly.

'May God bless you,' the second Sardar turned the door handle.

‘When will you be available in the canteen?’ the driver asked with some hesitation.

‘Come whenever you want. We’re always at your service.’

Laughing, the two Sardars stepped off the bus.

Taken aback, the passengers exchanged glances; each one trying to hide their embarrassment.

“Terror”: A Critical Review

KULBHUSHAN SHARMA

Aatank, a gripping story written by Gurmeet Singh Bedi, is translated into English as “Terror” by Meenakshi F. Paul. Translation, in itself, is a challenging task that demands expertise on linguistic skills, knowledge of culture, technicality, and skills to overcome the problems — lexical-semantic, grammatical, syntactical, rhetorical, pragmatic, and cultural issues. It is an onus on the translator to salvage the idioms and expressions used in a particular culturally-structured language representing the social milieu. The biggest challenge before a translator is to pick up a particular story for the translation.

The story under scrutinising lens provides a basis for ‘Perspectivism’. According to German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, Perspectivism, a philosophical view, is that all ideations take place from particular perspectives which means there is a strand of possible conceptual schemes, or perspectives on which judgment of truth and value can be made. It is a general tendency on the part of most people to pass a judgment or frame opinions about others too soon. The frailty of the human beings to turn into sharp critics and point out flaws or shortcomings in others, make them blind to their own faults, insecurities and mistakes. Instead of reacting, the need is to relate, to associate, to introspect and then reflect. In the modern world, where everyone is surrounded by machines and hi-tech gadgets, there is an urgent need to understand the three words – sympathy, empathy and apathy quite deeply. The world seems to move under the swooning impact of ‘self syndrome’ and the best option for carving a beautiful world of co-existence is a possible reality if humanity sheds the last word and imbibes the former two essential words by understanding the fellow human beings.

The story is well-crafted and written in a satirical tone. On a close reading of the story, it has all the basic elements of a plot. Right from exposition to denouement, it keeps the reader under a spell and arouses the curiosity to know what is to come. The plot and structure are like gravity. “Terror” has a well-knit structure, with the series of events assisting the overall design of the story. The setting is confined to a bus

where the passengers react and form the opinions about the two Sikhs. Two turbaned Sikhs, tall and robust, wrapped in blankets, board the bus. The people seated in the bus get suspicious about them and start forming opinions, branding them as militants or extremists. The alert eyes of the twenty-odd people in the bus are fixed on every movement of the Sardars. The passengers think that they are about to kill them. Every passenger on the bus seems to choke with the fear of impending death. The fear lurking in the corner of their hearts make them think that why the Sikhs are bent on killing them. But the twist of the story occurs when the one of the two Sikhs pleads the driver to stop the bus because they want to get down. Towards the end of the story, the friendly exchange of words in between the driver and the two Sardars leaves every passenger taken aback. The realization dawns upon the passengers that the two Sardars, indeed, are good human beings ready to render a helping hand. Exchanging glances, the passengers try to hide their embarrassment. The language used is full of local colloquism and the translator has retained the certain nuances of local idiom. The dialogues of the story have been maintained as written in *Punjabi* – “Rab Tuhada bhalaa kare.” As far as the character and characterization is concerned, the characters in the story are the people the reader associates quite easily. The translated version of the story has preserved the features of the characters portrayed as real. There is an apt portrayal of the physical description, action, inner thoughts, reactions and speech that makes the story compelling and gives the readers a strong sense of characters’ personalities and complexities, making them vivid, alive and believable. The thematic core of the story underlines the basic human nature to form the opinions and pass judgment about others which leaves a scope for everyone to reflect and think deeply about the self. The writer wants to transmit the message through the story that the basic need of human beings to be loved and to be understood.

Finally, the story can be read conveying a message that people are not to be judged solely on the basis of their appearance, attire, race, nationality, religion, family or sexual orientation. Rather, they must be accepted the way they are.



Audience’s Live Response

Sangeeta Singh: How wonderfully the story weaves various perceptions of human psychology, which are all hinged to one incident – social conditioning ...reminded me of Manto’s short stories. Very powerful!

Jyoti Mishra: It's remarkable to realize that the co-passengers actually lived through the 'aatank' in their minds without it being there... perception matters.

Anupama Pathak: That's how human psychology works...amazingly narrated.

Namrata Pathania: How pre-conceived notions terrorise us!

Leena Vaidya: It talks about our pre-conceived notions and our prejudices.



7

THE TEAR

IRENE

His hand went right through the sudden tear at the elbow of the sleeve. There was a sound of a slight hiss as worn cloth gave way and his heart seemed to jump into his eyes -- how will he go out in torn clothes? Must he walk on a busy road in a worn-out shirt? What if he met his teacher and he saw it? What if he met one of the snooty girls of his class and she saw it?

“Haw! Don’t know how some people can move around brazenly in broad daylight in tattered clothes! Simply standing first in maths doesn’t mean someone is king of the jungle!”

The tear seemed not in his shirt so much as in his heart. He silently watched his mother wrap and re-wrap her flowing blue 'dupatta' around her face so he could see only her eyes flutter like two black birds in a rolling blue sky. It had now been almost seven months that his small world seemed to have heaved endlessly under his small feet so he could barely stand. Every morning his father's defeated shoulders spoke of a restive night and a worried dawn. No word was spoken but every one knew that Baba again wasn't going to work that day. Mummy would quietly make 'chapattis' on the griddle and serve with small helpings of vegetables or lentils and Baba would hang his head and eat in silence, before putting up his feet on the bed and going off into a trance, from which no one dared to wake him.

The room had now become crowded. None of them moved out of the well-ordered but cramped surroundings of the four walls because it wasn't allowed. It was difficult to live in the tiny room through the day or to move around while all of them occupied the same space. Toes stubbed against metal trunks and bedposts and many times the little boy had to roll over the bed to avoid stepping on his silent but affectionate father's feet. That occasional tumble made Ishu laugh, but never his Baba.

"Sleeping all together never made such a crowd but sitting around does," Ishu thought whenever he lay down on the one double bed that dominated the tiny quarters. On one side stood a couple of trunks which held the beckoning mysteries of his mother's treasures and on the other was a small plastic stool meant exclusively for Baba's steel mug of water and steaming cup of tea. On the trunks were piled up the rolls of a couple of 'razais' and blankets, covered with a clean bedsheet. Beyond that was the kitchen shelf which held an amazing variety of utensils, neatly stacked beside a rusting gas stove. Buckets of water occupied the pride of place all over the room, but drops of it were immediately wiped up by his cleanliness-conscious mother. Ishu lay around the whole day, his pent-up energy bursting out in sporadic explosions of childish tantrums and continuous rants of permission to play on the single mobile phone that Baba had managed to buy second hand from his past employer. After a couple of weeks of resigned confinement, the entire room seemed like the lanes of 'Dilli' during the cold winter months — dark, foggy and suffocating.

Ishu's world hadn't always been so dismal. There was a time his father was ready before him and as he went off to school, Baba would trudge off too, whistling, in another direction, with his thick rope and paddings of cloth for his shoulders to carry loads and any other daily wages work. His loud, cheerful voice boomed beyond the curve of the road as he exchanged greetings with his colleagues.

Ishu's school was across the dispensary and was rife with laughter and calls of young voices. It had a few scraggly, half-wilted plants growing on its boundaries and about a dozen tall deodar trees in the distance. The rooms were small and held no furniture except for the teacher's table and chair and a blackboard; the students sat on small sack cloths provided by their mothers. Ishu knew that his mother had packed a few biscuits for him to munch on before he got his much-awaited meal in the school with the rest of the children. He knew that he had worked diligently at his arithmetic homework — not without invaluable help from his sharp mother — and was sure of getting a "Shabash!" from the teacher.

His mother, educated till the 10th class and quite bright in mathematics, had earlier worked as a maid at a number of houses, in order to supplement her husband's unreliable income. She would make food for them early in the morning, put it on the kitchen shelf for the two of them and move off quickly, throwing instructions at them for the day. They all would meet at home only in the evenings. In this mad rush,

Ishu had started becoming careless and reckless towards his studies. Mummy had noticed that and became worried. One evening, Ishu had seen her talking quietly but seriously to Baba, casting glances at him as he pretended to study. From the next day onwards, she never went to work again.

Baba had managed to keep them afloat, working hard and refraining from wasting money. And Ishu's performance at school had soared.

He loved school. He loved his books. He loved to play with his friends on the small, uneven ground adjacent to the school building. The loud noise of children shouting, laughing, calling out to each other was like elixir to him and he made sure never to miss a single day of learning and playing. Last year he had received two certificates -- one for mathematics and another for highest attendance, which he proudly displayed from the small stage of the school. But those were the good days. Mummy had always warned that good days have a habit of flying off like a bird.

Ishu isn't happy any more. Father's job is off. Mother looks like a frightened, startled deer. Everybody's faces covered in masks; roads emptied neighbourhoods desolate. A panic, a constant apprehension, a sense of doom.... all around.

And school closed. Ishu could hardly believe it! His head constantly whirled with the ceaseless, confusing, worrying questions — Where would he play? How would he learn? What about exams? How would he get promoted to the next, 'very very important' Class 6 ? Where and how would he meet his best friends? How would he get his afternoon meal? His entire world as he knew it, crumbled before him, leaving him shell-shocked, tearful, uncomprehending and devastated. And today his mother, with a troubled look on her face, lowered her quivering voice and said, "Ishu, wear your full-sleeved shirt and the jeans your Mamaji gave you last year. We have to go to the sahebs' homes. Ration has finished."

That was all she said. That was all she needed to say...

And then Ishu's shirt sleeve ripped

He walked quietly beside his mother - both of them wrapped in thought, heading for the 'kothis'. They were oblivious to the changing landscape as they climbed up the slope: the well-designed gardens, the

high, painted walls, the grand gates of the sprawling residences, the large, shiny window panes. Their feet seemed to pull them back, yet they dragged themselves towards the unknown.... Ishu burdened with the shame of an old, torn shirt and his mother with ... only God knew what.

As she stood before the women of the suddenly silent, apprehensive households, her eyes dark as hell's fires, her son stood beside her, his eyes lowered, shuffling his feet uncomfortably, trying to hold together the two sides of his torn sleeve with his other hand. They moved from one silently simmering house to the other, the small purse slowly filling up with money -- sometimes generously given, other times with tightly stitched mouths — the tear in his heart pulling apart the fabric of his being, his eyes filling up with unshed tears and his mouth with an unknown silence. By the time they returned home, Mummy seemed to be like an empty shell. Ishu wondered at the slight weight of her purse and the drooping, hollow blue suit that walked beside him and he felt a strange willingness for nothing envelop him.

When Ishu opened the door of his home, Baba's quiet presence filled him with some semblance of stability and assurance. He was standing at the gas stove, stirring a pot that contained a dismal comparison of the delicious — though small — dinners they used to have before the lockdown. The damp aroma of the broth filled the room with a tempered down hope for a life better lived in the future. He desperately tore away the offending, shaming shirt from his slight body and flew straight into his father's arms. Baba embraced him as Mummy settled on the side of the cot with an imperceptible sigh. Her tired eyes searched for that gleam of humour that she had always found in her husband's eyes whenever she returned home from work. Finding only a questioning gaze there, she dropped her eyes to slowly extricate her pouch from her handbag and counted out the cash from it.

"A month or so will pass easily," she said resignedly.

"And then...?" Baba's expression silently asked, as some of the weight from his shoulders seemed to roll off and shift to hers. She straightened her aching back, reaching out for Ishu's shirt as she picked up the sewing box from the shelf above the bed.

"The madames looked tired," she replied as she threaded the needle.



Review: The Tear

KAMAYANI VASHISHT

A lovely story; simple yet very sensitively written. The story is a narrative extension of a poem by the author which must find place alongside the tale because in many ways, the poem is its mother. One, because poetic utterance is the mother of emotional expression, two...because it was born before the story and then engendered it, three...because it sees Ishu's mother from another mother's (the author) perspective.

It was your eyes
The tide of uncertainty
Coming in and going out
Under the heavy sands of your scarf
It was your eyes
The raven depths
Like stinging black arrows
Piercing the secure bastions of my fort
It was your eyes
Vacuous with worry
There and yet not there
Quieting the laughter of my progeny
It was your eyes
That took a few pieces of paper
With the haughtiness paper deserves
Your pride intact, helping me to keep mine too
Your firm, rightful grip
My yielding one
That joined you and me
And made us complete women
With loving, giving eyes.
Thank you, o unknown woman.
May your family sustain
As mine does.

I read in this poem; a womanist note. Layli Maparyan (Phillips) says, womanism seeks to "restore the balance between people and the environment/nature and reconcile human life with the spiritual

dimension”. It is through her motherhood that the author connects with another woman’s life that has been torn and disrupted by the pandemic. Both, the poem and the story when read together add a three-dimensional understanding to the life of the little boy and his family. His mother and Ishu, both come alive; at times more real than the images of thousands of homeless migrants who inhabited our television screens for months during the first Covid lockdown. Those were numbers and sometimes just anonymous faces on the screen. Often, one would try to construct histories and back-stories to their faces and give them a more detailed context than just a mention in the news. One would wonder what it meant to lose livelihood or home and what sense those children walking alongside their parents made of the whole experience. This story brought some relief in bringing the reader, personally to the little house of one such face in the crowd.

The Corona experience definitely altered each one of us, though in a million diverse ways. There has been an immense outpouring of people’s responses to the pandemic through numerous mediums. The creative mind, the sensitive heart and the spiritual, or for that matter even the non spiritual soul has had much to engage with. In fact, art and literature have been our best allies during this phase. Also, one of its best by-products.

The Tear tells us about the tear in the life of one such family that doesn’t have the luxury of calling the lockdown “a blessing in disguise”. The experience of being locked in a cramped space: a home that takes on a very different dimension when there’s nowhere else to seek respite from it is beautifully imagined and articulated. “Sleeping all together never made such a crowd but sitting around does,” strikes one as a fascinating observation! After a couple of weeks of resigned confinement, the entire room seemed like the lanes of 'Dilli' during the cold winter months - dark, foggy and suffocating. The experience of confinement flows is osmosis and reverse osmosis from the Covid restricted spaces into memory and back.

His memory of happier days, when Baba went about his job as a coolie and Maa, as a domestic help and himself going to the neighborhood school are all luxuries that become windows of escape from the non-ventilated existence now. “Ishu isn't happy any more”, a treacherously simple sentence about the little boy tells us all that’s not right in his life. From his perspective, that’s the whole problem!

Another striking element in the story is the shifting landscape of the realities of the neighborhoods. The mother and son are the connecting links between the two divergent realities; the homes languishing in ennui and a home restless because of the crisis of too little. There's both a physical and mental journey between the two spaces and this journey reveals the inevitable connectedness and interdependence of social layers. The play of the homonymous word, 'tear' lends itself also to the tear in insulated structures of families, social systems and personal memory. The tear in Ishu's heart pulling apart the fabric of his being, filling up his eyes with unshed tears and his mouth with an unknown silence is a beautiful semantic movement of the word that justifies its claim to becoming the title of the story.

The story is replete with visual imagery. There are some very vivid descriptions of the spaces that were forced to wear a new mantle during the lockdown. The same spaces we had inhabited became more real in unprecedented ways, so their details that went unnoticed became overwhelmingly oppressive. The torn shirt evolves into a metaphor for disrupted lives that were until now conducting themselves with a modicum of dignity because they were not out in the public space for all to see. Here, they're forced to bare themselves and their tragedies to others and a consequent sense of anguish and shame accompanies both Ishu and his parents. The image of the mother walking by Ishu's side; the hollow blue suit, speaks volumes of the deprivation that is pushing the family against the wall.

"The madams looked tired," she replied as she threaded the needle." The last line is powerful in all its simplicity. There's hope next month because the madams are looking tired. She might be called to resume work in the *kothis*. There's a ray of hope in the darkness of their little home and lives. Were it not for this line, it would be a sad narrative. This single sentence turns it around and leaves the reader with a faint taste of optimism behind a wry smile. The interdependence of all human life is both inevitable and a matter of relief.

One is reminded of Donne's lines:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
own were; any man's death diminishes me,

because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore, never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Audiences' Live Response

Meenakshi F. Paul: Irene's sensitive and compassionate spirit shines through in this pandemic story.

Anshu Kaushal: The struggle of these challenging times reflected through the eyes of the young boy... heart wrenching!

Namrata Pathania: A melancholic tale with vivid imagery and poetic expressions.

Sapna Pandit: Beautiful story Irene... Congratulations and thank you for such a sensitive and true to life portrayal of those who were forced to leave their homes and walk the streets for months together during the pandemic... loved the story.

Priyadarshini Sharma: Very sensitive delineation of helplessness and hope. Wonderfully narrated and analyzed.

8

APOCALYPSE

JAIDEV

Her expert eyes swept past the neighbours' tele antennas and settled on the saintly pine. It looked dimmed against the lavish cooper clouds. The pine was her old man. Still. The blazing passion of the vine around its trunk staggered her. The land below the tree had gone and houses, gutters and garbage had erupted like pimples. Still, the tree was there and it was her brooding old man. She had once written a poem to it, but no, the thought of the poem was a needle. She averted her face.

A cracker exploded in some distance and the House trembled. The House was a wounded animal. Papery rags of discoloured paint flew down from the kitchen wall. Another Diwali? Something flew up hissing before bursting into several-coloured globs. Then explosions like hurts. Clutching at the loose rusty railing, she sighed but was held by the golden sun half out of the cloud. It was melting fast above the Kasauli hill. The treetops were a long dazzling armchair for its mercury glory. Her eyes swam with the circling sun.

Once upon a time there was a sprightly girl and her dress, on that Diwali night, jingled and glittered with tinsels and beads. That night she was numbed by a strong tension as her eyes pursued the ghostly coil of silver grey, the vanishing trail of her *phooljhadi*. That translucent coil was a poem, and she had revived it again and again. The mother was watching her, from the kitchen window, and the silver plate with the goddess would shake in her delicate ivory hand when the *phooljhadi* rushed towards her. For a moment, the little girl stopped, for there were tears behind the incense curls. Tears again? She knew he was behind all tears. He had been wicked in the morning. He had cursed them both without opening his eyes. And he was lying on the great-grandpa's sofa on which one wasn't allowed even to sit. The mother had prodded her in the back and when she had touched his eyes with a "Happy Diwali, Pa!"

he had shouted them out. The tea was spilled on the soft, soft rug. The pink napkin on which she had drawn a greeting went into another puddle of black tea below the dusty armours of the family greats. He had cursed away the lunch and spent the whole day sitting between the black telephone and the life-size portraits. His golden pen had hung over his thick diary and he was gazing into the flames in the fireplace. Later, in the evening, the mother's *puja* had to be abandoned because he kept shouting abuses from his room. His ivory pencil was rushing upon paper and his grey hair shone in the lamp's orb. The room was blue with smoke and the carpet was a jungle of crumpled, rejected poems. And all the while the dying coughing Ramu Chacha kept standing in the cold, turning away the friends and their packets of sweets. In fact, late last night he had smashed decorations and lamps in the garden and also smacked at the pleading face of the old dying Chacha.

She had not noticed when her dark, six-fingered hands had risen and covered her wrinkled face. A sudden chill made her realise the sun was gone down the Kasauli hill. Her fingers opened and through the chink she saw the pine. It looked calm. Thank God, she said and pressed at her eyelids. Hard, so that red stars gleamed, in the pain of dark. The shimmery borders were the texture of the conch she had found, once upon a time, on the Konark beach. The pale withered mother had sighed with a smile when the girl held the conch before her dark rimmed eyes. The very next instant she had hugged her hard and kissed her sandy cheeks. He had chuckled at the conch. That night, he had hit his head on the bar table and when they pushed him into the room, he had demanded an immediate death. This was, she could feel now, his way of wishing them dead. The mother had died soon after.

Yes, the day is gone. Again, nothing has happened. Nothing except that Diwali seems to be nearby. One more idiot day, she thought, crushing flat a peel of paint. Someone in a new house gave a cheer and a chain of bulbs went on. Yes, the day is over and yet he isn't dead, hasn't died. They're just prolonging his stupid life, but... but what else, come on, what else should they be doing? Yes, yes of course, she repeated and felt rancid. Yes, sometimes he looks alive, he notices your entry sometimes; he even makes some splintery noise. Sometimes he is alive. And so what is one supposed to feel? Gratitude? Oh, no! Her nails were telling into her chapped palms. Please God, let him die!

A faint darkness throbbing with the crickets' calls was oozing up from the hills, encroaching upon the red in the sky. Tomorrow, I'll be up

early; it's Sunday — another Sunday, another visiting morning, you see; she was now addressing the darkening top of her pine. May be, I'll gather a few roses, though he notices nothing. Not that he ever noticed anything. Except of course what he wanted; then he was a hawk. He was a hawk. He must have wanted the mother, so she loved him. Then he must have wanted her — so she was born. Then he must have wanted her to die — so she died, the poor reed of a mother. Then he must have wanted poems, and when they did not come, well, then too.... She sobbed, and suddenly in her dim, tear-touched impression, her pine bent with pity, bent all the way, its trunk making a plastic crescent around the new block of flats, to touch her, console her. The tree was her true friend.

Of course, the tree did not bend, and she knew it. In her poem it had bent and stood between her breasts. Please, you mustn't grudge her this innocent fiction. She had little else. Besides, a bird lived on her pine, and the bird was important.

But now she wasn't looking at the tree. She was away, in that winter night, once upon a time, when she sat by a drafty window in that common coach. They were returning after the ceremony on the river bank. The evening had been horrible, what with the car breaking down and, afterwards, on the river bank, that fat, turmeric-coated priest spitting verses on her ashes. The priest had messed up everything, and the ashes mostly blew in their faces. He had kept scratching into the lines on his forehead, resenting everything the shiny bald priest asked him to do. And when the latter objected to his cigar, he murderously stamped his feet. In the coach, his collapse and his 'damn it!' had drawn attention and in misery she had dropped her bag and when she was feeling and gathering the things, her shoulder had touched his thigh and God! He had recoiled from the touch. Hurt and bewildered she had looked up, but he had hidden the face in his hands and groaned. She had wanted to pull out a cigar from his pocket and shove it into his mouth. But no, she just got back to the seat and watched the jostling reflections in the window pane. By the time, she could isolate his profiled face; the glass had begun to rattle. She was torn by the recognition that everything — his agitation, his roughness towards a fat woman, his recoil against her touch and now these ugly moans — everything was aimed at her. His "God, my God!" was a pair of pincers and these were trying to slash into her and tear some part open. The cigar was nothing, the dead mother was nothing. The girl had sat with a brimful of red-hot emotions and his "God, my God!" had grown more frequent.

A Shylock demanding his pound of flesh? Of her? What had she to give him? What do you want? She had breathed to the face in the glass. For no reason, his drunken mockery of the mother echoed in her ears. "My love is a junkyard, virtuous bitch," he would blare while locking the garage. With a fresh wave of sobs, she had recalled the jasmine face of the mother. Then, slowly it came, swooping like a terror. Her mother's face vanished and left her to her own, in the glass, her nose flattened against it. Something was churning inside her; it was enormous, hot, also ominous and dangerous. She was marooned on some pointed rock, its edge hurting her, revolving her like a weathercock, blood trickling down her thighs. Faintly she sensed all this drama was a preparation for something terrible; she would suffer, suffer and suffer; she would be a victim, get burnt or charred; something was at work on her heart; she would suffer like the mother. And her mouth would be sewn shut. He was groaning as in a rite, invoking some dark powers. He was demanding. But what? She convulsed in agony; something, some stone, was rolling up her throat, preventing her breathing. But... some part inside was expectant, too. Also excited, reckless. She pressed at her throat and whatever mountain it was that was looming up now from some dark waters made her breathe in exultation. Somewhere she was happy that the ashes were gone.

And thus had begun a lifetime of damnation and despair, she thought and nodded. Grimly, in the dark. A brood of images stirred up — bizarre, revolting, hideous. And she had lived through them all. The young girl dreaming of a huge fire-ball with its octopus' arms all in flames and she screaming "Mother" as it stood suspended over her and he smiling and asking her to catch it for him and she scorching and still her arms unfolding... and in the morning she bracing up for an abstract eternity of withdrawal and solitude — at school, in the club, before everybody; and then placing a rose in the tea tray—and he seeing and yet saying nothing. And one day she dedicating her poem on the mother to him, and he giving her a cold stare before locking himself up in the Study; and later "Mother" and three more poems he published in his own name and dedicated them to her! And she fixing tea for him and expecting only a word, one clumsy stupid word of explanation but he only complained of the overboiled egg and his hundred hells! And two years later he getting a collection of poems mined out from her diaries and earning some name as a sensitive feminist male poet! And he coming home drunk, reeking of garlic when she wouldn't lay poems and demanding an instant death. And her attempted escapes all aborting as

jokes, leaving her exhausted but also convinced that she wasn't a person, wasn't anything except a shade, or a shell, and that was her life and her damnation. And all this, she knew, all this had been fixed that night in the coach. His "God, my God!" was a dark spell and she had said "Amen"!

Yes, everything was settled that night, though he had said nothing except "God, my God!" Somehow, the groans were the spell, she concluded in the dark. The pine was a phantom now. She thought of the time and rejected the idea of the meal. It is late again, she thought. And again, it is dark; this way I'll never see it. Still, her new poem was nearly done, and it was for the bird. May be, it's only right that I haven't seen it in clear light. In dark, it is mysterious but also special, my own, it's my dark bird, my bird on my pine. Tenderness lurked inside her and she wondered if someday it would perch on her shoulder.

Suppose he... This he was a queer poet-disciple of Him; he had seen some of his poems in a Melbourne magazine and had decided to call on Him while in India. His own poetry had been received well in his country but surely, he wrote, it was nothing beside the Indian Guru's, she had to hear his praising His sensitive entries into the feminine consciousness and once upon a time the irony of it all had made her collapse with a hysteric "Stop this!" But now she was only wondering, suppose he comes across her... no, His, His still, His, of course, His poem on the bird someday? Would he see the joke? And the irony? Would he remember her and how one evening he and she had stood in the balcony to watch the sunset? That was the first time the bird was noticed. It was hardly a bird, a strange fleeting lump, a ball rising in a trajectory towards the pine's top branches. It had almost touched her shoulder and she was jolted, and he had held her by his hairy arms. Whatever was it that got touched and conveyed? For he had gently bent his head and kissed her on her quivering lips. Suddenly the bird dived at them and after a confused circle rose again and vanished. The bird became a daily event, though next day the poet-disciple had been claimed by Him in some mysterious way for he did not speak even two sentences to her during his month-long stay. For hours together they were locked together in talk and laugh and their voices would trickle out of the closed room or window, and within a few days the poet-disciple had left his hotel and hung his sleeping bag in His inspired room. He was clever and had isolated hundreds of feminine nuances in His four volumes but even he had missed the meaning of the girl in the house or her hysteric tears, once upon a time in a party, at His bland "Meet my

daughter, my muse, my secretary." His brief, remote "How do you feel now" was little better than a young art historian's "It mustn't be easy to be a celebrity's daughter" or a poetry teacher. "Why did you stop your studies like that?" Oh, he was clever all right, but how could he guess?

Then it came. A compacted ball slashing its way from behind her, it caused a sudden flutter in her bosom and her *dupatta* rose and fell with her heart. Her mouth opened and her eyes widened feeling the needles that were lights in the distance. Blood rushed and tingled at her finger ends. And then ... it was gone past the antennas. A branch fluttered above and it was quiet. She stood with dreams tantalized on her cheeks and her eyes drinking the dim vision that was. It was her bird, she told a mocking murmur within her; why else should it go swishing so close to her? And who knows one day, someday, may be for a second only, it will gently land on her pleading shoulder, its beak softly trickling, exploring down her neck. In her poem, it did that. Her eyes were lingering to where the pine top was, she let out a long, half-happy breath and her body shivered. It's cold, it really is.

The telephone rang in the dark house. She trembled: Is He dead? Or has He again done something horrible? Last time she was called at night was because He had hit the nurse with an open hot-water bottle, smashing her glasses. He was left unattended that night. God knows she had gone all the way and tried hard to be of use. She had changed the sheets, fighting against the foul stench and He had cursed her all the while. She had wanted to pound on his chest and blast him with some truths at last, but no, she had allowed the kingdom, and the power and the glory, to include her poems too. The new Lord's Prayer, chanted for him.

After a pause, the telephone rang again. She moved. Her steps were clockwork through the kitchen and the dining room. The hand that pressed the switches was stone. Is he dead? He cannot be, He is God, the Father, immortal, everlasting. His being in hospital is his show. He cannot die, she shouted to the stuffed tiger against the grandpa's gun, and the telephone grew silent. She heard the return of silence and breathed. Is this life? She asked facing herself in the oval mirror. And this, is this woman me? Once upon a time there used to be a girl, but since that night in the coach, everything had been his, no longer a me or my life. Thine is the kingdom.

The telephone again. The stone turned but did not move. Is this life? What has it meant? And He cannot die. First, she must be

abolished. The bell persisted and the stone moved, sank on its knees and picked the receiver. Is this life please? With much accumulated rage she shouted, "Is He dead or not?" The speech exhausted her, and she listened, her eyes staring at the dusty chandelier. She dropped a pebble of yes into the instrument and pressed at her heart. He seemed to be dying at last, and a car was coming to take her at the gate. Is this life? And will it someday perch on my shoulder? And you who were so good at finding feminine nuances, did you never wonder, never suspect...? And is it fair? She asked the faded roses in the large vase while her hands gathered a green shawl. Is it fair, tell me please? She moaned at her sandals. And what do you make of one who steals her lover and her poems and her everything and spends an hour praising his iron will in giving up smoking? Is this life? She asked the gate. And is He dying?

"Let Him die," she says as the lift door is shut by a low-statured, bearded villager with an umbrella in his hand. The words shock him and he turns, arranges his glasses and says with confused anger, "What?" She is a stone and turns and faces the man's doll-like, field-smelling wife who in confusion folds her hands and presses them upon her bridal necklace. A child stands besides her holding her by a saree crease and a saliva thread is swinging from his lip. The lift crosses another level and the child frees the saree fold but tumbles. With a shock she realises the child is blind. Her mouth jerks open and she kneels down and holds his round milky face into her six-fingered hands. The hands are alien and the child recoils as she fills the face with kiss after kiss after kiss. There is something irregular in the act and the mother coughs and throws an anxious, urgent look at the man. He stops the lift and rather roughly herds away the child and the woman who looks very relieved at such a narrow escape from so obvious a witch. Alone now, she gazes at the numerous stub stains on the cage wall. Is this life? Is it fair? The lift crosses another landing and she wonders if he had noticed her pockmarks when the bird arrived and he kissed her. But what does it matter how I lost him? I lost him to Him. But is this life please? She is asking the lift and there is no one to watch how trapped this sagging, grey-haired woman looks as she crazily beats at the ascending metal frame.

She knows she is supposed to say something, perhaps thanks, to the anxious doctor who shifts a catheter to his left hand and leads her by the arm into the intensive care. She tries to form a word, her lips move, but nothing happens and she is a stone. Her nose twitches at the phenyl smell and she sets her eyes on the several bottle-stands around His head.

A syringe-carrying nurse holds a chart before the doctor. With a sigh, he waves his hand before His eyes. Nothing. But the eyes move when she reaches the bed. "A Corimin please, Sister," the doctor mumbles and the nurse selects a syringe. She brings her face right against His and at once something flickers across the web-veined eyeballs and the socket muscles expand shaking the dip tube in his nose. The eyes are purple but a red trickle is rising into them. And she is a stone.

Bubbles brew up at his suppurating lips. They are words, pus-stained and deformed, aborted kids, dying before they are allowed. She is a stone but bends. Right, wry, write, rite, what? Must be Write. Naturally. Write a poem on the death of a poet. Always an actor! She is a stone and bubbles are flying at her face and she smiles. Write! What else?

But write what? She suddenly panics and her hand takes the nurse's pad. His whole body is spasmic, a huge vibration and the noise from his lips is a beetle's hum. For a moment He seems to rise in the air and his eyes are two red embers. Pus bursts from the lower lip and the room seems to shake under his booming cough. With clots of blood flying out of his mouth, something emerges brokenly.

Once... up ... a time ... was ... a devil ... an he ... ate ... his ... delic...
chil...

As his mouth shuts, she hits at her eyes. What is this? What did he say? She looks hard at the dead mouth, rushes at him, gets tangled in the catheter tube, and falls on his chest. Glass bottles crash and the doctor shouts for water. Her body is on fire as she shakes Him hard. "Did you say those words?" She screams into His dead eyes. "Of course, you did. I heard, I heard". Her fingers crawl like lizards all over the bloody face. For a second, she lowers her right ear at her own breast. Something is cracking, splitting in it. She is rocked by a massive sob and her tears fall on her face as her kiss forgives Him all. When the nurse and the doctor hoist her face, she realizes that the tension and purpose of her life is gone; she will never write a poem again; nor will the bird perch on her shoulder.



Narrated by Praveen Kumar

Self-Blame and Self-Preservation in Jaidev's "Apocalypse"

MEENAKSHI F. PAUL

Apocalypse is usually understood to mean great or widespread destruction or devastation, particularly one brought about by violent means. It also means to reveal, unveil or disclose. In Jaidev's story both meanings are wrought with an acute sense of existential anxiety bordering on the absurd. Biblically, the apocalypse has special reference to the end of the days; it is believed that the horrific events of the apocalypse, drawn over ages, will be followed by the longed for Second Coming. The protagonist of "Apocalypse" is severely traumatised and left spent and empty after a lifetime of pitiless oppression; but the possibility of redemption is tenuously presaged at the end of the story.

"Apocalypse" is a dark, almost surreal, story about the brutalisation of a daughter by her father. Surreal elements in the story imbue it with inexhaustible meanings as its dark world articulates the unavowable in social discourse. The tone of the story is restrained to balance the horror of the narrative. "Apocalypse" is a scarring study of dehumanisation riding on the ego of an abusive failed poet and of his daughter overwhelmed with his violence and her father hunger. The story opens with the haunting image of a father substitute, the 'saintly pine' which the protagonist calls her 'old man' and her 'true friend' who even in her advanced age is still there as her 'brooding old man': "The pine was her old man. Still. The blazing passion of the vine around its trunk staggered her". The word 'still' holds one of the keys to unlock the complex plot of the story. It is strategically placed between the bedridden old father, the old man tree and the blazing passion of the vine. The tree is still there after so many years, holding out strength and security to the woman's dazed mind and body, which are tyrannised by her father. The tree is still and so is she; nothing has changed between them or in them, although all around the tree, change has "erupted like pimples". 'Still' the protagonist is staggered by the passion of the vine clinging to it. The passionate embrace of the vine is driven by self-preservation, for it would die if the tree died. She is the vine clinging to her tree, her life. The reader is driven into a vortex of events, thoughts and feelings in what

appears like a meld of *The Bluest Eye* and *Metamorphosis*. The tree and the vine are the first of paired symbols in the story. There is a brief mention of a poem she wrote many years ago to the tree and now she averted her face to escape the ‘needle’ of the poem; however, as a Diwali cracker exploded ‘in some distance,’ ‘the House trembled’ and the woman is catapulted to the past as a witness to her childhood life. Instantly, we are introduced to an abusive, violent, temperamental, frustrated poet who reduces his fearful wife and daughter to tears and hits their old domestic worker — the ‘pleading’ ‘dying coughing Ramu Chacha.’ “The House was a wounded animal” suffering as much as the human beings from the violence perpetrated by the patriarch.

The father is on his death bed in the hospital and the woman wills him dead, yet the ‘idiot’ day is over and “he isn’t dead, hasn’t died”. The death wish is juxtaposed to an earlier violent incident when “he had demanded an immediate death. This was, she could feel now, his way of wishing them dead. The mother had died soon after”. ‘Hasn’t died’ suggests that the woman believes her father is able to govern his and their lives according to his will. He exercises control on their life and death: “He must have wanted the mother, so she loved him. Then he must have wanted her—so she was born. Then he must have wanted her to die — so she died, the poor reed of a mother. Then he must have wanted poems, and when they did not come, well, then too...”. The woman breaks down at this recollection and the tree reaches out to her compassionately. It is interesting to note that while the House has been capitalised, the pine tree is not, keeping the latter well within the precincts of the fantastical and thus, highlighting the pathetic aspect of the girl/woman’s transferred subjectivity to the tree:

She sobbed, and suddenly in her dim, tear-touched impression, her pine bent with pity, bent all the way, its trunk making a plastic crescent around the new block of flats, to touch her, console her. The tree was her true friend.

Of course, the tree did not bend, and she knew it. In her poem it had bent and stood between her breasts. Please, you mustn’t grudge her this innocent fiction. She had little else.

In the midst of this emotional turmoil, Jaidev introduces another pair of symbols: a hawk and a bird. “He was a hawk” when he wanted something. And, although the tree cannot hold her straying mind, it was vital because “a bird lived on her pine, and the bird was important”. As the protagonist is identified with the bird, the juxtaposition of the hawk

and bird directly leads to the life-altering pitiless incident that defines her life thereafter. She is now away on a train with her father. They are on their way back from performing the last rituals of her dead mother on the riverbank. What follows is a dark, turbulent and chaotic passage that suggests vicious incest and rigid control that the father exercises over her: “And thus had begun a lifetime of damnation and despair, she thought and nodded. Grimly in the dark. A brood of images stirred up—bizarre, revolting, hideous. And she had lived through them all”. The ‘victim’ with her mouth sewn shut responds ambivalently from her “bracing up for an abstract eternity of withdrawal and solitude” to “placing a rose in the tea tray” for him. She dedicates her poem on the mother to him and he proceeds to publish that and other poems from her diary in his name. In a macabre irony, the poems earn him the title of a “sensitive feminist male poet”. When she “wouldn’t lay poems” he demanded “an instant death” convincing her “that she wasn’t a person, wasn’t anything except a shade, or a shell, and that was her life and her damnation”. Damnation because the hawk has the bird firmly in its talons and there is no escape. Also, because she had said ‘Amen’ to his dark spell of “God, my God!” and thus willingly lost her soul to his profanation. This self-blame causes further anguish and trauma as she internalises the guilt, shame and anxiety of a victim who believes she has colluded in her own oppression. The vine clings fiercely to the tree for survival.

The spell is not broken even with the arrival of a queer poet-disciple of the father from Australia. The bird was first seen by her as she stood with the visitor in the balcony to watch the sunset and he kissed her. The young man is immediately commandeered away to his room by the father and the disciple, though clever, has no clue that the four volumes of sensitive poetry expressing ‘feminine consciousness’ are actually written by the “girl in the house” mentioned in the poems. The father deviously crafts her image with “her hysteric tears” and gaslighting which effectively turns away potential suitors—the poet, a young art historian, a poetry teacher. The bird of her subconscious self is also only intermittently and partially visible to her after that evening on the balcony: “May be, it’s only right that I haven’t seen it in clear light. In dark, it is mysterious but also special, my own, it’s my dark bird, my bird on my pine. Tenderness lurked inside her and she wondered if someday it would perch on her shoulder”. She is now writing a poem, ‘*His poem*,’ for the bird and wonders if the poet-disciple would get to read it and grasp the irony of it. The woman feels momentary happiness as she thinks: “who knows one day, someday, may be for a second only, it will

gently land on her pleading shoulder, its beak softly trickling, exploring down her neck. In her poem, it did that". Once again, the last line negates the hopefulness of the preceding line by removing the bird to the realm of imagination. It is noteworthy here that the bird does not ever sing. Not even in her mind. The disturbing voicelessness of the woman is starkly enunciated by the songless bird.

Mary Ann Mattoon writes in her introduction to Jungian psychology that both the male and the female child could have a father complex, and it could be either negative or positive. The protagonist of the story appears to have a paradoxical emotional and psychic relationship with her father. She steps up to change his fouled linen in the hospital when he hits a nurse with "an open hot-water bottle" but he still "cursed her all the while". At this juncture, the extent of her enslavement to him is brought out with piercing clarity by the author:

She had wanted to pound on his chest and blast him with some truths at last, but no, she had allowed the kingdom, and the power and the glory, to include her poems too. The new Lord's Prayer, chanted for him.

When the telephone rings, she is turned to stone, incapable of any emotion but disbelief: "Is he dead? He cannot be, He is God, the Father, immortal, everlasting. His being in hospital is his show". The phone falls silent as she stares at herself in the mirror; a woman looks back at her from where once there was a girl. The self-conscious moment acutely brings out the awareness of loss and the interminable time that has elapsed in the clutches of the hawk. The stare at the reflection, underline the absence and depersonalisation of self that for long have made her feel 'not real'. Distanced and disconnected both from herself and the world around her make it difficult for her to attach emotions to memories.

The telephone rings again and the hospital intimates her of his imminent death, 'finally.' She is overcome with the question "Is this life? And will it someday perch on my shoulder?" The question reverberates in her mind till "Is this life?" is juxtaposed with "Is he dying?" and eventually gives way to "Let Him die". The 'stone melts' for a fleeting second in the lift as she caresses the liftman's blind child with her six-fingered hands and plants kisses all over his face. Disconcerted, the man stops the lift and herds his bewildered wife and child out. Jaidev now describes her in an image hauntingly evocative of Pecola Breedlove of *The Bluest Eye* who asks each and all if her eyes were the bluest and who

at the end of the novel: “[beat] the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind”. The woman in “Apocalypse” asks each and all “But is this life please? She is asking the lift and there is no one to watch how trapped this sagging, grey-haired woman looks as she crazily beats at the ascending metal frame”.

In the hospital she is a stone again and the full horror of ‘is this life?’ is encapsulated in the “Bubbles [that] brew up at his suppurating lips. They are words, pus-stained and deformed, aborted kids, dying before they are allowed”. Habitually, she takes the nurse’s pad and prepares to take orders on what to write, but the blood-clotted words that fly out of his mouth are completely unexpected:

Once ... up ... a time ... was ... a devil ... an he ... ate ... his ... delic ... chil

She is shocked and incredulous: “‘Did you say those words?’ She screams into His dead eyes”. The half-blurled confession of the dying man breaks the spell he had cast on her and something in her ‘cracks and splits’—the stone splinters and a ‘massive sob’ escapes the woman: “her tears fall on her face as her kiss forgives Him all”. This unprecedented and dramatic forgiveness scene at first appears parodic. The equivocal use of the words: ‘deli’—was it delicate (like the vine) or delicious; and ‘chil’—chilled or child, open the possibility of several parodic interpretations. In psychological terms, by his broken barely comprehensible words right before his death, he had robbed her of “the tension and purpose of her life”. It can also be understood, however, in the light of Ezekiel 36: 26 in which God promises his people: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” The Bible posits this replacement as a rebirth to spiritual awakening and ultimate redemption; nevertheless, this forgiveness extracts a colossal price: “she will never write a poem again; nor will the bird perch on her shoulder”. ‘Is this life?’ she had asked; it wasn’t, and yet, tragically but redemptively, it is.



Audience’s Live Response

Kamayani Vashisht: Ma'am, the fact that you chose to use the word, "father hunger" in the very first few sentences, placed the story in its right context. Everything else falls in place...candidly and spontaneously. Thank you!

Anupama Singh: This story has once again taken me to the classes of M.A. where Jaidev Sir used to take us on the journey of the characters of stories/fiction and while listening to him many times we could not hold back our tears. Our whole focus used to be on every word that he used to utter and his deep expressions can never ever be forgotten.

Namrata Pathania: A harrowing tale of abuse.

Anu Jaidev: Ma'am, a privilege to hear you on this story.

Sangeeta Singh: Amazing analysis Ma'am. It was a rather complex story. Need to read it.

9

A SNOW TRAIL

JANESH

It was snow everywhere when I got up in the morning. So much snow was being witnessed after a long gap: eternity as it were..., nostalgia about such winter mornings of yore, when my grandmother would coax me out of the warm bed, chirping: "Get up and come out! Look the earth has been studded with silver..."["*Uth Bhaua, uth! Dekh kedi chandi he chandi bikhri ri. Uth, uth...*"], suddenly possessed me. The eutony in her words invariably made me leap to the veranda, amazed not so much by the snow, but how it was projected by Ammaji, whose bed time stories full of gods and demons along with innocent human creatures braving the wrath of both, and of kings and queens, brave princes and lovely princesses, were catalysts enough to fantasize snowfall into something beyond mere ecstasy. Jacky, the dog next door, would start to pule and then growl impatiently, exhorting me to come often. I would quickly gulp down a cup of hot milk, allow myself to be wrapped in woollens without a frown, and run out wildly with Jacky, leaving our footprints on the pristine snow.

Later in the day, when I would team up with my cousins and other children of our Mohalla, I would cook up a story (not really a product of my imagination but a contextualization of childhood gossip) how snow was the messenger of Jacky's Mama, who would come to visit him shortly, making him so excited so early in the morning. Days would then be spent snowballing, sledging, creating a host of snow people and preparing *kulfis* by freezing a mixture of milk and sugar in layers of snow for our little private parties. But even in the midst of such happy times, the elderly boys in the group did not miss a chance to rag the young ones like us. It was January 30, and my cousin was persistently impressing upon me that we need to pay homage to our martyrs when the siren would be sounded. Overcome with patriotism, I could not have noticed him passing mischievous glances with others. I was in the midst of a

sledge ride when the siren went off and I tried to stand up to offer a salute to the great ones, to find myself flying into a *nallah* along with my sledge orchestrated by an uproar from other boys. The bulk of soft snow graciously saved me from any injury though. My Big Brother, who first protected me from the bullies and would always keep my back in numerous gulley fights as I grew up. May the powers that be speed his soul... *Amen!*

The awe and amazement for snowy days instilled by Ammaji continued to grow on me over the years. Find it impossible to remain cuddled indoors even today when it snows. And today was very special with so much snow around. Quickly gulped down a spicy *parantha* with steaming coffee, zipped-up my jacket and stepped out on to the pristine snow, gently cherishing the first imprint of my feet on its softness. As I walked along, couldn't help imagining as if I were paving the way to some uncharted destination.

The heavy snow had taken its toll on everything around. Trees had snapped branches, power supply wires were dangling from helplessly bent poles and water lines were frozen cold, but what of these. Not the occasion to worry that there would be no power or water supply for days to come. The crystalline beauty of the icicles was gradually taking on shapes, sparrows having the fill of snow with their pecking beaks, monkeys dangling from the tree branches releasing a brief spurt of snow, people walking steady now to suddenly lie flat in obeisance to some unseen power, only to be stunned was a snow missile fired from somewhere as they got up. Ash and gravel were being laid to make a safe pathway to save restless souls from slipping into the dungeon of despair as others laughed hilariously at their fall, only to be chastised with a swift fall the next moment. It was a longish walk from Summer Hills through Chaura Maidan across The Mall and beyond The Ridge. As I moved from Lakkar Bazar towards the Snowdon, I halted at a tea stall. It used to be our favourite haunt during studentship in Sanjauli College. It used to be a boys' college back then. Boisterousness, hooliganism and other forms of physical jugglery were hallmarks of what appeared to the public about the life in college. The boys would form chains covering the entire road and force girls from other colleges to bow down in order to cross over. But the essential character of the college comprised a disciplined and deeply academic culture. Sanjauli Boys dominated when it came to joining professional courses or securing university positions in academics or the co-curriculars. And while the boys would tease and taunt girls along the Lakkar Bazar road, not a squeak could be heard if

one of them happened to step inside the campus. And the famed rivalry between Sanjauli Boys and medical students from the IGMC which often erupted into violent clashes or the intra-college wars between different gangs of students. Studies would often be struck due to such incidents and most of us preferred to bask in the sun on The Ridge rather than braving the tundra that the way to the college was.

The tea stall, converted into a medical shop lately, was named *Anamika*. We would visit it several times a day for *chai* and sometimes *samosas*. As it was a relatively new eating joint then with few customers, we could sit there for as long as we desired. In fact, we were warmly welcomed as regular customers. The smoky cups of tea with ample time to spend over them would make us speculative – *fikro-fankaars* – as we loved to describe ourselves. There was not a problem in this universe which we could not resolve, empowered by the *amrita* infused in our beings by *chai* and *samosas*. There used to be so much excitement around the corner. India had hosted the Asiad and the NAM summit on a grand scale: a journalistic quip read – “Given India’s ability to organize *tamashas* overnight, if God made the world in six days, India could have done it in five”. The PSLV, our first satellite launch vehicle had been tested successfully. Rakesh Sharma had journeyed to space. It was some years since the Emergency and the atmosphere was generally euphoric. It was also the era of the cold war, of the disruption of the USSR, of gradual transition to a material and virtual world. There was more than a lot to keep us engaged.

The artistic strain in some of our comrades, be it writing, sketching, mimicry and the like was also sculpted here. Ayub (AK) would be busy singing melodious Mohammad Rafi Songs. Sodhi (SSS: Silly, Stupid Sodhi) would be busy sketching automobiles, aspiring to be an auto designer; or worrying about saving money to pay for his dog’s bus fare when they went to Delhi in the winters as his father won’t provide for it. Vineet (Vicky) was our Romeo, always working out ways to impress girls, always anxious about his appearance, constant subject of our taunts. Kartar (KT) would make every place pleasant with his ready smiles. Subhash (Bhashi) would turn aggressive over anything. I was the philosopher of the group; at least Pradeep (BB: Bhola Bhandari, the latter incidentally being his surname) always expected me to express some serious thought. BB was, still is simple and naïve, willing to believe everything. We would exploit his naivete to arrange food for us when we were broke: “*Oye BB! Kal hamare liye apne ghar se paranthe bana ke lana. Bhukhe rakha to bhoot banker tujhe tang karenge*” [“If you do not bring us

paranthas to eat tomorrow, our hungry souls are going to torment you”.] And BB actually brought something for us to eat. Surinder (Guru) was our reality instructor. He would taunt Vicky for his romantic dreams: “*Kake, tera yahan bhi barahwan number hai. Tujhse pehle gyarah line me lage hain. Chod yeh dhanda aur mast reh*” [“Don’t waste your time here. Eleven other boys are already towing this line ahead of you”]; or incite Bhashi: “*Bhashi to badahi susheel balak hai, Bas isse panga mat lena, nahin to phod dega*” [“Bhashi is such a sweet angel as long as you don’t bother him. He will just blast you, if you do”]. Again, when BB would ask me something: “*Usko chod, vah nahin bolega. Bas imagine karlega ki maine bol diya hai*” [“Who are you talking to? You will have to imagine his answer”].]

We lost Bhashi to eternity...

KT had to bear the brunt of fate; lost his parents and young children to a mysterious illness. Gosh! How does he manage to smile still?

Vicky, we all knew, would not try to reconnect once he left.

SSS too disappeared from the scene

Guru came back to meet us twice and I went to his village near Udhampur in Jammu once. But the terrorism happened and all connectivity was snapped. I hear that he is doing well.

AK, BB and I being localites do bang into each other at times. A brief stroll with AK on The Mall or passionate chats with BB always makes our day. Last time I met BB, he drove past me in his car, caught my glimpse in the rear mirror and, without even thinking, reversed through the traffic to hijack me for a drive.

Memories...

One fine afternoon in *Anamika*, while we were guffawing and joking, waiting for tea to be served, I felt hot tea seep into my trouser, irritating the skin beneath. The service boy had spilled the tea while putting it on the table and on to my lap. I was about to swear and curse but suppressed my anger as two deep innocent eyes stared at me without comprehension or fear: a little boy who had just been brought to the stall for work. “*Tumhara haath to nahi jala?*” [“Did you char your hand?”], I patted his hair as the owner scowled at the boy, pulled out my hanky to scrub my trouser and patiently waited for a fresh cup of tea.

It was after almost a decade that I found myself entering the old, familiar place. I nodded to the owner, who did not betray any sign of

recognition. The young lad had grown and supported a beard and a long 'tilak' on his forehead, was behind the stove. Trying to ring a memory of old days, I queried:

"Pehchana? Main apne doston ke saath yahan aata tha aur tum hamain chai pilate the?" ["Do you recognize me? I used to come here often with my friends. You used to serve us tea".]

"Aate honge. Yahan to kai aate-jaatehain" [May be. So many people keep coming and going".] was his deadpan response.

I tried to gulp down his apathy and said, *"Chalo, ek garama-garam chai to pila do. Bahut thand hai"* ["Ok. Do serve me some hot tea. It's so cold".]

"Ek chai in sir kobhi de dena" ["Give a cup of tea to this gentleman also"], he passed on the order to another young boy who now did the serving and cleaning.

I waited for tea, feeling cold and fidgety over the lack of human warmth I had always experienced in this place. It was perhaps this unconcern which made me repeat my order loud, *"Jaldi do bhai!"* ["Give me tea, quick!"]. My old accomplice in so many games and little mischiefs, be it making faces obliquely at his employer or pinching the hips of our other friends while we sat for tea, let out a volley of abuses at his apprentice: *"@#&\$#@&.... Dikht anahin. Sahab ko kitne jaldi hai!"* ["You @#&\$#@&.... Can't you see, Sahab is in such a hurry?"].

Chanmmnn.....!!!!

A past memory was suddenly shattered like a glass, its unheard smash exploding my innards and the very spirit.

I instantly got up and walked out. Not only had the voice and physicality of my little friend of one time, with deep, innocent eyes hardened, a part of him was also perhaps stone dead. I couldn't imagine what my reaction would have been if he had spilled tea on my trouser today?

Sand and gravel had blotted the whiteness and purity of snow. Numerous feet had flattened its softness. Shopkeepers had littered it with scraps and leavings from inside. Someone had also peed on it.

I turned back homewards as the snow abruptly began to look grotesque....



“The Snow Trail”: A Trail of Inner Devastation

PRAVEEN KUMAR

Janesh Kapoor’s disquieting story “The Snow Trail” begins with nature at its splendid best. It has snowed and there is whiteness all around. This whiteness has a special meaning for the protagonist because it flashes on his mind the fond memories of his past. He is reminded of his childhood when his grandmother would coax him out of a warm bed in harsh winters. She had an innate fondness for this beautiful natural phenomenon and wanted to instill the feeling of awe and wonder in the young boy. After an initial reluctance, quite normal for winters, the boy would spring to his feet and rush out to play amidst the silvery-white surroundings. Structurally, the story swings between the past and the present. The past is available in the story as nostalgia, while the present, devoid of childhood innocence and carefree attitude, is present through absence. It’s also about the expectations we have from people around us, not necessarily from family and close friends, but even from those with whom our bond is shallow and tenuous. The story is a study in human relations, which though lend beauty and charm to our lives, yet can also be a big drain on our emotional energy.

Coming back to the presence of the grandmother, it is easy to pick up a number of linguistic and structural hints that point to the nature and depth of her influence on the young boy. Her words used to cast a spell on him, filling him with excitement and verve. Look at the words: “The eutony in her words invariably made me leap to the veranda, amazed not so much by the snow, but how it was projected by Amma ji, whose bed time stories full of gods and demons along with innocent human creatures braving the wrath of both, and of kings and queens, brave princes and lovely princesses, were catalysts enough to fantasize snowfall into something beyond mere ecstasy.” In an attempt to show the impact of the grandmother’s words on the child, the writer makes use of an uncommon, but a very evocative word “eutony”. It comes from the Greek ‘Eu’ meaning good and from the Latin ‘Tonus’, meaning tension. Hence, ‘eutony’ conveys the idea of a harmoniously balanced tonicity, or in simple terms, the pleasantness that a word’s sound produces in an individual. The grandmother’s words and stories acted like a catalyst and fired his imagination. Her words had the power to transform snowfall into something mysterious. There have been numerous instances of great

writers imbibing their grandparents' linguistic and imaginative capabilities; here too the protagonist is shown to have learnt from his grandmother the ability to convey ideas and feelings in beautiful and expressive phrases and images. Look at the following construction: "The crystalline beauty of the icicles was gradually taking on shapes, sparrows having the fill of snow with their pecking beaks, monkeys dangling from the tree branches releasing a brief spurt of snow, people walking steady now to suddenly lie flat in obeisance to some unseen power, only to be stunned was a snow missile fired from somewhere as they got up." The present spell of snow stirs his childhood memories, and he goes lyrical quite like his grandmother. Since the grandmother was a simple lady who, in all probability, would use uncomplicated words and expressions to convey her ideas and feelings, but her language still sparkled because it had a natural rhythm and authentic flavour. The child, now fully grown up, has picked up some of her grandma's linguistic felicities, and the moment it snows, he is overwhelmed with emotions, and his words, expressions, and imagery do full justice to his emotional state.

The situations, places and people in the story may look familiar to anyone who has either lived in Shimla or been a regular visitor to the town. The walk from the Summerhill to the Mall and onwards up to Sanjauli makes many of us nostalgic. Despite the bus service available between these places, a lot many people love to walk on foot, enjoying the easy pace and serenity of the surroundings. The charm of this route is enhanced by the presence of many tea stalls and general stores, selling daily necessities. The greatest appeal of these tea stalls lies in the personal touch and intimacy of interaction that is invariably seen between the shopkeeper and the customer. At times the quality of tea may not match the expectations, but the feel of the place and the ease with which one could sit there for an extended period of time makes the experience unique. One such stall found favour with the young protagonist and his friends, where they would routinely enjoy hot cups of chai and occasional samosas several times a day. One may not even realize, but the experiences of this kind gradually cement an unspoken bond between the place, the people who manage it, and the visitors. After the college days, friends stopped visiting the tea stall, but the current spell of snow ignites the protagonist's memories relating to their favourite haunt. The protagonist, driven by some inner compulsion, finds himself walking into Anamika, their *adda* for tea and stimulating discussions. This place had the resonances of a Bengali *adda* where intellectuals gather, sip cups of tea, and discuss a range of topics from politics to poetry. After a lapse of ten years, not only did the place but also its people look a tad different. The protagonist's attempt to seek the past familiarity is almost rebuffed by the

owner's heartless indifference. He tries to swallow his pride and overlook this apparent coldness, but the subsequent interaction too offers no comfort. Things deteriorate further when he displays impatience and wants to be served quickly. The same service boy, who was once forgiven by the narrator for his innocent immaturity despite spilling tea over his trousers, looks indifferent, almost contemptuous. This is too much for him to bear, and the narrator walks out stupefied at this unexpected and rather unpleasant turn of events. The past memories which felt so heartwarming and life-enhancing a moment ago suddenly lose their meaning: "*Chanmmnn.....!!!!* A past memory was suddenly shattered like a glass, its unheard smash exploding my innards and very spirit." A beautiful past ceases to exist that very moment. In a hugely embarrassing and painful realization, the narrator learns that a memory we cherish and nurture for years together may have no meaning for someone else. At times there is a wide chasm between our perceptions, and if we don't learn to negotiate this gap, it may have devastating consequences for us. In that moment of frustration, the snow begins to look grotesque, loses its whiteness, softness, and purity, and even looks ugly, littered with scraps and leavings: "Sand and gravel had blotted the whiteness and purity of snow. Numerous feet had flattened its softness. Shopkeepers had littered it with scraps and leavings from inside. Someone had also peed on it. I turned back homewards as the snow abruptly began to look grotesque...."

The writer succeeds in capturing the state of shock and disbelief in a masterly fashion by projecting the inner turmoil of the protagonist on to the world outside, more particularly on the pristine snow, which now loses its luminosity and begins to look ugly. A situation of this kind may arise when one person flows with time, changes, evolves, and adapts to the changed realities of life, while the other one remains stuck in the past, hopelessly wallowing in nostalgia. A shopkeeper, for instance, gets a chance to meet a significant number of customers routinely. Even students who visit them frequently depart once they pass out, only to be replaced by a new set of students. Shopkeepers in general don't nurture a special bond with any particular set of customers. For them it is business, a question of livelihood, but for a customer, it may be indulgence. So, their approaches are in sharp contrast to each other's. While a shopkeeper takes things in his stride and doesn't fuss about emotional issues, a sensitive person may experience emotional trauma in such situations. Since educated customers have language at their beck and call, they find it easy to intellectualise, blow it out of proportion, and feel things much more intensely than they should.

The story explores the fragility of an individual's inner world that doesn't have its own resources for nourishment, but merely feeds on the mercy of others, or on the possibilities of love or indifference they receive from a relative, friend, or acquaintance. The story is peopled with numerous characters having unique attributes, but they just provide a context and background, and have hardly any bearing on the direction or the thematic focus of the story. Except for the grandmother whose pervasive presence lends beauty and charm to the story, no other character leaves any lasting impression on the mind of the reader. One could question the writer why he chose to tantalise the reader with hints of so many different characters when he had no intention to delineate them in detail. Possibly the answer lies in the fact that their primary role is to contextualise the flow of the story, without having a bearing on the final outcome. That may be one of the possible reasons why the writer takes no pains to develop these characters beyond a certain point. Besides the narrator, it is only the grandmother who gets the writer's attention. With a few careful strokes, the writer brings her alive in a masterly fashion.

Some readers may have issues with the abrupt ending of the story, but I believe it is in line with the unanticipated and appalling shock the protagonist receives from the people who would otherwise evoke happy memories in him. It was totally unforeseen and so justifiably dealt a stunning blow to the narrator. By not offering a detailed peep into the protagonist's mind, the writer left it to the reader to feel the impact of the shock, depending on their understanding of the situation, or their level of sensitivity. The writer succeeds in his attempt to build a situation whose enormity can plausibly leave inerasable scars on the psyche of the individual who happens to undergo this kind of humiliating experience. The story offers a rewarding experience with its well laid out structure and a clear progression of thought.



Audience's Live Response

Kamayani Vashisht: Thank you sir! Nostalgia is always beautiful...becomes better when it enters literature.

Girija Sharma: A slice of life...narrated in a manner most engaging with a lot of involvement...Congratulations Janesh.

Shikha Kapoor: Thoroughly enjoyed the story and the analysis. I guess most of us can identify with the emotions of the narrator.

Anjali Parmar: Thank you sir. A wonderful and lively portrayal of life.

Archana Sharma: Old memories well-knit into a story.

10

RADHE RADHE

KAMAYANI

Nirmalaji didn't take any of my calls that morning. It had become a ritual for me to call her every day on the way back from my walk. Not that I had been very close to her all my childhood and youth, but now on the wrong side of forty, I felt a newfound empathy for older people. I had, for most of my life, thought of her as the most crooked member of our extended family—clever, ambitious and selfish. Her smile had never convinced me of her love for the children of the family. It was never as exuberant as it was when she greeted her political colleagues.

I remember her husband busy himself with visits to hospitals, diligently filling prescriptions, bills and reimbursement forms. He would take out his files every day, reshuffle his papers, arrange them neatly and tuck them back safely under lock and key. And then, one day he died. Nirmalaji cried and cried. I wasn't moved by her crying. My mother told me; people have their own ways of mourning. She was sure Nirmalaji was sad; very sad.

This was about thirty-three years ago. Nirmalaji dedicated her life to the service of people in her district ever since. People sympathized with her childlessness even more. If only she had a son, she would feel more secure. Even a daughter would do. Her husband's demise freed her up of the domestic duties that had irked her sense of liberty. She had a lot of time on her hands now and she felt compelled to dedicate it to the service of society.

She had had to tone down the fire she was known for when she was in college. She was the first-ever girl to be elected President of the Students Union in the town's college. She dreamt of a bright political career. Senior leaders who visited the state always set aside time to get introduced to her. She radiated confidence and energy when she spoke on stage! Many, including her, imagined she'd become the country's

Prime Minister one day. Men around her were either scared of her or in love with her. She was called *Durga* by her political allies, and she believed it.

Somewhere along the way, marriage happened. She strived to keep *Durga* alive. But home and dreams never agreed with each other. She had never reckoned she would struggle to balance them out. She knew her priorities. Nation first! But priorities have a way of reshuffling themselves. She had imagined bedazzling the world with her large *bindi*; a symptom of the complete woman. After the first week of wearing red and pink silks, she realized her credibility lay in the *khadi sarees* and *Kolhapuri Chappals*. She started carrying a packet of smaller *bindis* in her *Jhola* and just before entering the party office, the size of the dot on her forehead would dramatically alter, and so would the look in her eyes.

Her colleagues, however, failed to reciprocate her enthusiasm. So, she worked harder than ever to prove her commitment to the nation and her capability to become...well, a worthy member of the party, if not the Prime Minister. Home would wait for her like a hungry, abandoned child. She began to despise all children. The very sight of them was disturbing. Marriage was expected to yield fruit. But she aspired to mother the entire nation!

And then, love happened. During one of the month-long training programmes of party workers, she met “J” who unlike the man at home, shared her idealism and participated in her dreams. They would sit in the lawns of the alien town every evening after the day’s routine and discuss political thinkers. She knew there were limits she couldn’t cross, and yet it was always a thrill to sneak under the barbed wire. The evening sessions gradually changed flavor without the political thinkers getting a whiff of it.

By the time she returned home, she was only half home. This man, the hungry home and the children waiting to be born were more repulsive than they had been a month ago. “J” and “N” wrote letters to each other with feverish frequency and then, they suddenly stopped. Nirmala would never know why. Routine took her in, and “J” became a thought that sneakily crept upon her once in a while, when her husband found the courage to demand her body. She had begun to forget what he looked like, but whenever he visited their bedroom, “J” was the sparkling Adonis they had jauntily read about the evening before they parted.

She managed to prove her commitment to her leaders; enough to be given a ticket in the state legislative elections. The pre-election campaign was exhilarating; just as she had dreamed. She felt like the *Shakti* that would save the world from doom. She wanted people to believe in her and they did! The man at home, his angry old mother and the children waiting to be born kept themselves busy with complaints and other chores. He contemplated *Sanyas* but that would affirm people's apprehension that the children waiting to be born, were not born because of him. So, he stayed and distracted himself with visits to doctors, prescriptions, Gold *bhasms* and *Shilajeet*.

She lost that election and subsequently, favour with party seniors and popularity amongst the townsfolk. But it all resurged when her husband died. She rose again—the Phoenix of a strong woman who never lost sight of her dream of serving the people but had to take a break from politics to tend to her ailing husband. Walking the streets of the town, talking to people in the villages gave her a new surge of life, the gasp of breath she needed to fill her aging lungs with. She fought another assembly election and lost. This time she felt broken, in spirit and in body as postmenopausal osteoporosis set in.

She sought refuge in *Bhakti*. After all, from nation to God is a noble trajectory to follow. As years went by, Nirmala increasingly found herself spending her days confined to her room. The hungry house needed her no more. She needed it. The life-sized calendar in her room was no longer a picture of her party's founding father. It had been replaced by one of Radha and Krishna. The calendar had expired ten years ago but who cared! Gods don't have limited shelf lives. All day she would drag herself around the house, managing the cooking, managing the cleaning, and managing her bones, all the while chanting "Radhe Radhe".

She gave me a call one morning, last year. I took the call unwillingly. She cried and I cried. I hated her for making me cry with her version of her story. I wondered why she had picked me to narrate her life to. I was two generations her junior. She said she always thought I understood her...even when I had been seven years old. She said she always wanted to explain herself to my angry eyes. I struggled to preserve my opinion of her, yet found myself calling her every day after that call. I waited for her to drop more details about herself and found myself sharing many of my own, ones I did not know existed.

Of late, she had started complaining of lack of sleep. Some days, we'd laugh. Some days, I'd struggle to keep the conversation going.

Some days, I wished she would completely fade into oblivion. But that day, when she did not take my calls, I got worried. I tried getting on with my day but when I couldn't, I mailed out an application for leave.

On reaching her place and getting in by the rear door, I found Nirmalaji lying on the floor, crying and unable to move. I helped her get up and reach her bed. She had obviously broken her leg. She was visibly distraught and shaken. Having called for an ambulance, I sat her down to prepare for the hospital. She wanted me to change her clothes.

“How did you fall, *Ammaji?*”

“I had climbed on the chair and the chair flipped”

“What were you doing trying to climb the chair so early in the morning?”

“I hate this Radha. I wanted to beat her up with my walking stick, but the chair flipped.

It dawned on me that she had dragged a chair to the wall and climbed on it to beat up the Radha in the calendar.

“Radha?” I asked, feeling perplexed. “Why would you want to do that?”

“She doesn't let me sleep. These two perform *Rasleela* all night long. It annoys me so.”

“Hmm” I said, “We'll see what to do about them later. Let's get you to hospital first.”

“Not them...only her. Make sure she's not there when we return. I want only Krishna on my wall.”

Review of “Radhe Radhe”

JANESH KAPOOR

We are now so much aware about the stereotyping of characters against the backdrop of social norms and how we are compelled, always or at least at times, to surrender to such stereotypes. It is the story of a failed life (which partakes of personal aspirations and interpersonal relationships) and the need to have at least one relationship or association with some other member of the human world through which we can find self-expression [or, maybe self-realization in a different dictum] – and age or gender need not be a bar to it, as is amply borne out by the initially unstable and then apparently a need-based association between the narrator and her protagonist, Nirmalaji, which is gradually transforming into a life-bond between the two. Of course, “Radhe Radhe” is, in a manner of looking at it, a story about human existence, and we do need a human environment to exist (I don’t mind if such an expression sounds aphoristic, just as it might be viewed as a feministic (given the centrality of a woman protagonist and her life) as well as a post-modernist narrative as it interrogates and fails to arrive at any plausible answer or solution with regards to every situation and relationship, whether it be on the personal or familial front, something which is very much rooted in the immediate context of the story and therefore quite authentic.

The thematic context of the story offers an interesting contrast with the story by Rajan Kaushal, “Why Fear...” which was presented in the same session. While Rajan’s story emphasizes the Divine schemata behind what happens in life, Kamayani’s protagonist, Nirmalaji, again assumes existential dimensions in that she is not afraid to make choices of her own, which appear to be drastic from the social stand point, and she is left near alone to grapple with their consequences. Since we do not really know how to respond to a personage like Nirmalaji, we take refuge in self-acclaimed pity for her. For instance, after her husband has died, we pity her thus hoping that she would realize the ‘blunders’ she has been committing all along: “People sympathized with her childlessness even more. If only she had a son, she would feel more secure. Even a daughter would do”. Maybe Divine Will matters or maybe it is a design to make people conform to the social structure....

In consonance with the thematic matrix of the story – a woman refusing to succumb to social stereotypes of a wife, daughter-in-law and a mother, or at least, attempting to carve out and establish her own identity despite her circumstances, the narrative tone is loaded with irony – pretty pungent at times. As a case in point, the sections which describe the relationship between Nirmalaji and her ‘unnamed’ husband may be taken up here. As the narrator states at the outset, “I remember her husband busy himself with visits to hospitals, diligently filling prescriptions, bills and reimbursement forms”. The irony embedded in the description of her husband indicated that theirs’ was a failed, insignificant relation from the very beginning, or that no attempt was made to build or resurrect it, except for occasional physical encounters [which too were doomed to fail – “he stayed and distracted himself with... prescriptions, Gold *bhasms* and *Shilajeet*” – and we later find our protagonist taking refuge in the romantic image of “J”, who “was the sparkling Adonis” of her imagination]. And then Nirmalaji’s husband dies ‘unnamed’. In fact, no other character in the story is named except for the metonymic “J”, whose brief association with her remains an unfulfilled, fleeting association for Nirmalaji’s being. The reference to our protagonist as “Nirmala(ji)” keeps her a distant, sulking member of her social as also of her political tribe which she wished to use as launch pad for her ambition to ‘mother’ her nation, although her own children (that is if she desired them, we are not sure of that) remain “waiting to be born”. Yes, the irony involved is pretty pungent as we can at times experience the stench emanating from Nirmalaji’s existence, which might in turn be the stench of some un-owned, dumped aspect of our own being. She envisions herself as ‘*Durga*’ and ‘*Shakti*’ to enable herself as ‘Mother of All’ and this makes her political colleagues either love [respect] or fear her, but perhaps never approach and appreciate her as another human being. And just as the mythological ‘Durga’ reincarnates herself in different forms to battle the demons and protect her children, Nirmalaji is also constantly changing her ‘avataars’. Her large red bindi and her silk sarees are thus substituted with *khadi*, *jhola* and small bindis to fulfil her political incarnation of the saviour of the nation. Such a transformation is deep-dyed in irony as, while it represents the desire to fulfil her own self, it also signifies her acceptance of political stereotypes to be able to do so in sharp contrast to the decrying of stereotypes – the key tone of her character.

Irony is also embedded in the narrative progression in the story, which is presented as a linear one on the surface but eventually

characterized Nirmalaji's existential space paradigmatically. The linear progression in the narrative may be listed thus:

“Somewhere along the way, marriage happened”

....

“And then, love happened”

....

“[Then] [s]he sought refuge in *Bhakti*. After all, from nation to God is a noble trajectory to follow”.

The events that 'happen' along the way are not a part of the schemata of things Nirmalaji has herself desired. These are merely contingencies of life that must be met with only to move on. However, when the apparently linear sequence of events is mapped out spatially to collate her life and being, the movement [hesitant to describe it as a transition] from husband to lover to God embodies the existential void in her existence which she fails to fill up because of the unbridgeable hiatus between the kind of life we desire and the one which is thrust upon us. [Maybe, some kind of balance, as proposed by Shivani in her story of the same title is required. I am reminded of lines by a senior poet from our state, Sh. Om Prakash Saraswat ji, in this context:

जब यह विश्व तुम्हारी आकांक्षाओं का विस्तार नहीं / तब तुम कैसे कामना कर सकते हो / सभी नागफनियों के कमल होने की ? (Writing from memory, might not be his exact words). As such, it may be observed that irony is the informing principle of the narrative structure of Kamayani's story.

The problematic construction and collapse of Kamalaji's world should be analysed from a woman's perspective for an authentic understanding thereof; however, I do not feel qualified to do so. The story and the protagonists' mental and emotional environ may be aptly approached and analysed from Erich Erikson's formulation of 'inner' and 'outer' space as characterising the basic orientations of women and men respectively towards life and its processes. According to Erikson, a clinical psychologist, who based his inference on the basis of play blocks given to a group of girls and boys and their subsequent 'constructs', women predominantly exist in the 'inner' sphere, which is well-ordered and peaceful, like the interior of a house [of course, such an assumption might be justifiably contested by feminist theorists who might ascribe the tendency exhibited by girls to social conditioning, but Erikson tends to

view is as a distinguishing trait] as compared to the ‘constructs’ by boys which were mostly outdoor, automotive objects. While we may not dwell on the relative merits or demerits of Erikson’s experiment, the potent idea being projected here is that the life-matrix of a woman is deeper and more precarious compared to that of a man. Kamalaji’s life, her emotions and expectations fail to be internalised and integrated with her being as they are constantly thwarted by the existing social structures in familial, social and institutional domains, which lack an imaginative apparatus to allow scope and space for the individualisation of sorts that she seeks.

The use of language, words and expressions, used like a refrain, reinforce the formal progression in the story as well as its structurality. As a prominent example, let us look at the expression pertaining to children “waiting to be born” once again in this context. The expression is repeated twice and is subtly reincorporated into the narrative pictographically by positing ‘home’ as ‘hungry, abandoned child’. The expression is specifically an epitome of the discontinuity between the desired and ascribed existence of Nirmalaji while ironically establishing the stereotypes one is expected to enact as a part and parcel of social existence and the apathy and patronizing sympathy that it entails from the social environs which keeps on changing in tone and tenor. The sentences are short and run-on syntactically which is suitable to establish the narrative contingency of the story. The use of such sentences keeps the reader alert and connected to the narrative tone and is also characteristic of the unwieldy gap between expectation and reality of individual and social existence.

However, the run-on or the run-through nature of the narrative also gives rise to some stylistic lapses. For instance, the reference to the angry mother-in-law should have been introduced early and integrated with the husband, hungry home and children waiting to be born in the course of the narrative. However, the reference is made casually, only once and remains a loose strand. Similarly, the ‘Adonis’ motif (or label it as you like it) with regards to “J” is a passing reference and fails to impress upon our perception of either the protagonist or of “J”. The calendar bearing the couple-image of Radha-Krishan, which/who do/does not have a shelf-life, and is used both as a motif (text-centric) and an archetype of eternal or unfulfilled (?) love could also have been introduced in Nirmalaji’s bedroom as the backdrop of her physical encounter with her husband while cohabiting with her ideal love on the imaginal plane. This would have enabled the emergence, disappearance

and re-emergence of the motif/archetype with a symphonic ardour and force to encapsulate Nirmalaji's life saga in a blended, conglomerate manner towards the conclusion of the narrative.

Audience's Live Response

Namrata Pathania: A bold narrative of the dilemma of a woman who wanted to excel in her chosen field...who somehow keeps the illusion of perfect marriage going on... Great Kamayani.

Irene Rattan: That was a stupendous first attempt.

Sapna Pandit: That's what story tellers do. Restore order with imagination... Congratulations Kamayani... beautiful narration.

Girija Sharma: That was a beautiful story Kamayani... inimitably narrated in an idiom uniquely yours...with a great sense of theatre too...Congratulations!

Anita Sharma: Bold theme, beautiful portrait of a woman trying her best to live life at her own terms, simple clear short precise sentences, narrated with clarity and confidence! Congratulations Kamayani! Looking to have few more stories from you.

11

ममा

कुँवर दिनेश सिंह

अखिल अभी सात बरस का नन्हा, अबोध बालक था। दूसरी कक्षा में पढ़ रहा था। अक्षर-ज्ञान से कुछ आगे बढ़ रहा था। अपने आसपास की दुनिया के रंगों को पहचानने लगा था; रंगों की अपील को, रंगों के भेद को, बूझने लगा था। अभी कुछ दिन पहले उसकी माँ उसके लिए सुन्दर सी गुलाबी रंग की टी-शर्ट लाई तो उसने उसे पहनने में आपत्ति जताई। कारण पूछा तो कहने लगा, "ममा, पिंक कलर तो गर्ल्स का है, मैं तो ब्लू या व्हाइट कलर की टी-शर्ट लूँगा..." माँ देख रही थी कि बच्चा कुछ-कुछ बड़ा हो रहा था; अपनी पसन्द-नापसन्द रखने लगा था। न केवल रंगों की पसन्द करने लगा था, बल्कि टी.वी. सीरियल्स में भी रुचि लेने लगा था। उसे अब पहचान थी कि किस चैनल पर कौन सा सीरिअल आता था, कौन किरदार थे और कुछ-कुछ सीरिअल में कथानक के प्रवाह को भी समझने लगा था। उसे लगभग सारा घटनाक्रम याद रहने लगा था। चरित्रों को, पात्रों को, समझने लगा था; उनमें तुलना करने लगा था। यही नहीं, अब वह अपने आस-पड़ोस के लोगों को भी विश्लेषण व तुलना की दृष्टि से निहारने लगा था। सभी को बड़े ध्यान से बाँचने लगा था; उनके आचार-व्यवहार को परखने लगा था। पड़ोस की आँटी को देखता तो उसको अपनी माँ की तुलना में देखता। स्कूल में मैडम को देखता, तो मन ही मन उससे अपनी माँ की तुलना करने लगता।

अखिल की माँ को उस दिन बहुत आश्चर्य हुआ और परेशानी भी हुई, जब वह स्कूल से लौटने पर उससे पूछने लगा — "ममा, आशीष की ममा कैसी अच्छी बनकर रहती है... आप वैसी क्यों नहीं रहती?"

"अच्छी का क्या मतलब? मैं अच्छी नहीं हूँ?" माँ ने बड़ी हैरानी से, थोड़े ऊँचे स्वर में पूछा।

"अच्छी हो... पर... वो... वो सुन्दर-सुन्दर माला पहनती है... बिंदी लगाती है... चूड़ियाँ पहनती है... लिपस्टिक लगाती है... आप क्यों नहीं लगाती...?"

"देख, बेटे... इन सब चीजों से कोई अच्छा या सुन्दर नहीं हो जाता... अच्छाई और सुन्दरता तो इन्सान में अपने अच्छे गुणों से आती है... पर तू क्यों सोचता है ये सब... बड़ों की बातों पर ज़्यादा ध्यान मत दिया कर, समझा... ?" माँ थोड़ा डाँट कर बोली।

माँ की डपट से अखिल थोड़ा सहमकर चुप रह गया। माँ ने उसे खाना खिलाया और फिर होमवर्क पूरा करने का आदेश दे दिया। वह खुद अखिल के साथ बैठ गई और जब तक सभी विषयों का कार्य पूरा नहीं हो गया, उसी के साथ बनी रही। सारे कार्य में एक घण्टे से अधिक समय भी नहीं लगा। सरकार की नई नीति के अनुसार अब बच्चों को ज़्यादा होमवर्क नहीं दिया जा सकता था। ज़्यादा से ज़्यादा कार्य स्कूल में ही करवाया जाए, ऐसे निर्देश जारी हो चुके थे। इससे बच्चों को खेलने व अन्य पाठेतर गतिविधियों के लिए समय काफ़ी बच जाता था। अखिल की माँ ने उसे ताना मारते हुए कहा — "अब एक तो तुम लोगों को होमवर्क भी ज़्यादा नहीं मिलता, बस खेलने की तरफ़ ध्यान रहता है या फिर टी.वी. पर या फिर ऊल-जलूल बातों पर..."

अखिल ने माँ की बात पर ज़्यादा ध्यान नहीं दिया। और होमवर्क खत्म होते ही तुरन्त बाहर मोहल्ले के बच्चों के साथ खेलने के लिए जाने की इजाज़त माँगने लगा। इधर माँ ने इजाज़त में सिर हिलाया और उधर वह दौड़ पड़ा घर से बाहर...

पति की अचानक एक कार-एक्सीडेंट में मृत्यु हो जाने के बाद बच्चे के पालन-पोषण के साथ-साथ अन्य कई जिम्मेदारियों का बोझ अब अकेली निशिता के काँधों पर आ गिरा था। सास-ससुर गाँव में पैतृक घर में रह रहे थे। वे वहाँ की थोड़ी बहुत जो ज़मीन थी, उसकी देखरेख करते हुए बुढ़ापे का वक़्त निकाल रहे थे। महीने में एक-आध बार बहू व पोते से मिलने शहर भी आते। और बीच-बीच में, विशेषतः स्कूल से बच्चे की छुट्टियों के दिनों में और त्यौहारों के अवसर पर निशिता भी अखिल के साथ गाँव जाती रहती थी।

निशिता शहर में बच्चे की पढ़ाई व पालन-पोषण की जिम्मेदारी निभा रही थी। पति राज्य के लोक-निर्माण विभाग में अभियंता थे। अपने जीते-जी वे दो-मंज़िला एक मकान बनवा गए थे। ऊपर की मंज़िल अपने लिए रखी थी। नीचे की मंज़िल में दो-दो कमरों के तीन सैट थे, जो किराए पर दिए हुए थे। इनसे जो किराया मिलता, उसी से निशिता अब सभी खर्चें पूरे करती। एक तीसरी मंज़िल अभी बननी बाक़ी थी, मगर अभी यह निशिता के वश में नहीं था। उस की एकमात्र प्राथमिकता थी बेटे अखिल की अच्छी पढ़ाई और परवरिश।

अखिल की बातों पर निशिता ने थोड़ा ग़ौर किया, मगर फिर एक अबोध बच्चे की जिज्ञासा मात्र मानकर उसे गम्भीरता से नहीं लिया। उसे बिल्कुल समझ नहीं आ रहा था कि वह अखिल को किस तरह समझाए कि भारतीय समाज में एक विधवा को शूंगार करने की इजाज़त नहीं है। मगर उस छोटे-से बच्चे को वह समाज के क्रायदे-क्रानूनों व बंदिशों के बारे में क्या बता सकती थी। उसे खुद समाज के नियमों को ठीक से समझना मुश्किल हो रहा था तो

उस नन्हे बच्चे को क्या समझा सकती थी। वह तो सिर्फ़ इतना जान पाई थी कि समाज के रीति-रिवाज़ों, मान्यताओं, विश्वासों व नियमों का शांत रहकर पालन करते रहो तो जीवन शान्तिमय ढंग से चल सकता है और यदि इनमें कहीं कोई टकराव पैदा हुआ तो अशान्ति तो होगी ही, जीना भी दुश्वार हो जाएगा। और समाज पुरुष-प्रधान होने से परम्पराओं व नियमों के पालन का सारा बोझ महिलाओं पर रहता है। पति के न रहने के बाद एक बेवा का तो मानो आधा अस्तित्व ही समाप्त हो जाता है। और जब आर्थिक स्वातन्त्र्य न हो तो आधा क्या, अपना अस्तित्व तो रह ही नहीं जाता; वह तो आश्रित हो जाती है दूसरों पर, परिवार पर, समाज पर। जहाँ कहीं वह लीक से हटी, समाज उससे (आत्म-)सम्मान के साथ सिर उठाकर जीने का अधिकार ही छीन लेगा।

वैसे आस-पड़ोस में बड़े समृद्ध घरों से कुछ नारी-मुक्ति संगठनों से जुड़ी महिलाएँ निशिता को उत्साहित करतीं एक सामान्य जीवन-यापन के लिए, किन्तु वह उनके बहकावे में न आती। उसे उनके वचनों में प्रचारबाज़ी ज़्यादा दिखती; सही चिन्ता व सहानुभूति कम दीख पड़ती थी। मन तो निशिता का भी करता कि वह भी रंग-बिरंगे, चटकीले कपड़े पहने, गहने पहने, शूंगार करे — एक समय था जब वह प्रायः जैसे कि करवा-चौथ के दिन, तीज-त्यौहार के मौक़े पर, नवरात्रि-दिवाली व बसन्त-पंचमी जैसे पर्वों पर और विवाहादि उत्सवों में ख़ूब शूंगार करती थी — सोने से लदी तो वह कैज़ुअली भी रहती थी। किन्तु कुछ वह समाज के भय से, अशान्ति के भय से, परम्परा में ढल गई और कुछ वह अपने पति के प्रति प्रेम व आदर के भाव के कारण भी समाज के चलन को स्वीकार किए हुए थी। लेकिन एक बच्चे को यह सब समझा पाना अभी सम्भव नहीं था। वह बेचारा तो अभी तक ठीक से पिता की मृत्यु को भी समझ नहीं पाया था।

निशिता सोच में डूबी हुई थी कि अचानक डोर-बेल बजी। उसने दरवाज़ा खोला, अखिल खेल कर थका-थका वापिस आया था। साँझ ढल गई थी। सूर्य रोज़ की तरह आँखें मूँदे प्रयाण कर चुका था। अखिल टी.वी. पर कार्टून नेटवर्क लगाकर बैठ गया। निशिता रसोईघर में रात के भोजन की तैयारी में लग गई। खाना पकाने में पौना-एक घंटा लग गया। इस दौरान अखिल कार्टून प्रोग्राम देखता रहा। खाना तैयार हो जाने पर निशिता घर के एक कोने में पूजा के लिए बनाए स्थान पर साँध्यकालीन पूजा-आरती के लिए गई। उसने अखिल को भी वहाँ बुलाया। दोनों पूजा के लिए बैठ गए। माँ ने जोत-अगरबत्ती जलाई और आरती गाई, बेटे ने भी ताली बजाकर साथ दिया। इस नित्य सन्ध्या के बाद दोनों ने भोजन किया। निशिता कुछ देर टी.वी. पर महिलाओं से सम्बन्धित सीरियल देखने में व्यस्त हो गई।

उधर अखिल अपनी छोटी-छोटी कार, जीप और अन्य खिलौनों के साथ खेलने में मशगूल हो गया। मुँह से गाड़ियों के चलाने की हुम्-हुम् की आवाज़ें भी निकाल रहा था। माँ

बीच-बीच में टोकती कि आवाज़ न करे। मगर अनजाने ही रुक-रुक कर वह फिर आवाज़ें निकालने लगता। माँ के व्यस्त रहने पर वह अक्सर इसी प्रकार खुद ही में मस्त रहता।

टी.वी. पर सीरियल के खत्म होने पर निशिता ने अखिल से भी खेल बंद कर अब सो जाने को कहा। अखिल ने सोने से पहले एक कहानी सुनने की इच्छा व्यक्त की। उसके दादा-दादी भी उसे कहानी जरूर सुनाते थे। माँ ने भी पंचतन्त्र की एक छोटी-सी कहानी सुनानी शुरू कर दी। मगर अखिल ने यह कहानी पहले भी सुनी हुई थी। उसने कोई नई कहानी सुनाने का आग्रह किया। माँ का मन कुछ उखड़ा हुआ था। उसने अखिल को थोड़ा डपट कर वही कहानी सुनने को कहा और ज़ोर दिया कि वह जल्दी सो जाए। उसे सुबह भी जल्दी उठकर स्कूल जाना था। कहानी सुनते-सुनते उसे नींद आ गई और कुछ देर में निशिता की भी आँख लग गई।

अगली सुबह फिर से वही दिनचर्या प्रारम्भ। प्रातः जल्दी-जल्दी अखिल को तैयार कर आठ बजे निशिता उसे स्कूल तक छोड़ने के लिए निकल पड़ी। स्कूल करीब एक किलोमीटर की दूरी पर ही था।

रोज़ की तरह बेटे को स्कूल छोड़कर लौटने पर वह घर के सारे काम निपटाने में लग गई। दो बजे फिर से अखिल को स्कूल से लाना था। जल्दी-जल्दी काम निपटा कर निशिता पौने दो बजे ही स्कूल के प्रांगण में पहुँच चुकी थी। छुट्टी ठीक दो बजे होनी थी। और बहुत-से बच्चों की माताएँ भी वहाँ पहुँच रहीं थीं। छुट्टी के इंतज़ार में सभी एक-दूसरे के साथ चपड़-चपड़ गप्प-शप्प में लगीं थीं। हर रोज़ की तरह चर्चा के केन्द्रीय विषय थे — एक-दूसरे के सूट, साड़ी व गहने, या अपने-अपने बच्चों की बाल-लीलाएँ, या सास-ससुर की आलोचना, या पतियों के तौर-तरीके, या फिर बच्चों की क्लास-टीचर पर टिप्पणियाँ।

निशिता भी अखिल के घनिष्ठ मित्र आशीष की माँ के साथ बातचीत में व्यस्त हो गई थी। आशीष की माँ बहुत सुन्दर थी। माथे पर बड़ी-सी लाल बिन्दी उसकी आभा को चौगुना कर देती थी। दोनों बच्चों के बारे में ही बतिया रही थीं। एक दम घंटी की आवाज़ हुई। दो बज गए थे। छुट्टी की घोषणा थी। सभी अभिभावक बच्चों को लेने गेट पर इकट्ठा हो गए। अध्यापकों ने अपनी-अपनी कक्षा के बच्चों को लाईन में खड़ा कर दिया था और एक-एक करके बच्चों को गेट से बाहर भेज रहे थे। पाँच मिनट में अखिल भी बाहर आ गया। वह तुरन्त माँ की तरफ़ दौड़ा और अपना बस्ता उतार कर उसे थमा दिया। साथ ही आशीष भी आ चुका था और उसने भी अपना बस्ता अपनी माँ के पास दे दिया था। अब दोनों बच्चे हँसते-खेलते, बतियाते, हाथों में हाथ डाले, कभी एक-दूसरे के काँधों पे हाथ धरे जा रहे थे। दोनों की माँएँ भी बातें करतीं जा रहीं थीं। बातों बातों में आशीष का घर आ गया। उसकी माँ ने निशिता से कुछ देर रुकने को कहा। पहले तो निशिता ने कुछ आपत्ति जताई, मगर जब आशीष ने भी अखिल को कुछ देर रुकने के लिए ज़ोर दिया, तो निशिता मान गई।

इधर निशिता आशीष की माँ से बातों में लग गई। स्वेटर की बुनाई; किसी डिश की रेसिपी; बच्चों के विकास और कुछ पारिवारिक समस्याओं को लेकर चर्चा चल रही थी। उधर अखिल और आशीष अपने-अपने बस्ते उठाकर भीतर के कमरे में चले गए। दोनों अपनी बातचीत में व्यस्त हो गए। इस बीच आशीष की माँ ने चाय बना दी व बिस्किट के साथ निशिता को परोसी। बच्चों के लिए दो गिलास दूध कमरे में देकर आई। बातों-बातों में पता ही नहीं चला कैसे वक़्त बीत गया। दो घंटे बीत गए थे। घड़ी में चार बजते देख निशिता खड़ी हो गई और आशीष की माँ से चलने की इजाज़त माँगने लगी।

— "अब हमें चलना चाहिए... हमने आपका बहुत समय ले लिया..."

— "नहीं, नहीं, आप ऐसा क्यों कहती हैं? बहुत अच्छा लगा आप से बातचीत कर के... और... अखिल और आशीष भी कितने मस्त हो गए हैं... इन बच्चों की भी अपनी ही एक अलग दुनिया होती है..."

— "जी हाँ, यह तो सही है..."

— "कुछ देर और बैठो ना... बच्चों को खेल लेने दो... इन का जी अभी नहीं भरा..."

— "नहीं, नहीं, अब चलना है... अखिल को होमवर्क भी कराना है; थक कर यह सो जाता है, फिर काम का वक़्त नहीं रहता... घर के और काम भी हैं..." ऐसा कहकर निशिता अखिल को आवाज़ लगाती है, मगर बच्चे अपनी बातों में इतने खोए थे कि अखिल को माँ की आवाज़ें सुनाए नहीं दीं। आशीष की माँ और निशिता उन्हें बाहर लाने को कमरे में गईं। निशिता ने अखिल को चलने को कहा –

— "अखिल, घर नहीं जाना है क्या?"

— "ममा, हम वीडियो गेम खेल रहे हैं, कुछ देर रुक जाओ ना..."

आशीष भी कहने लगा, "आँटी, हमें गेम पूरी करने दो ना..."

— "नहीं बेटे, अब देर हो रही है; हमें चलना होगा... अखिल फिर किसी दिन आ जाएगा... (अखिल से) बेटे, अब चलो... अपना बैग उठाओ और चलो..."

अखिल ने उन्मना-सा होकर बैग उठाया और बाहर की ओर को चल पड़ा। दरवाज़े तक आशीष और उसकी माँ उन्हें बाय कहने को आए और उन्हें फिर आने को कहने लगे। निशिता ने भी उन्हें अपने घर आमन्त्रित किया और इसके साथ ही वहाँ से विदा ली।

घर पहुँचते ही, कपड़े बदलने के बाद, माँ-बेटा दोनों कुछ देर टी.वी. देखने बैठ गए। बेटा कोई कार्टून प्रोग्राम देखने की ज़िद्द कर रहा था, मगर माँ ने महिलाओं का कोई कार्यक्रम लगा

दिया था। ऐसे में बोर होकर दस-बारह मिनट में ही अखिल की आँख लग गई। टी.वी. से थोड़ा ध्यान हटने पर निशिता ने अखिल को सोते देख, उसे कम्बल ओढ़ा दिया। और स्वयं उसके होमवर्क और क्लास टीचर से मिलने वाले अन्य किसी निर्देश के लिए उसके स्कूल बैग से डायरी निकालने को बंदी।

बैग खोलने पर पहले बाहर की ज़ेब से उसने लंच-बॉक्स निकालकर धोने के लिए अलग रखा और फिर जब उसने डायरी निकालने के लिए बैग के अन्दर हाथ डाला, तो उसका हाथ कुछ ऐसी चीज़ों पर पड़ा, जिनके बारे में वह सोच भी नहीं सकती थी। लिपस्टिक, मस्कारा, बिन्दियाँ और कुछ चूड़ियाँ — ये सब चीज़ें देखकर उसका माथा ठनक गया। आखिर अखिल ये सब कहाँ से लाया होगा? और क्यों लाया होगा? किसी के यहाँ से चुराए होंगे? पर किस लिए?

बच्चे की इस हरकत पर उसका मन उद्विग्न हो उठा। उसने तुरन्त सो रहे बच्चे को झकझोरना शुरू कर दिया।

— "अखिल... अखिल... उठ... अखिल... उठ ज़रा..."

अखिल की नींद टूट गई। आँखें मलता हुआ हैरानी में वह माँ की ओर देखने लगा। माँ को गुस्से में चिल्लाते हुए देख वह सहमा-सा, अवाक् था। माँ फिर उसे झकझोरते हुए, उसकी लाई चीज़ों को हाथ में लेकर बोली —

"अखिल, ये सब कहाँ से लाया है तू?... बता कहाँ से लाया है?"

माँ को झल्लाते हुए देख अखिल डर के मारे कुछ नहीं बोला। उसे खामोश देख माँ को उस पर और सन्देह होने लगा। अब वह उसके कान मरोड़ते हुए पूछ रही थी — "जल्दी बता, नहीं तो सज़ा मिलेगी... तेरी पिटाई करूँगी और वॉशरूम में बंद कर दूँगी..." उसके इस प्रकार बार-बार धमकाने पर अखिल कुछ रुक-रुक कर बोलने लगा —

"आ... आशीष..."

वह अभी कुछ बोल ही रहा था कि उसकी माँ ने प्जिर से चिल्ला कर झिड़का, "क्या? तूने आशीष के घर से चोरी किया ये सब?...?" और साथ ही उसने अखिल के गाल पर एक तमाँचा भी जड़ दिया।

अखिल रोने लगा। माँ ने फिर उसके कान मरोड़ते हुए पूछा, "सच-सच बता तूने चोरी क्यों की?"

सिसकते हुए अखिल बोला, "ममा, मैंने चोरी नहीं की..."

— "फिर ये सब सामान कहाँ से आ गया तेरे पास?"

- "मैंने आशीष के साथ ऐक्सचेंज किया है..."
- "क्या मतलब? क्या ऐक्सचेंज किया है?"
- "मैंने उसे अपनी ट्वाय ट्रेन दी है... उसके बदले में ये लाया हूँ"
- "लेकिन ये सब किस लिए उठा लाया?"
- "आपके लिए..."
- "क्या? मेरे लिए?... लेकिन क्यों?"
- "वो आशीष की ममा भी तो ये सब लगाती है... तो आपके लिए भी ले आया..."
- "लेकिन तूने ऐसा क्यों किया?"
- "आप भी आशीष की ममा की तरह सुन्दर दिखोगी..."

अखिल के सिर पर हाथ फेरते हुए निशिता ने उसे गले से लगा लिया और कुछ पलों के लिए वह चुप्प सी हो गई।



कहानी 'ममा' की समीक्षा

बलदेव सिंह ठाकुर

'ममा' कुँवर दिनेश विरचित कहानी है जो इनके प्रथम कहानी संग्रह "जब तक ज़िंदा हैं" में संगृहीत एक महत्वपूर्ण व मर्मस्पर्शी कहानी है। इससे पूर्व इनके अनेक काव्य-संग्रह, समीक्षात्मक व शोधात्मक ग्रंथ प्रकाशित हो चुके हैं। इन्हें कई साहित्यिक पुरस्कारों से नवाजा जा चुका है व इनके सृजन पर कई विश्वविद्यालयों में शोधकार्य भी हो रहा है।

'ममा' एकल (विधवा) नारी व उसके सात वर्षीय बच्चे की कहानी है। माँ का नाम निशिता व बेटे का अखिल है जो शहर में रह रहे हैं। पति की मृत्यु हो चुकी है जो मरने से पूर्व शहर में दो मंज़िला मकान बना देता है। निशिता ऊपर की मंज़िल में रहती है और नीचे की मंज़िल के दो कमरों के तीन सैट किराए पर दिए गए हैं और यही आमदनी उनके गुज़र-बसर का आधार है। सास-ससुर गाँव में थोड़ी-सी खेती भी करते हैं व कभी-कभार उनसे मिलने शहर आ जाते हैं। निशिता ने अखिल को एक किलोमीटर की दूरी पर स्थित विद्यालय में प्रवेश दिलाया है। वह नित्यप्रति उसे विद्यालय छोड़ने व लाने जाती है व इस बीच घर के सारे कार्य भी करती है। कुल मिलाकर 'ममा' का कथानक डेढ़ दिन का है। विद्यालय से लौटकर सायं माँ बेटे को होमवर्क करवा रही है। वहीं से कथानक शुरू होता है। होमवर्क करके बेटा खेलने चला जाता है और माँ इस बीच घर के कार्य निपटा देती है। अखिल खेलकर वापिस आता है तो टी.वी. देखता है। निशिता उसे पूजा-आरती में साथ बैठाती है। अखिल माँ से अपने सहपाठी- सखा आशीष की माँ की तरह सज-धजकर रहने का आग्रह करता है तो निशिता उसे कहती है कि सुन्दरता गुणों सी आती है। भोजनोपरान्त कोई कहानी सुनाकर उसे सुला दिया जाता है। दूसरे दिन निशिता बेटे को विद्यालय छोड़कर वापिस आकर घर के कार्य निपटाकर दोपहर पश्चात् पुनः लाने जाती है और वापिसी में आशीष की माँ के आग्रह पर चाय पीने को रुक जाती है। अखिल और आशीष वीडियो गेम खेलने में व्यस्त हो जाते हैं। चाय पीकर माँ- बेटा घर वापिस आते हैं। शाम को वही नित्यप्रति के कार्य और अखिल कार्टून लगाने की ज़िद के पूरा न होने पर उसी मुद्रा में सो जाता है। निशिता टी.वी. पर कोई महिला-कार्यक्रम देखने के बाद बेटे की स्कूल डायरी देखने के लिए बैग खोलती है तो हतप्रभ रह जाती है। यही कहानी का चरम-बिन्दु है। बैग में शृंगार की वो सभी वस्तुएँ थीं जिन्हें अखिल माँ को पहने देखना चाहता था। निशिता क्रोध में अखिल को उठाकर उसे चाँटा तक रसीद कर देती है तो अखिल उसे बताता है कि उसने अपनी ट्वाय-ट्रेन आशीष को देकर बदले में ये चूड़ियाँ, लिपस्टिक, बिंदियाँ आदि ली हैं। अन्त में माँ ने बेटे को गले लगा लिया और कहानी समाप्त हो जाती है।

कथानक का अन्त प्रेमचंद की 'ईदगाह' कहानी की तरह है। चिमटा और सौन्दर्य-प्रसाधन दो वर्गों व काल-खण्डों की आवश्यकताएँ और प्राथमिकताएँ हो सकती हैं। परन्तु उत्तरदायित्व और चाहत का भाव तद्युगीन परिवेश से ही आता है। अखिल अपनी माँ को किसी भी सूरत में अपने मित्र की माँ से कमतर नहीं देख सकता। यदि हामिद मेले में मिठाई न खाकर दादी-माँ को चिमटा लाता है तो अखिल भी अपनी ट्वाय-ट्रेन कुर्बान कर देता है। संवेदना का उत्स किस घड़ी और किस चित्तवृत्ति से होता है, इसकी मनोरम छवि प्रस्तुत कहानी में बहुत ही शिद्दत से उभारी गई है। माँ के सज न पाने की विडम्बना ही कहानी को मार्मान्तक बना देती है जिसके द्वारा लेखक ने रूढ़-समाज की वर्जनाएँ बखूबी उजागर की हैं। कथा की यह केन्द्रीय पात्र मानती है कि विद्रोह का मतलब अपने को अशान्त करना है— “समाज के रीति-रिवाजों, मान्यताओं, विश्वासों व नियमों का शान्त रहकर पालन करते रहो तो जीवन शान्तिमय ढंग से चल सकता है और यदि इनमें कहीं कोई टकराव पैदा हुआ, तो अशान्ति तो होगी ही, जीना भी दुश्वार हो जाएगा। और समाज पुरुष-प्रधान होने से परम्पराओं व नियमों के पालन का सारा बोझ महिलाओं पर रहता है। पति के न रहने के बाद एक बेवा का तो मानो आधा अस्तित्व ही समाप्त हो जाता है। . . . जहाँ कहीं वह लीक से हटी, समाज उससे आत्म-सम्मान के साथ सिर उठाकर जीने का अधिकार छीन लेगा।” निशिता का यह चिन्तन उसे समझौतावादी नारी बनाता है। वह रुढ़ियों को तोड़ती नहीं निबाहती है। परन्तु यह भी निश्चित है कि निबाहने के पश्चात् भी वह शान्त कहाँ है? क्या समाज के बाह्य घटनाक्रम की संरचना में ढलना शान्ति है? शान्ति तो अन्तश्चेतना से उभरती है जिस स्तर पर निशिता अशान्त है। सम्भवतः कहानीकार विधवा स्त्री की इसी दशा को उजागर करना चाहता है।

कहानी में भले ही पितृ-विहीन सन्तान की एषणा तुष्ट हो गई हो, परन्तु पति-विहीन पत्नी विडम्बनाओं में पल रही है; यही कहानी का मूल संवेद्य भी है। कहानीकार ने केवल दो पात्रों के आधार पर कथानक को गुंथा है। प्रासंगिक पात्रों के रूप में आशीष व उसकी माँ को सृजा है। बाकी सभी पात्रों का मात्र परोक्ष वर्णन है। पात्रों में परस्पर सामंजस्य की समझ है। किसी भी पात्र का दूसरे से विरोध नहीं है। माँ, बेटा, मित्र, मित्र की माँ या दादा-दादी; पात्रों में हर स्तर पर समझौता या संतुलित जीवन-दृष्टि है। शहरी परिवेश का जीवन काफ़ी कुछ औपचारिक भी होता है और यही सब कुछ 'ममा' कहानी में भी चित्रित हुआ है। इस कहानी के संवाद भी छोटे, वर्णन- प्रधान व पात्रानुकूल हैं। निशिता- केन्द्रित अन्यपुरुष शैली के स्व-संवाद कहानी का सबल पक्ष है। लेखक की भाषा पर पूरी पकड़ है। स्थित्यंकन के लिए प्रयुक्त सामान्य भाषा प्रभावशाली है और उर्दू, देशज शब्दों का प्रयोग भी सहजता से हुआ है। मनोवृत्ति को मुहावरों के प्रयोग द्वारा उजागर किया गया है। आप्तवाक्य सदृश अन्यतम कथनों का प्रयोग करके कहानीकार ने अपनी उत्कृष्ट कहानी कला का परिचय दिया है। यथा — “सूरज आँखें मूँदे प्रयाण कर चुका था।” समग्रतः कुँवर दिनेश को भाषा-शिल्पी कहा जा सकता है।

अतएव प्रस्तुत कहानी में परिस्थितियों की विडम्बनाओं में एक समझौतावादी नारी है जो सब कुछ समझते हुए भी विद्रोह नहीं करती है। सम्भवतः लेखक ने समाज की रूढ़-वर्जनाओं को दिखाने के लिए ही कथा की सृष्टि की हो। यद्यपि नारी-समाज का एक वर्ग, भले ही वह कम है, इन वर्जनाओं को तोड़ रहा है। यह भी हो सकता है कि अधिकाँश का चित्रण लेखक का ध्येय रहा हो। यदि बच्चे के चित्रण को केन्द्र में रखकर विश्लेषण किया जाए तो बाल-सुलभ चेष्टाओं व एषणाओं की माँ की ममता के साथ जुगलबन्दी (माँ के चाहने के स्तर पर) भी सुन्दर बन पड़ी है। अतः इस कहानी में जीवन्त परिवेश है जहाँ मानवीय भावों व संवेदनाओं के रेशों का विगलन कर समाजानुरूप रूपान्तरण हुआ है।



Audience's Live Response

Irene Rattan: Dinesh sir, sensitive portrayal of the trials of a single mother. Commendable.

Leena Vaidya: Very touching stories Suneela ma'am and Dinesh sir.

Rajan Kaushal: Wonderful stories.... very touching... Congratulations Suneela Ma'am and Dinesh Sir.

Savita J.B. Singh: Loved the enunciation and pronunciation of Hindi by the anchor and the story teller... both sounded really good!

Irene Rattan: बलदेव सर, क्या बात कही है आपने। लेखक कहीं ना हो.... वाह!

12

THE HOLE IN THE WALL

MAHI YOGESH

“Why have I kept you? To doze off whenever you find a chance?” thundered Kishan Lal as Rahil woke up with beads of sweat on his forehead. Kishan Lal stood there pointing at the unwashed utensils and babbled, “Who’s going to wash these, you or your Abba?” A nervous smile appeared on Rahil’s sunburnt face when he realised that he was dreaming and that his secret was still well kept. A dealer had bought and brought fifteen boys, huddled in the back of a truck and Rahil was one of them. Four boys were from his village and eleven from the nearby villages. They were being taken to work in the factories and dhabas in the town. Kishan Lal had paid a handsome sum of ten thousand rupees for him, which his father and the dealer had shared equally. He was ten years old, with a slight frame but was tall for his age. He knew nothing about dreams or childhood. Kishan Lal, a stout man of over fifty, was Rahil’s new master and his dhaba was his new home.

His job was to serve tea to the shopkeepers nearby, wash utensils, scrub the floor and obey Kishan Lal with a nod every time he was summoned. There was an old cinema hall in the locality and Rahil went there every day to serve tea to the Babu at the ticket window. He had seen young men loiter around the hall, waiting for their turn as one show ended and the other followed. He so much wanted to see a film, any film, but he knew Kishan Lal would never allow him to be absent from his duties for three long hours. The coloured film posters were all over the front wall of the cinema hall and they were alluring for the little boy. He had tried to catch a glimpse of the inside of the cinema hall by standing close to the entry door but was pushed away by the ticket checker.

He took tea for the shopkeepers at two in the afternoon and had to return with the empty glasses by 3 pm. This was the only time when he

was on his own and away from Kishan Lal's sharp gaze and scathing tongue. One day, after he had served tea to the Babu at the ticket window, he went towards the back of the cinema hall to have his fun time there. He threw heaps of dry leaves in the air and urinated on the wall. There were two old film posters on the wall. On the first poster the colour of the heroine's saree had faded away and the other poster was half torn from the top with only two pairs of legs left in the lower half. He picked up a piece of charcoal from the ground and started drawing the upper body on the two pairs of legs. He drew a figure of a bald man with a big paunch on the first pair of legs; he looked at it and had a hearty laugh. Then he thought of making a thin man; so, on the other pair of legs he drew the figure of an extremely skinny person with a tube-like waist and a long face. This little act of creativity filled him with great excitement and he started tearing the poster with the heroine whose saree had faded; he thought, "If I cannot watch a film, I can at least keep an old poster." As he tore off the poster, he saw that there was a three-inch-wide hole in the portion of the wall that the poster had covered. There were loose stones and gravel in the hole which could be easily removed. He delicately removed the small stones and tried to clean the inner surface of this hole. As he emptied the entire contents of the hole, he began to hear some sounds, which were not familiar but exciting. To peep through this opening, he had to stand on his toes. A feeling of sudden exhilaration and joy took over his whole body when he saw that from this miniscule opening, he could see the screen on which a film was running. His eyes grew big. He thought, "Is this real, or am I day-dreaming?" This was what he had longed for and now without even buying a ticket he could see a film and that too at any time he wanted to. He was thinking fast, and then with a sudden feeling of fear he shuddered. He looked all around to see if there was anybody watching him but only found a crow flitting on the branch of a tree opposite the wall. He turned around and stood with his back towards the wall trying to hide the hole. Then he turned around again and peeped through the hole and realised he was standing on his toes. He looked for something that he could stand on comfortably, but not finding anything, decided to relish the movie that was going on. The time passed quicker than he had thought. He knew he had to go. His heart was racing. He thought aloud, "Nobody should know about this opening in the wall". He had to cover it up and make it look as it appeared earlier, before he had torn off the posters. He could not paste the torn posters back but he thought that later in the evening he could bring some rice from the shop to use as

adhesive. He furtively started filling the hole with the loose gravel, mud and dry leaves lying on the ground.

Kishan Lal screamed as he saw him coming, “Hey you scoundrel, don’t even think of running away. I have paid a lot of money for a scrawny fool like you,” reminding Rahil his worth. All these dialogues got mixed up with the ones he had just heard while peeping through his little kaleidoscope. Hiding his joy, he returned to his work thinking of many more films that he would watch in the coming days. It was challenging for him to contain his excitement, but he tried as best as a child can try to hide his gratification.

Every day with a song in his heart, he made his way to the market to serve tea, and then rushed to the secret hideout to enjoy the panorama of the film world that it unfolded. He could never watch a complete film together. He had seen the same scenes from a film till it ran for a week and had later tried to connect different scenes from different films to make a movie of his own. His days were like dreams where he like a poor hero worked at a dhaba and whenever possible escaped into a film. His dreams were made up of the films that he had repeatedly watched. He got confused at how fast the life on the screen moved as compared to the real life he led. He wondered how the heroes in the films wore new clothes in different scenes whereas he had just one extra pair of shirt and pants to change. The worn-out sweater whose sleeves were short for his long arms was the only piece of warm clothing he owned. His mother had woven this sweater for him when he was eight and he still continued to wear it. She had made it with some leftover yarn which was noticeable in the haphazard pattern on his sweater. He could not read and write well. His father had taken a loan from the village landlord to marry off his two elder sisters and now he was bound to the landlord’s fields and so was Rahil. He was sent to school at seven and removed after a year to help his father. When he turned ten, he was brought by a dealer to work in the town. He once cried his heart out at the death of the hero’s mother and had longed to go home, but giving up this fun was too much for him. Through the films he had got close to a world which was more beautiful and vivid than his own pallid life at the dhaba. He had seen the mountains and the seas which he had only heard of. He felt intoxicated by the show of colour and dance and woke up mumbling the dialogues of a film.

One afternoon, while filling the glasses he spilled some tea on the floor. Kishan Lal noticed his exuberance. But today he said nothing, just stared hard. There were customers in the shop and Kishan Lal did not

want to make a scene; so, he let him go. In the evening Rahil cleaned the tables and helped Kishan Lal to close the shop. As he turned to go to bed Kishan Lal gave him a forceful jerk and he almost fell to the ground. He pulled Rahil by his neck, brought him close and stared in his eyes. "Why are you in such a hurry to run to the market Hmm? Don't forget, my eyes are on you!" Rahil could not utter a word; Kishan Lal pushed him to the floor and left the shop. Rahil nearly choked and realised that at any cost he had to keep his secret safe. "I will lose my greatest amusement, if someone came to know about my wanderings, caught me peeping through the hole and reported it to Kishan Lal," he thought. So, he reduced his visits to the compound and decided to go there only thrice a week. Months passed and a whole year went by and his jubilation grew manifold.

One morning when he was attending the customers, he heard a discussion about the Cinema Wala. He stood near the table to gather more, "So finally the Cinema Wala has hit the jackpot," one of the customers said. "The cinema hall is old but, the property has value," added the other. Rahil forgot to put the tray down on the table. "What are you listening to? Foolish boy!" screamed Kishan Lal and hit him on his head. The joy he had secretly found had taught him to ignore these fiery rebukes and blows with nonchalance. He had always felt jealous of the Cinema Wala whom he considered to be the happiest person in the world. "He can watch any film for free anytime and he makes money by showing it to others, what more can one ask for and now he has hit another fortune, God is extremely benevolent to him," he thought.

Rahil wanted to be a Cinema Wala when he grew up. By the afternoon, the conversation he had heard in the morning had lost its effect on him. He carried on with his work and as the favourite part of his day arrived, he joyously arranged the tea glasses in the metal carrier and made his way to the shops.

After serving the customers, he tip-toed to the back of the cinema hall. As he approached the place, he heard rustling of the leaves and saw three men inspecting the building and its compound. They had long measuring tapes and were noting down something. He stood there transfixed. All gaiety left him when he found company at his usually deserted hideout. "Have they found out about the hole and have come to mend the wall?" he thought. One of them saw him staring and shouted, "Hey you chokre run away from here." While he crossed the market place, he saw people hanging out in groups talking about the cinema hall.

A week went by and every day when he went to the compound, he found somebody there. The following week, when he went to the market, he heard that the film shows for the day had been cancelled. When he passed by the front gate of the Cinema Hall, he saw a lock hanging there. The bigger gate had a smaller entry to its left which had a broken latch. He sneaked in through that little gate and went towards the backside. Today there was nobody there. He slowly approached the hole and saw that nobody had even bothered to check it in all these days. He removed the loose gravel from the hole and peeped in but there were no colours or sounds coming from the other side. Today it was just a black hole staring at him. He stepped back and felt uncomfortable, the black hole disturbed him. He put the gravel back and hid it.

He could not sleep that night and woke up exhausted in the morning. While washing utensils he heard Kishan Lal say, "What kismet Cinema Hall wala has, inherited property is selling for crores." "Now our town will also have a touch of the big city," his customer added enthusiastically. Next morning while running for errands the people saw an enormous machine with jaws attached to an arm, move towards the market. People left their work and children left their play to follow the machine. Rahil also left his work and ran to see. A huge crowd had gathered outside the cinema hall. He shoved and pushed through the crowd to have a closer look. The sturdy gigantic arm of the machine hit the old building and the structure crumbled before his eyes. The crowd cheered at the demolition but Rahil's legs began to tremble. His face went pale.

He staggered to the dhaba where Kishan Lal was waiting for him, "Abbe, if you have had your fun get back to work or get lost!" The word 'fun' pricked him; he could not tell anyone what he had lost. He wanted to howl and cry but had to hold back. When he went to sleep, he was reminded of his village, the dirty lanes and one room home with no electricity. One day his father had handed him over to the dealer, who brought him in the back of a truck with fourteen young boys and they left their homes far behind to work and live amidst complete strangers at unknown places. He remembered his mother had stood at the door wailing and pleading to his father not to send him. His head began to ache. For a year these memories had not haunted him. He felt sick and wanted to go home to his mother. That night in his dream, he saw the scary machine with jaws approach him while he was peeping through the hole in the wall.

Review: “The Hole in the Wall”

MEENAKSHI F. PAUL

“The Hole in the Wall” is an engaging story of Rahil, a ten-year-old boy, who was bought by Kishan Lal, a dhaba owner, for ten thousand rupees from a dealer who had ‘bought and brought’ fifteen young boys from the village. The story begins with Kishan Lal reprimanding Rahil for sleeping while there was much work to be done. This harsh tone of the beginning becomes a foil for the endearing tale that follows. Rahil worked a long day and slept in the dhaba itself. His work included taking tea to the nearby shops and cinema hall in the afternoon. He enjoyed doing this work because “This was the only time when he was on his own and away from Kishan Lal’s sharp gaze and scathing tongue.” Rahil was mesmerised by the larger-than-life posters pasted on the wall of the hall and longed to watch a movie. The glitz and aura of films fuelled his fantasy and dreams of fortune in the midst of his poverty and squalor. He was driven away, however, even if he peeped in the door of the hall.

Rahil has no friends and his family back in the village had sold him in desperation born of penury. He feels acutely alienated from the world and the magical world of films seems to offer him the only opportunity to escape his mundane existence. One day, he makes his way to the back of the hall for a few moments of solitary fun. He plays with the dry leaves and draws figures on the partly torn and faded posters. He decides to take home the poster of the heroine in a faded saree, for, “If he could not watch a film, he could at least keep an old poster.” As he peels off the poster, a three-inch hole is revealed behind it. This hole in the wall becomes his passport to the land of fantasy in which he is the hero. The silver screen complements his daydreams and the friendless boy projects his feelings on to the cinematic characters. So, the individual self of Rahil seeks self-definition through fantasy, even as his relational self is marked by the absence of meaningful bonds of attachment. The hole in the wall dhaba in which he is condemned to child labour is displaced by the hole in the wall of the derelict cinema hall that offers him visions of love, adventure and heroism. Rahil’s name means ‘traveller’ and ‘to leave,’ the dhaba and the hole in the wall map his journey from drudgery to daring.

Rahil watches sporadic scenes of films through the hole whenever he can and then strings what he has seen with what he imagines. The vivid scenes of far-off places, the dialogues and the emotions portrayed by the actors fuel his creativity. Rahil understands the significance of his find and when Kishan Lal becomes suspicious of his alacrity to go to the market, he rations his visits to the treasure hole to three times a week. After a year, Rahil discovers that the cinema hall is being sold. People gossip about it and men get busy measuring and evaluating the property. He peeps through the hole “but there were no colours or sounds coming from the other side. Today it was just a black hole staring at him. He stepped back and felt uncomfortable, the black hole disturbed him.” From this point, the story moves towards its resolution fairly quickly. The unravelling of Rahil’s dreams reaches its conclusion with the jaws of the pulveriser biting into the wall of the cinema hall. The end of the fantasy marks the return of reality and Rahil remembers his poverty-stricken home, his mother’s wailing and his father’s helpless deal with the agent which brought him to the town: “That night in his dream, he saw the scary machine with jaws approach him while he was peeping through the hole in the wall.”

Mahi Yogesh has spun an appealing story of a child who faces the odds of life with a mix of gutsiness and innocence. Sadness and longing are kept at bay through daydreaming of an alternate life and the hole in the wall becomes a concrete medium to live that imagined life for Rahil. The tone of the story reminds one of Ruskin Bond’s “The Thief” and Dicken’s *Oliver Twist*. Yet, the story would benefit from scrupulous editing in order to smoothen the narrative and eliminate errors. Also, the characters in the story could be fleshed out some more to enhance the effect sought by the writer. The interaction between Rahil and Kishan Lal is quickly sketched out to keep the focus on the hole in the wall; nevertheless, the characterisation would gain from layering of their personalities, emotions, and experiences. While Rahil’s character is envisaged from the child’s perspective and can absorb the gaps, Kishan Lal’s character remains fairly stereotypical. The impact of Rahil’s alienation is thus weakened. The direct descriptions in the story hold out an opportunity for additions that may engage the senses more and help to fully conceive the world of the story. The exchange of dialogues, however, is sharp and ably maintains the momentum of the story.

The story makes us aware of the reality of child labour that is unabated in our society despite the constitutional directives and legislations prohibiting child labour. Rahil is one of the thousands of

'Chhotus' and 'Chhokras' who are robbed of their childhood and pushed into a life of toil and sweat. Rahil is also one of those who face hardships with ingenuity and grit. So, while the story ends on a note of pathos, it is hoped that the enduring spirit of Rahil, although bruised, may not be broken. This hope is ignited with the knowledge that Rahil had used the fantasy world of films to cope with the harshness of his existence but, at the same time, he had never lost sight of his reality.

Audience's Live Response

Sangeeta Singh: Sad tragedy of lost childhood pleasures.

Anupama Singh: Mahi ma'am your story was full of mysteries, surprises, humour, satire and dejection. It was a gripping story indeed.

Anita Sharma: An introspective story! Congratulations Dr. Mahi!

Namrata Pathania: A brilliant analysis Meenakshi Ma'am.

Irene Rattan: I loved it that you took up a child as a protagonist. Despite the fact that we have various types of topics in our writings, but to give voice to the ignored and the voiceless is highly relevant and greatly required. Congratulations Mahi to depict a sensitive theme.

13

A GIRL AS OLD AS THIRTY

PRAKASH AVASTHI

I turned thirty last summer. My father is hopeful—rather he is almost certain that he would be able to fulfil his only remaining wish—the wish of being able to find a suitable match for me. Whenever father comes across a ‘nice’ young man or even a relatively older one, he loses his sleep and begins to make enquiries about him. Now, why on earth, that should not happen? Afterall, I am his only daughter and after mother’s passing away, this responsibility weighs heavily on his mind. Isn’t it bizarre that my younger brothers are married and living happily with their families but I, the eldest child of my father, am still unmarried? Ever since he retired, he sighs anxiously when he looks at me saying: “As old as thirty—and still unmarried!”

Father is not the only one worried about me. Even I want to get married now as almost all of my friends have been married long enough. Father keeps inviting home the prospective grooms—so many of them. So, what do I do? Granted, I am no princess, people would swoon over, but I am also not so wretched that I would agree to marry just about anyone. The ‘boys’ who come to ‘see’ me behave as though they have already ‘accepted’ me and the other way round too. Now, let’s look at what happened yesterday. Father brought some spicy snacks from the market and whispered to me, “Sheela, get ready quickly and make some tea.”

I asked him nervously, “Anything special Papa?”

“Yes, Mr. Ram Singh has been recently posted as tehsildar here. I have invited him over for tea.”

“But Papa...”, I wanted to say something but was interrupted by father.

“I have told you to make tea. If you want to ask me anything, ask later.”

Meanwhile, come evening and the new tehsildar appeared on the scene. Seeing his blood shot eyes and an obese frame, I guessed at once that he takes less tea and more of other drinks. He must have been about thirty-five years of age but looked forty or more. Forgetting his age and that he himself was once an officer, father began to fawn on him brazenly while addressing him as ‘sir’ on more than one occasion. The tehsildar kept on boasting about his family, his well-placed brothers, his sister’s forthcoming marriage to a high-ranking officer, his big house in Delhi and so on. When the discourse became too vulgar to bear, I quietly slipped out of the room on the pretext of preparing tea leaving him in father’s company.

After a few days father invited a doctor who bragged about ministers being his patients: “With your qualification, I’ll get you a job in no time. Making one phone call will fix everything. You know, there are as many as five ministers who are my patients.”

Now what do I do with such people? After one such encounter, father asked: “What do you think about this boy?” I stood quietly with my head down not uttering a word. He shouted at the top of his voice, “What sin have I committed? You are thirty years old! I can barely sleep. Wherever I go, whomsoever I meet, I am asked only one question: ‘Have you found a suitable match for your daughter? When are you marrying her off?’, and so on”.

For some time, father stayed quiet after this outburst and then said:

“Listen, what’s your opinion about that engineer?”

“Papa...”

“Yes, say something”.

“He is much older to me. I won’t be comfortable marrying a person ten years my senior in age.”

“You are too fussy. Remember...”

“Yes Papa, I have turned thirty.”

“And that Civil Supplies Officer? He’s not much older to you.”

“I don’t think I can communicate with him in any way.”

“Oh, my child you’re forgetting that you are not a young girl now....”

“Yes Papa, I’m as old as thirty.”

Next day my brother came to visit us along with his family. My father was delighted to see the children. We were all sitting together. In the middle of a conversation, he suddenly stopped talking and then sighed. A heaviness seemed to fill the air. My brother and his wife sat in front of us, their gaze fixed on me as though I had committed some blunder. Father began his characteristic refrain, “How I wish Sheela too would settle down!” And now it was the turn of my brother to show sympathy: “Don’t worry Papa! A suitable boy for her will be found soon.” As everybody nodded in agreement, a wry smile appeared on my father’s lips and he sighed again.

I pitied my father, who constantly faced the onslaught of the neighbours’ and the relatives’ inquisitiveness: “Not yet? Well, your daughter is highly educated, why would she marry just about anyone? It would have been so easy to marry her off had she been an ordinary and a less educated girl. Maybe we can help you.” Father didn’t know what to say. Though proud of me, he found it hard to counter these unsolicited opinions. It appeared people around me had nothing else to occupy their minds with but the thought of the long-delayed marriage of a girl as old as thirty.

Winter passed and the sleepy earth began to wake up slowly, ready for the birth of the spring. Soon the trees began to blossom turning red, purple, yellow and orange. The heaviness of the air gave way to a light fragrant breeze. The rustling of leaves and the songs of birds filled the air. The sun-kissed grass looked so inviting. As I stepped out of home for a stroll, I was overcome with a strange feeling of listlessness. Soon I found myself sitting on a bench, my eyes somewhat heavy. The gentle breeze soothed my spirits. I closed my eyes. After a while I heard someone humming a beautiful melody marked by a note of gay abandon rare to find in a systematically composed musical piece. “What a soothing tune”, I said to myself and looked around. A young man was walking merrily across the road. He looked radiant as he smiled, gentle breeze lightly fanning his thick black hair. The moment he saw me, he stopped, looked at me, smiled intriguingly and occupied the bench opposite mine. He held a book in his hand and in no time was absorbed in it. After a while I realized I was feeling very light. Did I sleep? Was it a dream? No, no I was awake. The sound of the melody was still echoing

in my ears. I looked around. The charming young man sitting right there had left. Stung by acute loneliness, I walked back home with heavy steps.

That day I just couldn't concentrate on anything. The haunting sound of the melody seemed to grip my mind as never before. I smiled when I remembered his smile. I hummed the melody he hummed. Seeing my excitement, father asked, "You look a bit nervous. Are you alright?"

"Yes Papa, why do you worry? I'm alright."

"This is not fair. Why wouldn't I worry? Thirty years old and no sign of marriage! You just don't seem to like anyone. At this age you cannot be a chooser. Sham Singh is a nice boy. Just today he was asking about your well-being. I fail to understand in what sense he is lacking."

"Papa, I have already told you what I feel about him."

"Tell me again."

"He behaves a bit awkwardly, always talking about money matters. Doesn't ever smile..."

Father nearly lost his temper, "Oh, my God! What do I do? Someone is old' someone immature, someone laughs loudly, someone does not smile..." I remained silent. He continued, "What kind of a boy are you looking for? Tell me what kind of a *gentleman* do you want to marry?"

I remained quiet for a while. Then suddenly I was astounded to find myself pouring out my feelings so passionately: "Papa, I would want to marry someone with a smile so charming that it would envelope me...who would hum a melody so sweet as to engulf me like the song of the Earth itself." Father froze up on the sofa—agape. "Oh my God! My fears have come true!" said he. After a pause, he muttered to himself, "This girl has gone crazy." I put my arms around his neck and said gleefully, "Papa, You're right."

I could not sleep that night. Every moment weighed heavily on my mind. The next morning as soon as father left home, I combed my hair, put on a light lipstick that matched with my lavender salwar-kameez and smiled in the mirror. "Will he come again?" I asked myself. That very moment, I heard the sound of humming that possessed me yet again. I found myself walking on the forest road to the spot where I had met

him, until I reached the bench in the garden. The young man appeared again. I stood as though in a trance.

“Do you live here?” he asked me.

“Yes, I live here with my father.”

He smiled again and waving a goodbye went his way. I waved my hand, wanting to say more, ask more but my lips froze and so did my feet. He walked some distance, turned and smiled yet again before disappearing. I spent the entire evening restlessly. A mixed feeling of anxiety and euphoria overpowered me again next morning. I could hear the rumbling sound of thunder in the distance. The dark sky looked ominous. Yet I stepped out. Suddenly, it started to rain. I ran for cover and reached the veranda. The young man stood in front of me near our front gate. Drenched in rain, he was still smiling. “Come inside. You’ll catch cold”, I said. Hesitant at first, he finally came indoors. We sipped tea together. I felt I was melting in his warmth as his voice softened. The rain had stopped. I looked around. He was here a moment ago. Where has he disappeared? A feeling of loneliness began to overcome me yet again.

My father who associated my state of mind to some delusion of sorts kept a dignified silence for a couple of days. His troubled look, however, revealed the disquiet within. Suppressing the commotion that raged inside his mind, he asked me coolly, “My child, what is the matter? Why do you look so dazed these days?” His fragile and ageing frame seemed to reel back under the weight of an undefined fear. I found it hard to look into his anxious eyes. I knew how desperately he wanted me to ‘settle down’. The conflicting emotions of hope and fear gripped me.

“Haven’t you taken a decision so far?” he asked once again almost pleadingly.

“Papa, I like a boy...”

“Is he one of those...?” he asked, his eyes beaming.

“No Papa”

“Then who is he? What’s his name? What does he do?”

I realised I did not have answers for any of these questions. What I finally said sent father in a fit of anger.

“I don’t know his name. I don’t know what he does. But I know that I...I...love him.”

“What nonsense are you talking?” he retorted.

Father stood dazed while I continued, “He is sensitive. He knows I am lonely, very lonely. I do not laugh. I do not sing. He understands me. Came to see me even as it was raining. I love him”, I said, scolding tears rolling down my cheeks. Father could bear it no more. Quietly he walked out of the room looking very sad and remorseful.

The next morning, I began to wait again. But he did not come. Yet another day came. The sun shone brightly and the light breeze blew gently. But he did not come. I waited, waited endlessly. Birds chirped happily and flowers bloomed everywhere. Then came summer. But he did not come.

My father and family believe that I had concocted this story to console myself. The truth, however, is that he will certainly come. When flowers bloom in the spring and birds begin to sing in chorus, he will come—whistling and singing gaily, tugging at my heartstrings again with his warm smile.

Translated from Hindi by Girija Sharma

Review: “A Girl as Old as Thirty”

JANESH KAPOOR

“I turned thirty this summer”: The opening line of the story has a strong prophetic tone, almost ominous. Apparently, a statement of fact, it acquires an ominous character when read in the context particular to it. The person turning thirty is a girl who is still unmarried: a constant source of worry and consternation to her father, family and society because Sheela, the girl, is “As old as thirty – and still unmarried”. The expression runs like a refrain with subtle variations throughout the narrative:

“You are thirty years old! I [the father] can barely sleep.”

.....

“Yes Papa, I have turned thirty.”

.....

“When are you marrying her off?”

.....

“Thirty years old and no sign of marriage. . .”

Marriage is thus not a matter of individual choice. It involves the parents, the family and the society more than the individual concerned. Sheela’s father is keen “to fulfill his only remaining wish – the wish of being able to find a suitable match for [her]”. Father’s wish is a natural one; she is his only daughter, the eldest of his offspring. It is but natural that she should be married and settled in life like her younger brothers. The responsibility “weighs heavily on his mind” ever since his wife passed away.

The emotional and filial responsibility of the father is permuted into anxiety by social pressures that he has to reckon with on a regular basis. The undercurrent of social mindset is explicit in the kind of observations that the neighbours and relatives make about Sheela having to remain single for so long: “Not yet? Well, your daughter is highly educated, why would she marry just about anyone? It would have been so easy to marry her off had she been an ordinary and less educated

girl". He does not possibly find support from his sons either. The matter invariably comes up for deliberation during family meets only to end with mere comforting words for the father: "Don't worry Papa! A suitable boy for her would be found soon". The father can merely smile wryly and heave a sigh.

The antinomy in the views of the father and the daughter regarding matrimonial alliance is also quite apparent. While the father tends to think that the prospective groom should be well placed socially and economically, the daughter continues to cherish ideas of platonic love. As she once blurts out to her father: "Papa, I would want to marry someone with a smile so charming that it would envelop me. . . who would hum a melody so sweet as to engulf me like the song of the Earth itself". The poor father is sure the girl has turned crazy as he freezes up on the sofa: "At this age you cannot be a chooser".

So far, the atmosphere of the story is dull and dreary as the season is that of winter. We now have the advent of Spring and the mood of nature begins to turn colourful -- "red, purple, yellow and orange", which offset the "light fragrant breeze" to the tune of the "rustling of leaves". The filiations and passions of Sheela also appear to come of age. It appears like a dream to her. She sits on a bench, significantly in an outside space for the first time in the story and seeks to do away with the "heav[iness]" of her situation, with eyes closed. After a while she hears "a beautiful melody marked by a note of gay abandon". It came from a young man "walking merrily across the road". "He looked radiant as he smiled, gentle breeze lightly fanning his thick black hair. The moment he saw me [Sheela], he stopped, looked at me, smiled intriguingly and occupied the bench opposite mine". This is the moment when love happens; at least for Sheela. She is unable to concentrate on anything that day or sleep at night, her mind gripped with the "haunting sound of the melody".

The next morning Sheela finds herself getting ready and moving out to the same space in expectation of another encounter with the young man: "I combed my hair, put on a light lipstick that matched with my lavender salwar-kameez and smiled in the mirror. Will he come again? I asked myself". Her expectation is duly fulfilled as the man appears again, humming melodiously. The two also exchange a few words in a bid to get acquainted. Sheela is left "euphoric" again with a mix of anxiety about the coming day as the young man disappears out of view. Next, they meet at Sheela's place, who invites him inside as it is

raining and the man is drenched. While they sip tea together, she feels like melting in his presence. Then the rain stops and the young man disappears yet again and is never seen thereafter.

However, to Sheela the young man represents love and the dream of the life she yearns for. As she vehemently declares her resolve to her father to wait for the young man as she loved him, the latter is remorsefully sure that Sheela had concocted the story to console herself.

Seasons begin to pass but Sheela continues to wait full of hope. It is on this note of hope that the story concludes: “The truth, however, is that he will certainly come. When flowers bloom in the spring and birds begin to sing in chorus, he will come – whistling and singing gaily, tugging at my heartstrings again with his warm smile”.

“A Girl as Old as Thirty” has been translated from a relatively long Hindi story by the translator’s late father – indeed an eloquent tribute to his cherished memory. On the linguistic level, the translation does total justice to the original. There is no jugglery of words, which unfortunately is the case with some translations when the translator is unable to find and organize words and expressions which are close to the original context. In fact, the language used by the translator is fluid enough to carry the readers with it, even if they do not have access to the original story. In fact, the translation reads like an original story in English. The colour and the sound images used by the translator to establish the two parts of the story – the first characterized by anxiety and the second by hope – have also been fine tuned to the original. The trajectory of the story is marked by a leap of hope and faith, which accords meaning and purpose to Sheela and which would perhaps also sustain the father. Indeed, no matter how cliched it sounds, it is our hopes and dreams which keep us going. . .

While the translated version is a shortened re-writing of the original, a couple of passages pertaining to interaction between the characters could have been retained for an authentic contextualization of the translated version. The most pertinent one is the brief conversation between Sheela and the young man as the two sit together as it rains and thunders outside. At this juncture in the original, the young man observes that he would certainly come to meet Sheela again if it does not rain – a strong indicator that he might not continue to be there for Sheela with the passage of time despite her dream of building a platonic relationship with him. As another instance of what could have been included is the brief banter between Sheela and her younger brother over

the apparent change in her demeanor, who can now be seen happy and chirpy. This would have infused the translation with a sense of sibling teasing so common in families and also served as a qualifier for the element of hope which infuses the story.

However, a story is not something which is always available to us in black and white and may be translated word-for-word. It is what can be abstracted from a narrative, recounted and retold in a different idiom. A successful translation is one which captures the essence of the original story and does not move very far away from the source. Girija Sharma's translation seeks to retell the original story which is better suited to the new readership most likely to read it in English only. It is a successful translation which accords a new life to the original story.



Audience's Live Response

Priyanka Vaidya: I was lost somewhere in emotional swings of a woman turning thirty!

Anupama Singh: Such a poignant truth has been narrated in such a touching manner by you ma'am. Bitter truth of our society.

Neelima Kanwar: Beautiful story, beautifully narrated...thank you, ma'am.

Sangeeta Singh: In the context of Girija Madam's story, I would also like to applaud the decision of the cabinet for having increased the marriage age of girls from 18 to 21.

Kamayani Vashisht: Thanks Ma'am Girija, for that engaging story. Enjoyed the conclusion.

14

AND THEN THE RIVER FLOWED

PRAVEEN KUMAR

Words fascinate me and I love to listen to the cadence their arrangements produce, but the moment I attempt to dress up a character or weave a story, words fail to fall into place and grow viscous. Restless tales lurk faintly in some corner of my mind, but they refuse to take a body and a shape. An overwhelming amorphous cloud muddies the river of thought, hangs over it like an ill omen, and spews in fits its chaotic elements, leaving me dazed. Don't know from where and why this cloud floats in, adding to my misery, leaving me fuming, shredding my faith in my creativity that has been drilled foolishly into my mind by those who claim to know me. Not that I am a lost case, incapable of writing sensible sentences, but this cloud comes with such frequency that I begin to lose faith in the unfounded belief that I'll bloom into a writer someday, whose words will cast a spell in the literary world.

I had never been inclined to write stories or novels. Deficient in empathy, inquisitiveness, and other writerly traits, I hardly fit the bill. But those whose orbital paths coincide with mine feel persuaded that a writer is waiting to be awakened within me, something I have failed to notice myself. Their faith and insistence weigh heavy on me. Should I yield to their misplaced faith or stick to my unartistic self? An attempt was being made to carve a writer out of an unimaginative bore, who hardly took interest in people's lives – probably the key ingredient in a writer's repertoire. The impasse into which our conflicting views had crystallized implored a quick resolution for my sanity. A part of me was willing to oblige and do the bidding, but a lot many other faculties refused to cooperate. The pen would hardly move across a page; it felt an insurmountable friction and dragged on producing uninspiring phrases and poorly conceived metaphors. Despite the unease I felt, I was too arrogant to admit to myself that I was incapable of looking into human minds besides being helplessly pathetic in capturing the externalities.

The nature of my professional work and personal aspirations of a different nature, obstructed my journey to literary stardom, which anyway was hardly a possibility or priority. But new possibilities can knock at the door of life most unexpectedly; they can peep through unexpected dark alleys, which often hide from view the light at the farthest end. My possibilities came wrapped in shock when I had to move unwillingly to a remote location; I was left bewildered and distraught, incapable of processing the new challenge with sense and sensibility. A seven-hour drive through the seeming wilderness landed me into a non-descript village that had nothing to boast of except its menacing peaks, lovely people, and a captivating place of worship. The journey to this land, which had existed in my mind only as a name and not as a living, habitable place, was an endless encounter with fear. Incessant rain had added to the magic, mystery, beauty, fear, and other undefined emotions. The arrival was no less dramatic as I bumped into a group of important-looking people, who extended a warm welcome, which failed to evoke a positive feel in the tired, frustrated, and unhappy soul. Someone offered to comfort, “You are fortunate because the presiding deity of the temple herself decided to requisition your services for the people of this area.” This aggravated my irritation, but it did not take long before the import of the words dawned on me. The place had an ineffable magnetism and charm that soon gripped my soul and made me bow before it in total submission.

It was getting dark and the towering hills surrounding the place filled me with intense sadness. Cold added to the misery; the presence of a known face was the only source of comfort. It was a revelation that even insignificant things had the potential to alter the rhythm of life; they could trigger joy or sadness instantaneously. And when would joy turn sour, filling one with sadness, none could predict. Days rolled by and I found that a new world of innocence and natural grandeur was opening up before my eyes. While my workplace was always teeming with people whose painful stories of myriad ailments weighed heavy on my conscience, the sprawling complex, where I was offered a place to live, was always abuzz with activities, sounds, and an endless flow of people. There was never a single dull moment here. People from all strata of society could be seen paying obeisance to the goddess. Politicians, high officials, and common people came from far and wide, giving it a unique charm. But for me the greatest charm lay in the simple folk who served in the temple with utmost devotion and love. An instant bond was forged with the people and the place, the physicality of which lasted till my

departure, but on an astral plane, it'll remain with me for life. Their existence is eternally etched on my mind.

The place had a mesmerizing beauty; tall deodars and rocky cliffs had an overpowering presence. Long walks in the wilderness, peppered with an animated discourse on spiritual matters by a junior colleague Prabodh added ineffable joy to the whole experience. I behaved like a curious seeker in his presence. He was more than willing to indulge me. In response to a question like, "Why does isolation and absence of human company leave us sad and insecure?" he would dwell on the intricacies of human emotions and of his encounters with the spiritual masters. Metaphysical questions fascinated him, and he loved to expatiate upon these topics. He had read a great deal of literature of this kind, and had spent a few months deep into the uninhabited mountains, where none except the seekers of the divine truth lived and prayed. "Sir, listen to this piece of music, and forget about your doubts; the melody, rhythm, and divinity of this rendition will dissolve your doubts in no time," he would assure me. He always spoke with conviction and passion about spiritual matters. His incredible stories often left me both mesmerized and puzzled. During one such sessions, he said, "I met a very old yogi, who looked resplendent, and with no sign of physical or mental decline that comes with age. I sat in his company enraptured for days together and listened to his discourses, which had multiple strands of spirituality, science, and metaphysics." Stories of this kind filled me with a deep sense of wonder and awe. On other days, we would sit together on a mound, deep into the wilderness, and enjoy music in total silence. An inexplicable joy flowed unhindered though no words were exchanged.

While Prabodh took me on an inner journey, Balu, an apparently arrogant yet caring man, made my life joyful in his own humble way. He was a dynamic and talkative worker whose presence could be felt in every part of the temple. I was drawn towards him, and he too showed his fondness for me. I couldn't understand why I liked him because I had never been good at forging friendship with simple village folk. I realized for the first time the power of innocence and love; generally, only in books do we speak about such emotions in glowing terms, but these come alive when we see them manifested in a living being. Balu interacted with me like a friend, would even tease me freely, without inhibitions. He always spoke to me with a feigned annoyance whenever I took leave. "Sirji! I don't like your frequent absences. I am very angry with you. Why do you go to your hometown so frequently?" he would

act as if he were really displeased. I would then explain my position, try to convince him that the number of days I had spent away from the place were too few to give him reason to feel indignant. Jeevan, the cook, was another friend whose love had its own fragrance. Without being demonstrative, he would try to feed me with love. He had noticed my lack of excitement about food and made it a point that I ate well. He would invariably insist on having an extra chapati, and would always keep my share of the sweet dish despite it being in short supply. Once he got to know that I was seeking transfer from the place, he was dismayed. “Sirji! I don’t like the idea at all. Why don’t you serve here till retirement?” he expressed his disapproval of my plans. I knew it was nothing but attachment. He expressed similar sentiments on a number of other occasions. He tried to pressurize me by telling, “Devi ma would be unhappy with you if you decide to go.” Expression of such pure love from someone with whom my association was relatively new put me in a big dilemma. Should I listen to my family, which needed me and was desperate to have me back, or should I respect Jeevan’s loving insistence on prolonging my stay here? It was a difficult call. Moreover, the place which in the first few days of my arrival had looked so dreary and deserted now began to look like a home – vibrant, joyful, loving, and very charming. A heady mix of the people and the place had captivated me; it was beyond me to break the spell.

Long periods of isolation on Sundays or holidays were blissful. My soul, which looked tattered and joyless after years of constant inner chatter and restlessness, physical movement and emotional upheavals began to heal. Equanimity, an easy calm, and love for nature, fellow humans and simple things of life began to take roots. On certain occasions I spent whole days confined to my cramped but beautiful room. I couldn’t understand why I never felt lonely, unhappy or disoriented despite not meeting a single soul for long hours. Peace pervaded my whole being, and no physical deprivation or discomfort could destabilize me. Even power cuts during the snowfalls were not much of an inconvenience. A new understanding of life was taking hold of me. Each had their contribution – loving friends, which included colleagues, temple *sevaks* and also the nearby shopkeepers with whom I had little in common. I felt it for the first time that we constituted a large human family in which each member was equally important; education, affluence, poverty, caste, class, or position hardly mattered. We were all notes of a symphony, and unless all notes played in tandem, the only possible music was a jarring noise. I was beginning to take interest in the

multiple strands of the web that made society. Children returning from school on foot, who respectfully bowed and touched our feet gave me as much joy as our occasional encounters with high-profile visitors to the temple, who often interacted with us as we were regarded the intellectual elites in this rural setting.

A great many local patients thronged the hospital with their sufferings and ailments. Some came with routine problems, but in some cases, long years of neglect had taken their diseases beyond a point of no return. They struggled to articulate their symptoms, but their bodies said it all. Nikita and Vinti, my two nursing associates, came to their rescue. With utmost patience and empathy, they dealt with them, mediated and bridged the linguistic gap that lay between these simple folks and a medical specialist, who revelled in medical jargon. To my innocent inquiry how they could ever remain calm and helpful, they would respond with innocent smiles and disarming candidness. “They are almost family, directly or indirectly. In villages, the boundary of our love is not so well-defined. It spills beyond a mother, father, brother or a sister; a neighbor or a distant acquaintance has an equal right to sit in the comforts of the canopy of love we erect,” said Nikita with conviction, leaving me speechless. Are they a different human species or is my understanding of human nature so pathetic and limited? The smell of festering wounds, medicine, and the huge associated paraphernalia that attempted to steal life from death, couldn’t dampen the spirit of my team; the challenging working conditions couldn’t kill their free-flowing humaneness and abundant charm. The whole atmosphere palpitated with a vibrancy and exuberance that their collective energies produced. Their tender approach to human connections, their quiet and unobtrusive presence released a torrent of ideas that had been simmering, waiting to spill over into images and phrases.

Life has its own logic and pace. We can hardly visualize what lies in store for us. What seems profitable to us may prove disastrous in the long run, while a seemingly unwelcome event may bring joy. My life too took a decisive turn when, one fine day, I picked up the pen and found that the company of these beautiful characters had mobilized my writerly instincts that had lain dormant all these years. I had met these artless souls only for a few months, but their ruggedness, commitment, unbounded love, and passion for life ignited in me an urge to look deep into human soul, to experience the rhythm of life intimately. I had never known that our lives had so much richness and depth, love and beauty. Their lives were an unfathomable quarry where multi-hued gems lay

embedded. The seeds that had lain unsprouted all these years had finally found the soil they had been yearning for; tender offshoots were joyfully playing with the wind. The frozen mass of ideas and emotions was beginning to thaw. The river carried in its life-giving waters a huge mass of the fertile earth. The pen, which had got stuck in the rough furrows and looked rudderless, was finally moving freely, happily, energized with the human spirit and warmth. It was feeling uncaged and natural, almost like a river swollen with water, soil and uprooted trees during a calamitous flood. The barrier was finally crossed and a new, beautiful, resplendent view was emerging from behind the fog that had blinded my gaze.



Review: “And Then the River Flowed”

JANESH KAPOOR

“And Then the River Flowed” by Praveen Kumar appears to be based upon the age-old adage that the seeds of creativity are inherent in all ‘thinking’ human beings, particularly if they enjoy a certain degree of felicity with regards to linguistic expression as well. This is particularly true of the present writer-narrator, who has always been “fascinate[d]” by words: “I love to listen to the cadence their arrangements produce. . .” and can feel “Restless tales lurk faintly in some corner” of his mind. Numerous friends and well-wishers constantly endeavour to provide a fillip to the dormant creative zeal of the writer, who feels both encouraged and constrained by such efforts as the moment he attempts “to dress up a character or weave a story, words fail to fall into place and grow viscous”, thereby “shredding” his “faith in [his] creativity”.

However, as Carl Gustav Jung has averred, our creativity (yes, we are innately creative, lest the opening sentence of the review be taken as an ironic indictment of sorts) comes to the fore when we feel ourselves to be the captives of some unwarranted situation or perceive an existential challenge to our being (often the result of the finitude of existence). It is when the narrator gets posted to a remote hilly area in the course of professional life and is subject to certain experiences, which are a proscription as well as a transcription of the hitherto routine life, offset with the basic inertia to change and the gradual interiorizing of the inapposite involvement in the new ethos apart from the professional-scape that the river of creative expression begins to flow.

Initially the writer-narrator is “bewildered and distraught” and is “incapable of processing the new challenge with sense and sensibility” The very idea of working and living in a “non-descript” village that has “nothing to boast of except its menacing peaks, lovely people and a captivating place of worship” after having apparently lived in cities for long. The very journey to the place “was an endless encounter with fear”. It is to be noted that the narrator’s description of the place is characterized by antithetical expressions as they combine anxiety and awe. The sentence which precedes his arrival at the new place is a case in

point: “Incessant rain had added to the magic, mystery, beauty, fear and other undefined emotions”.

However, it is the mystery and majesty of the place with its “ineffable magnetism” which soon charms the narrator who begins to view his transition to the place as a revelation of sorts: “it was a revelation that even insignificant things had the potential to alter the rhythm of life; they could trigger joy and sadness instantaneously. And when would joy turn sour, filling one with sadness, none could predict”. It is the pervasive human environment of the temple and the unflinching faith of the people from every quarter of life in the benevolence of the deity, along with specific people who form a close proximity to the narrator that his experiential matrix begins to transform into an all-embracing and inclusive spectrum of being. He forges “an instant bond” with “the simple folk who served in the temple with utmost devotion and love” and observes that the “physicality” of his encounter with “the people and the place” “lasted till my departure, but on an astral plane, it’ll remain with me for life. Their existence is eternally etched on my mind”. He never finds a “single dull moment” in life now.

Some personages from this new environ find a special mention in the story. One is Prabodh, a young colleague of the narrator, who ignites a spiritual spark of sorts in the narrator. Prabodh’s “animated discourses on spiritual matters” during long walks “in the wilderness” added ‘ineffable joy to the whole experience’. While Prabodh never accords any concrete answers to the queries by the writer-narrator, he apparently deepens the mystery and seductiveness of matters immaterial through suggestive stories and musical recourses, leaving the latter “both mesmerized and puzzled”, vicariously perpetuating his “deep sense of wonder and awe” associated with the place.

Another such personage is Balu, “an apparently arrogant yet a caring man”, who made the narrator’s life “joyful in his own humble way”. Balu would interact with him “like a friend” and tease him “freely, without inhibitions” and pose to be angry when he would proceed on leave on account of familial or social obligations. Jeevan, the cook at the temple, also finds a loving place in the narrator’s memory. Jeevan made it a point that he ate well, was aware of his lack of appetite, perhaps due to his different eating habits, and would reserve some sweet dish for him to boost his appetite.

The writer-narrator can now consciously experience the transformation in his personality and outlook. Long periods of alone-

ness no longer bothered him. “Equanimity, an easy calm, and love for nature, fellow humans and simple things of life began to take roots. . . . Peace pervaded my whole being, and no physical deprivation or discomfort could destabilize me”. He is able to meditate upon and realize a rare harmony with every aspect of being alive: “I felt for the first time that we constituted a large human family in which each member was equally important; education, affluence, poverty, class, or position hardly mattered. We were all notes of a symphony, and unless all notes played in tandem, the only possible music was a jarring noise”.

Eventually, it is Nikita and Vinti, the two nursing associates of the narrator, who “mediated and bridged the linguistic gap” that often proved to be a barrier between him and his patients”, and who remain ever calm and helpful to the simple folks who come to him for medical intervention in their diseases which “long years of neglect” had in some cases move “beyond a point of no return”. For Nikita and Vinti, these patients “are almost family, directly or indirectly” both by virtue of their profession as well as the sense of belongingness and association with the place and its people. While the narrator’s association with Prabodh, Balu or Jeevan is more of a personal alchemy, It is the care and concern which these two women exude towards humanity at large, which is perhaps an epiphany-like event for him and ushers a total transformation of his being variously orchestrated by his sojourn in this peculiarly humane place with a harsh geography. He is able to shed the persona of an intellectual struggling with words and ideas and respond intimately to the human condition around him, like a *sahaj sahridaya*. And the river of creativity begins to flow. . . .

Structurally and linguistically “And Then the River Flowed” is a well-knit story. There are no loose strands in the narrative and the syntagma fall into place perfectly. The choice of words is rigorous and orchestrates the state of mind of the writer-narrator characterized first by doubt and anxiety before moving to the mountainous include and later by acceptance and equanimity. Thus, antonymic words and expressions like “incapable”, “unfounded”, “unartistic” [*sic*], “insurmountable”, “uninspiring”, “unexpected” and the like abound in the first half of the story, but rarely occur in the later part. However, the language used remains too elite and does not capture the linguistic peculiarity of the rural, mountain people, whose feelings and expressions appear to be merely approximated even when assigned within quotation marks. While the “cadence” of strictly English language may be well maintained here, the words really “fail to fall into place and grow viscous” at least in this

instance, as the language used by the rural folk tends to be idiomatic and inflectional. The use of “Sirji!” as an endearing form of address is the only exception one can pin point in this context.

Moreover, despite the delimited canvas of a short story with little scope for growth and development of context and characters, one feels as a reader that the depiction of the mountainous environment and the characters drawn there from lack due cross-matching. Various characters could have been assigned some traits drawn from their environment. For instance, Balu’s apparent arrogance could have been likened to the towering hills and his caring attitude to the melting snow.

“And Then the River Flowed” is eventually a self-reflexive story wherein the writer tries to explore and justify one’s creative process vis-à-vis the changing circumstances and environment of his personal and professional life. There is hardly any event executed on the external plane: the substance of the story comprises the thought process of the narrator which borders on the philosophical. However, all said and done, there lies embedded within the narrative, a larger story which is about life itself and its *joie de verve*.

Audience’s Live Response

Priyanka Vaidya: Beautiful expressions and metaphors! This story teaches the art of living. Mesmerizing!

Sangeeta Singh: "Candid confessions" of the evolution of a writer/ artist/human being. Autobiographical inward journey of a mystic-seeker. Love the sheer flow of the river of words....

Kamayani Vashisht: The story of a story! Praveen sir, let this be the beginning of a new journey.

Shivani Chaudhary: An unconventional pastoral narrative... inner chatter, peace, harmony, charming human touch... how well contours of life have been painted. It's a story of finding extraordinary happiness in the ordinary.

Swaraj Raj: A tellingly effective memoir of a story. Sir, we are the people we meet, the stories we read, the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves... we grow, we evolve in response to all that we encounter... very well narrated.

15

छतरी

प्रियंका वैद्य

ज़िंदगी के चालीस बसंत वो अकेले बिता चुका था, एक अजीब सी कश्मकश थी जो उसे रोकती थी। अकेले रहने की आदत हो गई थी।

अजीब आदत थी, होटल में मिली लड़कियों के बारे में जानने की कोशिश करता। उनके अतीत की तहें खोलता और फिर ज़िंदगी और भावनाओं की कृत्रिमता को देख ठहर जाता। किसी को उस जीवन में धकेला गया था और किसी ने खुद उस बाज़ार में कदम रखा था।

व्यापार दोनों परिस्थियों में था। उसे ज़िंदगी एक बाज़ार और भावनाएँ वस्तुएँ लगती थी। गहरा उतरने की आदत थी और वो सारी कहानियाँ उसके अंतर्मन को घेरे रखती, उनसे निकलना आलोक के लिए सम्भव न था। कभी कहीं बाहर जाता तो भी बड़े शहरों की गलियों में बिखरी कहानियों को समेटने पहुँच जाता। कभी किसी को नज़र भर नहीं देखता, न किसी को स्पर्श ही करता। रात भर आराम कुर्सी पर बैठ मद्धम रोशनी में उन लड़कियों की अनकही और अनसुनी दास्तानों को सुनने की कोशिश करता।

आलोक एक महीने की छुट्टी लेकर मुंबई चला गया। किताबें पढ़ने का शौक था और किताबघर में जाते ही उसकी मुलाकात एक खामोश पहेली से हुई, जो शब्दों का समंदर थी, फिर भी कोई हलचल नहीं थी।

अजीब पागलपन था। कुछ पाने की होड़ नहीं थी, कुछ जानने की होड़ थी और वो समंदर अथाह था और गहराई का कोई अंत नहीं। वो डूबता चला गया।

आलोक इस बार किसी ऐसी लड़की से मिला जिसके जीवन की गहराई तक पहुँचना सम्भव न था।

वो लड़की साँवली थी। गहरी काली बड़ी-बड़ी आँखें और घुंगराले बाल।

“तुम्हारा नाम क्या है?”

जो नाम आप दे दो। जितने लोग आते हैं उतने नाम दे जाते हैं और मैं अपना नाम भूल चुकी हूँ, याद करना भी नहीं चाहती। उन लोगों को भी कहाँ मेरा नाम याद होगा, मेरा चेहरा भी भूल गए होंगे।

बत्ती भी जलाना नहीं चाहते, खुद का चेहरा जो छुपाते हैं।

‘मैंने नाम पूछा और तुमने सब बता दिया, नाम नहीं बताया।’

‘नाम पहचान से जुड़ा है, पहचान तो गुम है, इन बदनाम गलियों में।’

वो हंस दी। हँसी उसके चेहरे से अलग ही नहीं हो रही थी और खुशी उसकी जिंदगी से बहुत दूर थी।

‘आप पहले हैं जो बात कर रहे हैं ... बात कौन करता है?’

फिर खामोशी ने दस्तक दी।

दोनों चुप हो गए। बाहर बारिश हो रही थी। आवाज़ थी तो बस बूंदों के टपकने की।

‘परदा खोल दो। हाँ! खिड़की भी खोल दो।’

‘अरे! यहाँ कोई कभी भी खिड़की खुलवाने वाला नहीं आया। तुम अजीब हो।’

‘क्या पीना पसंद करोगे?’

‘काली चाय अदरक वाली। बस!’

‘अच्छा! तुम तो अपना नाम बताओगी नहीं, नैना सही रहेगा।’

‘नैना! नैना! नैना!’ वो नाम दोहराने लगी। कितना अच्छा है सुनने में!

नैना ने कभी कुछ नहीं देखा था, रोशनी उसे डराती थी और रात अंधेरी होती थी। नैना की बड़ी-बड़ी आँखों में काजल ऐसे लग रहा था मानो आसमान को काले बादलों ने बाँधने की कोशिश की हो।

‘तुम्हारे बाल तुम्हारे चेहरे पर गिर रहे हैं, तुम्हारी आँखों को देखना है। इन्हें बाँध लो।’

हाँ! चाय अपने लिए भी बनाना।’

वो मैथिली में कोई गीत गुनगुना रही थी। उसकी आवाज़ बहुत सुरीली थी और बारिश की रिमझिम में संगीत घुल गया था।

‘गाओ, चुप क्यों हो गई?’

‘चलो खिड़की के पास दो कुर्सियाँ लगा दो, वहीं बैठेंगे।’

ज़ोर से हंस पड़ी, एक तो चाय और ऊपर से सर्दी की बारिश।

"बैठ जाओ, गाना अच्छा गाती हो। कुछ और सुनाओगी, अभी तो बारह ही बजे हैं, पूरी रात बाक़ी है। चाय अच्छी है, थोड़ी और बनाओगी?"

वो चाय बनाते हुए गाना गुनगुनाती रही और आलोक उसके मैथिली भाषा में रचे हुए गीत में उसका अतीत खोजता रहा। मानो शब्दों के पीछे का सच, धड़कन में छिपा संगीत सुनना चाहता हो।

"मैथिली कैसे आती है?"

"ये गीत कहीं रुह में बसा है, बाक़ी कुछ ठीक से याद नहीं।"

अतीत याद नहीं, पहचान पता नहीं, नाम का अस्तित्व नहीं, जानने की चाह नहीं। आलोक खिड़की से दिख रही बूँदों में खोया हुआ था। कुछ ढूँढ रहा था। मैं कभी खिड़की नहीं खोलती! खासकर जब बारिश हो रही हो तो! आलोक नैना की मरुस्थल हुई आँखों को देख रहा था।

पूरी रात बिना कुछ कहे और सुने बीत गई। खामोशी चीख रही थी। कुछ था जो अभिव्यक्त हो रहा था, कुछ बिना प्रयासों के मुकम्मल हो रहा था। बिना कोशिश के घटित हो रहा था। आलोक बिस्तर पर सो गया, नैना ने बरसों बाद बारिश को देखा था और वो सोफ़े पर बैठ एकटक खिड़की से बाहर देखती रही और कब उसकी आँख लग गयी उसे पता न चला।

अगले दिन सुबह फिर वही चाय।

"साहिब! ऐसे आप यहाँ नहीं रुक सकते।"

"मैं तुम्हें क्रीमत दे दूँगा।"

"किसकी क्रीमत, अदरक वाली चाय की?"

"हाँ! चाय और गाने, दोनों की!"

वो मुस्कुरा दी। पहली दफ़ा उस ठहरी सी लहर में उफ़ान आया था। रेडियो पर प्रधानमंत्री जी का संबोधन आ रहा था, उन्होंने कहा, "जो जहाँ है वहीं रहे!" लॉकडाउन लग गया था।

"क्या तुम मुझे लॉकडाउन खत्म होने तक यहाँ रहने दोगी?"

ठीक है। वो गीत गुनगुनाते हुए रसोई में चली गई।

"हाँ! कल का एक सवाल अधूरा है। तुम्हें बारिश क्यों पसंद नहीं?"

“इस सवाल का जवाब जरूर दूँगी। “बोलते-बोलते वो चुप हो गई। दोनों अपनी खामोशियों में खो गए। आलोक दिन भर कम्प्यूटर पर अपने काम करता रहा। नैना कहानियाँ लिखती थी। उसकी डायरी में सबकी कहानियाँ दर्ज़ थी। आलोक उस डायरी को पढ़ना नहीं चाहता था। वो नैना के मुँह से उसकी दास्ताँ सुनना चाहता था।

“क्या कभी किसी से प्यार हुआ है? किस बारे में लिखती हो, खोने के बारे में या पाने के बारे में?”

“पाया होता तो यहाँ नहीं होती।”

प्यार की तलाश भी अजीब है। प्यार की तलाश में खोया हुआ आदमी सब पर विश्वास करता है। सभी को दिल में पनाह देता है और सब की जिंदगी में आग के बाद बची राख की तरह बिखर जाता है। राख फिर किसी उन्मुक्त हवा के झोंके के इंतज़ार में ठहरी रहती है।

पुनः जलना चाहती है, जो सम्भव नहीं। राख से खेलते-खेलते अनेकों चिराग बुझ गए। बुझने से जलने तक का सफ़र और जलने से पुनः बुझने तक का सफ़र भी अजीब होता है। प्यार नाम का लफ़्ज़ मेरी कहानियों में कभी था ही नहीं। अगर ग़लती से उस शब्द को लिखती तो आँखों में पड़े रेत की तरह वो शब्द चुभता। पुनः मिटाती और कर देती अलविदा उस एक शब्द को जिसकी सदा से तलाश थी। पीछे भागती। अब लफ़्ज़ों से काम नहीं चल रहा था।

वक्रत की कँटीली धरातल पर पुष्प के बीज बिखेरने की सोचती और कोई उसे प्रताड़ित कर रौंद कर चला जाता। जिजीविषा के लिए फिर नए रास्ते पर चल पड़ती।

वृक्ष के सब फूल तोड़ दिए गए थे।

जो भावनाएँ थी वो घुटने लगी थी।

प्यार तो कभी था ही नहीं। प्यार ठहरता ही नहीं। प्यार तो स्वच्छंद हवा सा गुज़र जाता है। प्यार की तलाश खत्म हो चुकी थी। हृदय अनेकों आघात सहकर पाषाण होने लगा था। जब कभी कोई उसकी तरफ़ मुस्कराकर देखता तो उसके बढ़ते हाथों को देख वो सहर जाती और विलीन हो जाती। स्पर्श उसे ग्लानि से भर देता। वो स्पर्श से भागती।

जिस स्त्री के जीवन में कोई पुरुष नहीं होता, वो सब के लिए आसान लक्ष्य होती है। सब उसकी भावनाओं के साथ खेलने को तैयार होते हैं। प्यार क्या इंसानियत ही मिल जाए, काफ़ी है।

सूरज ढल रहा था। हवा में ठंडक थी और नैना को एक रबड़ देते हुए आलोक ने कहा,

“तुम्हारे बाल बँधे हुए अच्छे लगते हैं!”

मानो उसकी काजल लगी गहरी आँखें पूछ रही हों, “आखिर तुम चाहते क्या हो?”

नैना ने अलमारी से एक छतरी निकाली और ज़ोर-ज़ोर से रोने लगी।

“आप मुझसे बात करना चाहते हो ना? कोई बात ही तो नहीं की किसी ने, किसी ने कुछ नहीं पूछा कभी। ये छतरी बाबा ने दी थी, दो दिन पहले ही मैं ग्यारह की हुई थी। वो रंगबिरंगी छतरी। मैं रात भर उस छतरी को अपने साथ लेकर सोती, डर था कि मेरा छोटा भाई ले लेगा। आज मैं खुद उसे देना चाहती हूँ, वो नहीं है। मैं ये छतरी लेकर नदी पार गाँव से दूर अपने रिश्तेदार के घर गई थी। बस यही छतरी थी मेरे पास। नदी में भीषण बाढ़ आ गई, घर और घर का कोई भी सदस्य नहीं बचा। सब डूब गया। सब तरफ़ पानी था, ज़िंदगी का कोई निशाँ नहीं था। सबकुछ डूब गया था। लहरों भी मेरे घर का पता नहीं बता रही थी। सब सवाल निरुत्तर रह गए। मेरी ज़िंदगी किस दिशा में जाएगी, मुझे नहीं पता था। मेरी नौका और मेरा सफ़र कुछ भी मेरा अपना नहीं था।”

“मेरे पास बस एक छतरी बची थी।”

“मैं दोबारा कभी अपने माँ-बाबा को नहीं देख पाई। उनकी तस्वीरें भी डूब गई थी। कुछ भी शेष नहीं था, उनके चेहरे मेरे दिल में अभी भी कहीं दफ़न है।”

“बाबा का हाथ मैं अभी भी महसूस करती हूँ, माँ की गोद मुझे बहुत याद आती है।”

“छोटा भाई अभी भी मेरी चोटी खींचकर मुझे सताता है।”

“वो गिरने के बाद बिना कपड़े झाड़े फिर से भागना, धूल से नहाना और फिर भी खिलखिलाते रहना, मिट्टी से सने चेहरे में जो हँसी फूट पड़ती थी वो बहुत याद आती है। आइने से ज़्यादा माँ की आँखें हाल बताती थी और खामोशी भी बहुत शोर करती थी। भोलापन ऐसा कि प्यार जीतने के लिए रिश्तत नहीं देनी पड़ती थी और थोड़ी सी चोट लगने पर कई हाथ सहलाने के लिए उठते थे। पिता की उँगलियों से मेरी उँगलियाँ छोटी होती थी और पकड़ कर लगता था कि दुनिया के सबसे ताक़तवर आदमी ने थाम लिया और अनंत साहस भर जाता था। अब किसी भी दौलत से वो मिट्टी में सनी मुस्कान, साहस, छोटी उँगलियाँ और लम्बी दौड़ नहीं खरीदी जा सकती।”

“ग्यारह साल की उम्र में कोठे पर उन चीखों को सुनने की आदत हो गई थी और मेरी ही उम्र की छोटी-छोटी लड़कियों को गुड़िया तोहफ़े में दी जाती थी।”

“पंद्रह साल की उम्र में मैं वहाँ से भाग गई। एक किताबों की दुकान में काम किया, पढ़ने का शौक़ था।

उस दुकान की मालकिन ने एक कमरा दे दिया। पढ़ाई फिर से शुरू करने में मदद की। अंधेरे कमरे में माँ-बाबा से बातें करती, वो नहीं थे, उनका एहसास बाक़ी था:

“बाबा! मैं पढ़ूँगी, अब मास्टर तो नहीं बन सकती। जिंदगी ने ऐसे पाठ पढ़ा दिए हैं, परंतु मैं पढ़ूँगी।”

“हिंदी के सब लेखकों को दुकान में बैठ पढ़ लिया, जो खरीददार किताब लेते थे उन्हें लेखक और किताब के बारे में बता देती। कहानियाँ सुनाना आदत हो गई थी।”

वक्रत बीतता गया।”

“वो बैसाखियाँ काटने लगीं। फिर से क्रीमत चुकानी पड़ी। कमरा महँगा हो गया और जिंदगी सस्ती। कुछ महीने ही हुए थे कि फिर से वही सिलसिला शुरु हुआ। अब की दफ़ा पढ़े-लिखे लोग थे, कोठा भी नहीं था। मैं थी और मेरा छोटा सा घर, बिना एहसास का जिस्म और बिना धड़कन का दिला।”

“सुना है आपने? ये दिल धड़कता ही नहीं।”

“अभी भी कालांतर में किताबघर जाती हूँ तभी आप मिले! जिंदगी कहानी बन गई है।”

एक ज़माने से किसी ने कुछ पूछा नहीं था। सब सिर्फ़ बताते हैं, कोई बीवी से परेशान, कोई घर से, कोई नौकरी से, कोई जिंदगी से। कोई नहीं पूछता कि मेरी क्या कहानी है।

वो छतरी को गले सा लगाकर रोने लगी, काजल बह गया था।

बाल अभी भी बँधे थे।

आलोक उठा, “तुम अदरक वाली चाय लोगी?”

“मुझे कहानियाँ पसंद हैं, क्या रोज़ शाम को एक कहानी सुनाओगी?”



प्रियंका वैद्य की कहानी "छतरी" की समीक्षा

हेम राज बंसल

साहित्य बहुत सी ऐसी कहानियों से भरा है जो वेश्याओं के जीवन और उनकी वास्तविक पहचान से जुड़ा रहा है। कमला दास (1934-2009) की कहानी "ए डॉल फॉर दी चाइल्ड प्रॉस्टिट्यूट" (1977) तेरह वर्ष की लड़की रुक्मिणी की जीवन व्यथा पर प्रकाश डालती है। बाबूराव बागुल (1930-2008) की "वुमन ऑफ दी स्ट्रीट" और निरंजन की "दी लास्ट कस्टर" भी हृदय विदार कर देने वाली कहानियां हैं। इस्मत चुगताई (1915-1991) और कुर्नुतुल ऐन हैदर (1926-2007) की कहानियां भी समाज के इस कड़वे सच को उजागर करती हैं। लेकिन प्रियंका वैद्य की कहानी एक ऐसी ही मजबू लड़की के जिस्म से न शुरू होकर समझ से शुरू होती है। "छतरी" कहानी एक उस लड़की के बारे में बताती है जो एक ऐसी दुनिया में खुद को खोया हुआ पाती है जहां उसकी अपनी कोई व्यक्तिगत पहचान नहीं रह पाती। कहानी के मुख्य पात्र ओजस के जीवन को देखें तो वह उन लड़कियों के बारे में जानना चाहता है जो उसे होटल में मिलती हैं। उसे इस बात से पीड़ा पहुंचती है कि कैसे जीवन मात्र एक बाजार की तरह है और भावनाएं बनावटी। वह लड़कियों की जिंदगी में उतर जाना चाहता है, उन्हें समझना चाहता है, उन्हें क्यों और कैसे खुद को बेचना पड़ रहा है, क्या वो ये सब किसी पारिवारिक समस्या के कारण कर रही हैं या किसी आर्थिक समस्या के कारण या फिर स्वेच्छा से।

कहानीकार आलोक को एक ऐसे पात्र के रूप में दर्शाती है जो बिल्कुल अलग है जिसका मकसद किसी के जिस्म तक पहुंचना नहीं बल्कि उनकी आत्मा, मन और परिस्थितियों को समझना है। यही कारण है कि जब वो मुंबई जाता है तो एक क़िताबघर में एक ऐसी लड़की को पाता है जिसको आज तक किसी ने समझने की कोशिश ही नहीं की थी। जब वह उससे उसका नाम पूछता है तो वह बताना ही नहीं चाहती। उसे यह जान कर आश्चर्य होता है कि किसी ने आज तक उससे उसका नाम जानने की कोशिश ही नहीं की थी। उसके पास आज तक जितने भी ग्राहक आये थे वो केवल शारीरिक भूख मिटाने आये थे, कभी बत्ती तक जलाने की कोशिश नहीं की थी उन्होंने क्योंकि वो किसी को भी अपनी पहचान नहीं बताना चाहते थे। इसलिए सबको अँधेरा पसंद था और अँधेरे में ही लौट जाना ताकि उनकी सामाजिक पहचान पर कोई नकारात्मक प्रभाव न पड़े।

प्रियंका वैद्य ने काफी मार्मिक ढंग से इस लड़की का चित्रण किया है। भिन्न-भिन्न लोग उसे अलग-अलग नाम से पुकारते थे और इस कारण वह अपना नाम तक भूल चुकी थी। आलोक का उसे नैना नाम देना उस लड़की की वास्तविकता को दर्शाता है। ये नाम उसे अँधेरे से उजाले की तरफ लाने की कोशिश करता है, और समाज को भी एक आइना दिखाता है कि हमें कैसे अपने नैना, अपनी आँखे एक वेश्या की जिंदगी को एक अलग दृष्टिकोण से देखने के लिए खोल देनी चाहिए। नैना का खिड़की कभी न खोलना भी उसके अंदर के अँधेरे को दर्शाता है। खिड़कियां जीवन में नयी संभावनाओं, अवसरों की प्रतीक होती हैं और इसी के साथ-साथ बाहरी दुनिया की झलक भी दिखाती हैं लेकिन नैना के सन्दर्भ में ये सारी सम्भावनायें मात्र एक कभी न पूरे होने वाले सपने के समान थीं। इसके अलावा किसी ने भी उसके दिल की खिड़की में गहराई से नहीं देखा था और न ही किसी ने उसकी पीड़ा को भांपने का प्रयास किया था। यही कारण था कि वह कभी भी कमरे की खिड़की नहीं खोलती थी और दूसरा यह भी कि लोग अपनी पहचान छुपाना चाहते थे।

लेखिका नैना की तुलना उस वृक्ष से करती हैं जिसके सारे पत्ते और फूल तोड़ दिए गए हो। नैना के जीवन से भी सारी खुशियों रूपी फूल तोड़ दिए गए थे। कुछ वक्त के तमाचों ने तो कुछ उसका जिस्म नोचने वाले विलासिता में डूबे लोगों ने। उसका बारिश को पसंद न करना उसके जीवन की एक असहनीय घटना से जुड़ा था। उसकी रंग बिरंगी छतरी के साथ नैना की बहुत सी यादें जुड़ी थी क्योंकि वह उसे उसके बाबा ने दी थी। यही वो छतरी थी जो उसके बाबा के प्यार का प्रतीक थी और इसी छतरी ने उसे उस भयानक रात को बचाया था जब गाँव में आई बाढ़ में सब कुछ डूब गया था। बची थी तो सिर्फ वही क्योंकि उस रात वह उस गाँव में नहीं थी। इसी विवशता के परिणामस्वरूप एवं अनाथ होने के कारण ग्यारह साल की अवस्था में ही उसे वेश्यावृत्ति में धकेल दिया गया था। प्रियंका कोठे की वास्तविकता को सबके सामने लाकर नैना के माध्यम से उस पर व्यंग्य करती हैं जो नैना की उम्र की बच्चियों के चीखने की आवाज़ से पता चलता है। नैना साहस जुटा कर जिस तरह से भाग निकलती है और एक पुस्तक की दुकान पर काम करती है वह उसके होंसले एवं विश्वास को दर्शाता है। लेकिन अब फिर से बढ़ती मंहगाई के कारण उसे मजबूरन वही करना पड़ता है -- जिस्म बेच कर गुजारा। और अगर प्रियंका के शब्दों में कहूँ "बिना एहसास का जिस्म और बिना धड़कन का दिल", कुछ इस तरह का जीवन हो जाता है नैना का।

आलोक नैना के दुःख भरे जीवन वृत्तांत से आश्चर्यचकित हो जाता है। वह उसे जीवन जीने की एक नई आस देना चाहता है। लेखिका कहानी को एक औपचारिक अंत नहीं देती, वह यह पाठकों पर छोड़ देती हैं और यह कहानी के अंतिम प्रश्नवाचक वाक्य "क्या रोज शाम को एक कहानी सुनाओगी?" से प्रतीत होता है। हालाँकि आलोक वहां लॉकडाउन के बीच फंसा था लेकिन उनकी यह मुलाकात हमें उनके जीवन के एक सुहावने भविष्य की ओर इंगित करता है क्योंकि आलोक बहुत ही सहानुभूति पूर्वक नैना को समझने की कोशिश करता है।

नैना की रंग-बिरंगी छतरी जीवन के उन रंगों अर्थात् खुशियों का प्रतीक है जो उसके बाबा उसकी ज़िन्दगी में भर देना चाहते थे। नैना का छतरी से हमेशा चिपके रहना उसके बाबा की उसके ज़िन्दगी में परोक्ष रूप से निरंतर साथ रहने का एवं सहारा देने को दर्शाता है। जिस प्रकार से छतरी बारिश और धूप से हमारी रक्षा करती है वैसे ही नैना के बाबा की भेंट की हुई छतरी उसे विकट स्थितियों से निपटने में ढाल का काम करती है।

"छतरी" 2020 में प्रकाशित कहानी-संग्रह *लॉकडाउन डायरी: कही-अनकही कहानियाँ* में सम्मिलित है। यह कहानी आर्थिक विवशता में जूझ रही औरतों के मजबूरन जिस्म-परोसने की पीड़ा को दिखाती है। लेखिका की इस तरह की औरतों के प्रति संवेदना का पता इस बात से चलता है की उन्होंने पूरी कहानी में कहीं पर भी 'वेश्या' शब्द का प्रयोग नहीं किया है। यह कहानी आर्थिक विवशता में जूझ रही औरतों के मजबूरन जिस्म-परोसने की पीड़ा को दिखाती है। आलोक जैसे समझदार पात्र का होना भी इस बात का परिचायक है कि ज़िन्दगी में वेश्याओं को भी प्रेम की जरूरत होती है, उन्हें केवल शारीरिक भोग की वस्तु मात्र नहीं समझा जाना चाहिए। वे भी भावनात्मक रूप से भूखी होती हैं जिसे शारीरिक विलासिता कभी पूरा नहीं कर सकती। कहानी की सुंदरता इस बात से भी है कि कहानी में मुख्य रूप से दो ही पात्र हैं और वो सही मायने में एक-दूसरे से 'बात' करते हैं और एक-दूसरे के मनोभावों को समझते हैं। यह कहानी हमें *जॉर्ज बर्नार्ड शॉ* (1856-1950) के मशहूर नाटक *मिसिज़ वारेन'स प्रोफेशन* (1902) की भी याद दिलाता है जिसमें उन्होंने कहा था कि वेश्यावृत्ति एक नैतिक चूक के कारण नहीं बल्कि आर्थिक जरूरत की वजह से उत्पन्न होती है। इसी के साथ-साथ यह कहानी बाल तस्करी, मुख्यतः मासूम लड़कियों की तस्करी तथा उन्हें जिस्म बेचने के धंधे में धकेलने वाले लोगों पर कड़ा कटाक्ष है।



Audience's Live Response

Jyoti Mishra: Very passionate rendering Priyanka...

Seema Bawa: Mesmerizing!

Shikha Kapur: Amazing! Lovely narration!

Shelley Narang: Loved your rendition ...so passionate, yet delicate.

Arun Guleria: Very heart touching story Priyanka... exposed hidden layers of society... great.

16

WHY FEAR WHEN I AM HERE

RAJAN KAUSHAL

Mohan was literally dragging his feet while returning home. Earlier, he would always want to reach home as early as possible. He had never experienced this kind of eerie feeling where he would just keep walking and should never be home. What troubled him the most was that he was fired from his job despite his honesty, loyalty and dedication towards the company. This thought crossed his mind relentlessly despite giving his heart and soul to the company, the owner didn't think at all before his dismissal. He was the oldest employee of the company and had been there from the day when the owner Mr. Chopra inaugurated it by breaking the coconut. He had seen the firm meandering through the tumultuous path during recession to achieving the culmination of success, eventually. When he arrived near his home, the kids playing in the street thronged him for grabbing their toffies as he would bring toffies for them everyday. "Today I have nothing, kids," said he and showed his empty hands.

He had a surge of extreme sadness on his face. The moment he pressed the doorbell, he didn't know how he would face his wife and kids. His wife opened the door but without making an eye contact with her or uttering a word, he went inside. The wife could sense the change in his behaviour. She gave him a glass of water and sat near him. Then after a moment she asked, "What happened, are you Ok?"

He said in a very low volume while gazing at the floor, "Rekha, I have lost my job. They have fired me."

The wife was shocked but remained quiet for a while. But after a couple of minutes she asked, "But why did they do it?"

Mohan sighed and explained, "You know our employees' union has been on strike as we haven't been paid our bonus and dearness allowance this year. The owner gave the reason that company had

incurred a huge loss this year. Being there in the accounts department, I knew it was true. So, I appealed the union leader to give our owner some time and apprised him of the losses this year. But he got infuriated and alleged, “You are a minion of the owner and a traitor of our union.” It had happened a week back. That very day, our employees in the union shouted the slogans against me, calling me a traitor. Today, union made a compromise with the owner and agreed on half bonus and half DA now and half of it to be paid the next year.”

“So good, union has compromised,” she interrupted.

Mohan continued, “Yes, but along with that they kept a demand in front of the owner.”

“What demand,” asked Rekha exasperatingly.

He replied, “The demand to fire me. When the owner resisted a bit then they threatened to go on the strike again. The owner called me and handed over the letter of dismissal and asked me to leave,” his voice cracked while saying this.

His wife said, “But why did you advise the union leader when there was no need?”

When Chopra Sir, the founder of the company was on his death bed, one day he had called me. He asked me to help his son in handling the company being the oldest employee. He reposed trust in me. He valued my loyalty towards the company. So, there was nothing wrong in telling the union leader about the loss the company had incurred. It was true,” he answered.

“But what did you get after telling this truth”, asked Rekha in frustration.

“Don’t worry I’ll find another, job soon,” replied Mohan.

“I had told you so many times to make a job shift to any other company. You could get better salary in any other company as per your long experience and capability. But, you never listened to my advice. You have not faced any interview in the last 20 years. It is not going to be that easy,” responded Rekha.

Mohan didn’t answer and just got up and went to the balcony. He sat there and kept ruminating over the happenings in his life. His wife brought him a cup of tea and the newspaper. “Why newspaper,” he asked.

“So, that you may look for a new job,” replied she.

Being a practical lady, she knew that he would have to try hard; only then he could secure a job. She never wanted the family to suffer for want of money. They required money for the education of their kids. The son was pursuing his engineering whereas; the daughter was preparing hard to get admission in a medical college. Both the kids were in dire need of money for their fees and other expenses. The next day Mohan appeared in an interview. They were looking for a fresher and not a very experienced guy for the post as they wanted to shell out a miniscule amount as emolument. There were very few jobs available, as most of the business houses were firing employees to cut their costs and fight with the recession in the market. A couple of companies could give him a job but he couldn't justify why he left the previous one. So, he was considered as a candidate with dubious reputation. He had tried everything but still couldn't obtain a job even after two months. Their savings had gone and there was an urgent need to get a job. His wife tried to contact a few relatives to help him getting a job, but to no avail. Mohan prayed every day in the evening but he was unable to concentrate on prayer. The picture of his *Guru* and his words, “Why fear, when I am here” flashed through his mind. He remembered what he had said in his discourse when he had gone to his *ashram* long ago, “Keep your intention correct, I'll take care of the rest.”

But this question kept disturbing him that despite his right intentions, honesty and diligence he was suffering so much. A couple of tears fell down his cheeks while gazing at the picture of his *Guru*.

Though, his wife would come up with one idea or the other every day to secure a job but even after acting upon her advice myriad times, he could not obtain a job. Today, when he finished his evening prayers, she had been waiting eagerly with one more idea to divulge.

She said, “I was thinking that at times, especially in troubled times we ought to take the help of our relatives.”

Mohan stared at Rekha angrily but again she started giving her logics,

“Why not, relatives should help each other”

“Who are you talking about?” asked Mohan.

“Krishna, Bhai Sahab, whom you had met, at the demise of his father,” she answered.

“What are you saying? I hope you haven’t gone crazy. He is my grandmother’s sister’s grandson, such a distant relative. I had met only once during the last rites of his father, 18 years back. He doesn’t even live in India. He has his business in South Africa,” he blurted out.

“So, what, but you told me that he had asked you to tell him if you ever need any help, he would,” she responded.

He said that as everybody says, during exchanging pleasantries. He might not be even remembering my name. It has been 18 years, nobody remembers such a small meeting of just a couple of minutes,” replied Mohan instantly.

“You please try, if he doesn’t recognise you then don’t take it to heart,” she pleaded.

His son Lokesh was listening to this conversation and he started searching Krishna in South Africa on the Facebook. Facebook showed 37 results. He quickly went to his parents who were chatting in their balcony.

“Baba, Facebook is showing all these profiles when I searched Krishna in South Africa. Can you identify his face Baba?” asked Lokesh.

Mohan looked at the profile pictures on his son’s phone one by one. But he couldn’t find him, so he said, “Look for Krishna Awasthi.”

“Ok, Baba,” replied Lokesh.

As he searched Krishna Awasthi, there came a profile showing the picture of a gentleman. He was dressed in a charcoal black suit and had radiance on his face. There was an aerial view of the Cape Town as the background of his profile picture.

“Baba, look at this picture, is he Awasthi uncle?” asked his son with excitement.

“A little smile came on Mohan’s face and he said, “Yes, he is Krishna Awasthi.”

“Lokesh, can you get his phone number from the Facebook?” mother asked Lokesh instantly.

“Let me see, Mummy, if he had put his phone number on the Facebook,” saying this, Lokesh started searching again.

“No, he hasn’t Mummy, but we can send him the friend request from Baba’s Facebook account. Let’s see whether he accepts it or not?” replied Lokesh.

“Ok, send it, immediately,” responded mother.

Though, Mohan was reluctant to send the request but he remained mum.

His son immediately sent the request and said, “Baba, if he accepts your friend request, it means he has recognised you. We will proceed further, only then, don’t you worry Baba,” Lokesh assured him as he knew the nature of his father, that he never wanted to lose his self - respect.

Now everyone got busy in their works. Lokesh checked the Facebook in the evening. He literally ran to meet his father who was on the terrace and was lost in his thoughts. Lokesh danced there like a kid but his father snubbed him, “What are you doing, Lokesh, have you gone mad?”

“Baba, Awasthi Uncle has accepted your friend request and he has sent you a message on the messenger, saying, ‘Got connected to you after a long time, and how are you, Mohan?’” informed Lokesh.

Mohan didn’t believe his ears and said, “Are you sure, Lokesh?”

“Yes, Baba, yes, very sure,” saying this he danced again.

“Stop this Lokesh, he has just accepted my friend request. I have not got the job yet, so, please stop this,” said Mohan irritatingly.

“Come on, be optimistic, Baba, I am very hopeful, you will get the job soon, if he gives his reference,” responded Lokesh.

Mohan came down; he himself typed a message on the messenger and described the entire scenario in short. He requested him to give a reference so that he could get a job and he would be grateful. After half an hour, Mr. Awasthi sent a message asking for Mohan’s phone number. As Lokesh sent his phone number just after a couple of minutes Mohan received a call from Mr. Awasthi’s office. His assistant connected him to Mr. Awasthi.

After exchanging the pleasantries, he explained the entire story in short though Mr. Awasthi listened the entire narrative sympathetically but he said, “You do one thing send me your CV across on my email address which I am sending you on messenger, let me see what I can do.

Ok, dear I will get back to you in a couple of days,” and he kept the phone down.

After this, Mr. Awasthi straightaway called up his personal Assistant and told her, “See, Suzane, I’ll send you a CV in a shortwhile, immediately forward that to the HR department of our office in India. I want to know every detail about this guy, his work, conduct, reputation where he was working in his previous company. I want to know the reason why he was fired from there.”

“Right sir,” Suzane answered.

After a couple of days Suzane came and handed over the report about Mohan which they had received from their Office in India.

The report said the same version what was narrated by Mohan in his telephonic conversation. Mr. Awasthi asked Suzane to connect him to Mohan.

He said “Hello Mohan, see instead of giving you a reference for the job, I offer you a job in my company in South Africa, you will get good salary and other perks, a nice place to stay as well. What do you think about the offer?”

“Well, I will have to think, Bhai Sahab,” replied Mohan.

“What is there to think Mohan, have you got your passport?”

“No, I haven’t,” Mohan replied.

“Anyways that can be made fast these days. You make up your mind, get your passport ready and call me back, I’ll send you the Air ticket, take care, bye.” As he talked about the offer to his wife and kids, they couldn’t believe it to be true.

“What are you thinking now, please go and get your passport made,” said Rekha.

“I will help you Baba, I know the process, as I have got it made,” said Lokesh

“What happened why you are so sad Baba,” asked his daughter Meghna.

“Nothing, Meghna, I had never thought that a day would come when I would be forced to leave my company first and then my country. Now I have no other choice but to accept the offer,” replied Mohan in a very sad tone.

As Mohan called Mr. Awasthi after a week and informed him that he had got his passport ready. He immediately told him that he would be sending him the tickets soon on his mail.

Next week, Mohan flew to South Africa, and there the official car was ready to receive him. He was taken to the guest house where he got fresh and changed his clothes. Then he met Mr. Awasthi and, in the office, he met him like a professional and spoke to him formally. He handed him over his appointment letter. He was given the designation of the senior Accounts Officer in the central office of Awasthi Group of industries. Mr. Awasthi would also sit in that office itself. From central office all the offices located in various locations are supervised by the owner and the staff. He was given a fully furnished apartment from the office as promised. Mr. Martin Astle was asked to brief him about the various companies of their work and his work in the accounts department. Every day Mr. Awasthi would keep a strict vigil on him through the CCTV, and he found him very punctual and sincere. When Mohan's senior Mr. Astle was called to report about the performance then he simply said, "He is excellent, Sir. He has got a thorough understanding of accounts."

Mr. Awasthi was elated to know that. He again called Suzane and asked her to check the credibility and character of the new employee by tempting him by wealth, wine and women. He was offered a huge bribe to change some entries in the accounts but he refused straightaway and acquainted Mr. Awasthi of the happening. Even other temptations of wine and women were not paid any heed by him. So, he had got through even in this test. His domestic help was asked about his lifestyle at home and he said, "This guy leads a very boring life, sleeps at 10 o'clock and gets up at 5 O' Clock in the morning. Starts his day by praying in his little temple and ends the day again by praying. He eats whatever is given to him, no likings at all, no drinking; no partying God knows what he lives for."

Just after a month, he was promoted as the head of the accounts section. Now Mr. Awasthi started discussing various problems his companies were facing. Every time he posed a problem in front of Mohan, he gave him an ideal solution. This clearly showed that Mohan not only was exceptionally well in accounts but even in other matters related to the company as well. Mr. Awasthi could sense that though Mohan had worked in a smaller company for so long but he was quite aware of the fact where the international market was moving as he was

in the habit of reading the Economic Times everyday. Mr. Awasthi also realised that he had a vision for taking the company ahead but till that time he had neither got the opportunity nor any exposure to prove his mettle. One day when Mr. Awasthi called him and asked him, “Mohan, are you happy here?”

“Yes, Sir”, Mohan replied.

“Then, why don’t you look happy?” he asked further.

“I don’t know, Sir, but I had not thought about coming here, living here as I was very happy in that small company. The owner Mr. Chopra had asked me before leaving for his heavenly abode to be there and look after the company. But destiny had something else in store for me,” replied Mohan.

“I understand that, anyways it has been three months now, go home, spend a couple of weeks with your family, then bring them here, if possible,” suggested Mr. Awasthi.

“Yes sir,” Mohan replied.

“You pack your stuff you will get the ticket soon”

The moment Mohan leaves Mr. Awasthi spoke to his manager in the Indian office and directs him to initiate the deal of taking over KGX Pharmaceuticals. As the company was incurring losses and the price quoted was more than the expected so the owner readily agreed. Within a week KGX Pharmaceuticals had become Awasthi Pharmaceuticals. Mr. Awasthi called up Mohan and asked him about his plan of coming back to South Africa. He said, “Sir, I would be back after a week.”

“Ok, you may stay there for three months now,” said Mr. Awasthi.

“But I have come here just for a couple of weeks, Sir,” responded Mohan.

“But I want you to be there, as I have recently taken over a new company there which was incurring losses. Now it is your job to transform that company into a profitable one as I have appointed you the CEO of that company.”

“CEO of a company...., which company is that, Sir?” asked Mohan in surprise.

“KGX Pharmaceuticals,” responded the boss.

After hearing that, Mohan felt choked, and couldn’t speak a word.

There was silence for a few seconds and then Mr. Awasthi said, “Mohan, check your mail, your appointment letter has been sent along with all the details of the company. You may take any assistance required from our office in India. They will be contacting you soon. Once you join me in South Africa, after three months then you have to give me a presentation on what changes you made in the company. Wish you Good Luck! Take care.” Mr. Awasthi kept the phone down after saying this.

Mohan sat down and it was still difficult for him to believe that he would be the head of the company from where he was fired six months back. Such a turnaround in such a short span seemed like a dream. When this news was divulged to the members of his family they were overjoyed and celebrated the occasion. But that night Mohan went to his *Pooja* room locked himself. He looked at the picture of his *Guru*, read again those words written at the top of the picture, ‘Why Fear When I Am Here’ and tears trickled down his eyes, he remembered the day when he was fired and he couldn’t understand why he was fired. Now he realized that everything happened because of the divine plan as God wanted to give him something better.

He wiped his tears, got a pen and paper and wrote down about his priorities in the company. Then he wrote down those things he thought were necessary to do in the company but he couldn’t do due to lack of authority. Next day, he went to the company, hung the picture of his *Guru* in his room first, with the title, ‘WHY FEAR WHEN I AM HERE.’ Some employees were shocked to see him as their CEO. Whereas, some were apprehensive as to what would happen to their jobs, others were happy too as they knew that he was a very good human being. He called up a meeting of all the employees, which had never happened in the history of that company. Earlier, only union leaders would speak to the management. Then they used to pass on that message to the employees. They would communicate the matters as per their petty motives. Mohan in this meeting delivered a brief speech, “Dear, fellow workers, first of all accept my greetings. I had joined this company as a junior accountant 20 years back. I vividly remember the day when this company was inaugurated by our worthy owner Late Chopraji. I still see myself as an employee who has been here from its inauguration till now, except for the six months’ time. I love this company as it has given food, shelter and everything, I and my family needed and even to yours as well. I never ever felt that I was working just for salary. I expect the same love from you for this company. If you look

after this company nicely, in return it will look after you and your family in same proportion. Many people may have some apprehensions that I may be revengeful and I may take their jobs away. But believe me I am not going to do anything like that. I know what happens when you lose your job, I won't let any of our employee go through that tragic experience at all. I know, you all are capable and have done a great job here. One thing I want you to keep in your mind that you all will grow if the company grows. Love this firm and this firm will love you in return. Each one of you may come and meet me anytime if you have any problem. No other channel is required. Two employees don't need any other channel to talk to each other. If we can bring this company into profit, it will be beneficial for each and every employee. Now every month we will meet and discuss our progress, problems and plans. Let's take it as a challenge that in this quarterly report we will bring this company into profit. Wish you all good luck."

This speech had infused a great confidence among the workers and now an environment of positivity had started prevailing there. In the same way he had a meeting with his sales executives and motivated them. He established a better communication with his wholesalers and offered them incentives too.

He did achieve what he had planned to achieve. When the next quarterly report came his company had attained profit. Share value of the company had gone up. When he went to South Africa, he delivered a presentation on how he converted a sick company into a profitable one. Mr. Awasthi was simply overjoyed. Though he was thoroughly professional but he couldn't stop himself rising from his chair and hugging him. Afterwards, he asked him to manage the Awasthi Pharmaceuticals from South Africa and he was given the task of CEO of two of his South African companies and was asked to bring the required changes in them in the next couple of months. He studied their entire system. With great precision he understood the problems and tried to find their solutions. He was doing a wonderful job. A few days later Mr. Awasthi called him up and asked him to come to his home in the evening. He went there and it was a huge mansion. As he sat in the drawing room waiting for Mr. Awasthi but then a servant came and told him, "Sir, is calling you in his bed room."

He went there and saw that Mr. Awasthi was in his bed and was looking sick.

"Sir, what happened, are you fine," asked Mohan.

“Come, Mohan, sit here,” replied the boss.

Mohan sat on a chair near his bed. Mr. Awasthi held Mohan’s hand and a stream of tears rolled down his eyes. He said, “Mohan, my brother I am dying.”

“What are you saying Sir?, asked Mohan, absolutely shocked.

“Mohan just listen to me, about 10 months back, I got to know that I had blood cancer. I went to USA for my treatment but even there the doctors told me that I had maximum one year. They told me that for about 10 months I would be able to work but towards the end I would feel as if there was no energy in my body. I was not afraid of the death at all. But I was extremely worried about my son Shankul. He was a drug addict and when after remaining in rehabilitation centre for one year though he gave up drugs but suffered from acute depression. Now he doesn’t speak much. He remains in his own world. I had already lost my wife a few years back. Now there would be nobody to look after him that was my chief concern. Another worry was my 18000 employees who work in my companies. What will happen to their future and their families? When that day, I sat for meditation and these words written there ‘WHY FEAR WHEN I AM HERE’ started flashing my eyes, again and again. Then picture of my Guru flashed. That was a kind of sign that don’t worry. That very evening, I got a Facebook request from you. I put you to various tests but you passed all the tests. Now I don’t think there could be a better successor to my business empire. Please, take care of my son Shankul. Treat him as your own son. Whatever belongs to me is yours from now onwards.”

Mohan sat there shocked and speechless. He was gazing at the picture of his *Guru* hanging there in front of him with the words ‘WHY FEAR WHEN I AM HERE’. He had now understood the divine plan completely why he lost his job and why he came there. It was all God’s plan. The lawyer was called and all the formalities were completed. That day onwards Mohan remained there with him and every evening he would spend with him. He would sit near him till late in the night talking and assuring him that he would take care of his son and his business very well. After a couple of months Mr. Awasthi passed away very peacefully. No need saying that Mohan loved and looked after Shankul just like his kids.

Review: “Why Fear When I am Here”

SHIVANI CHAUDHARY

Dr Rajan Kaushal’s “Why Fear When I am Here” is a story about faith, telepathy and the tendency of our belief system to govern our lives. The author has done a commendable job in driving home the point that every end marks a new beginning. So, when something goes wrong, God wants us to get something better. It is thus, a story about trusting the divine plan.

Everyone has their own belief system but we all feel, at certain points of time, our lives moving according to a masterplan. We are like blocks of a jigsaw puzzle; we are arranged to complete an array which is then broken to create a fresh one. Our conscious choices may result in small decisions like choosing a profession or a place of work but we do not consciously choose our looks, parents, place of birth, etc. We can’t negate the fact that life happens to us. There is a superpower that brings us sufferings, joy, gain or loss.

The story has a well-knit structure. There are two subplots in the story which merge through the punch line ‘why fear when I am here’ thus justifying the title of the story. The protagonist of the story Mohan connects both the subplots.

The first subplot unravels the crises that Mohan is undergoing. Despite being sincere, loyal and one of the founder employees of Mr. Chopra’s company KG Pharmaceuticals, Mohan loses his job. His wife Rekha emerges as a strong and practical lady who does not want her family to suffer a financial crunch. She suggests Mohan to ask for help by contacting people who could help them come out of the situation. Their son Lokesh is pursuing engineering and their daughter Meghna is preparing hard to get admission in a medical college. So they need funds. Mohan sits in meditation and visualizes his guru’s words ‘why fear when I am here’.

In the second subplot we come across Krishna Awasthi, his business empire, his son Shankul, his Secretary Suzane and Mr Astle, Mohan’s senior in South African setting. Mr Awasthi is Mohan’s distant relative – his grandmother’s sister’s grandson.

The two subplots meet when Mr Awasthi offers Mohan a job in his company but puts him through ordeal by testing him in every possible way. The reader is shocked when the revelation of Mr Awasthi's Blood cancer is made. His wife is already dead; his son Shankul who used to be a drug-addict and now faces anxiety issues needs care and supervision. It is when Mr Awasthi is reminded of his guru's words, 'why fear when I am here' that he gets a call from Mohan asking for help. Mr Awasthi wants Mohan to take charge of his business empire and his son Shankul. Mohan becomes CEO of the company he was fired from and Mr Awasthi passes away peacefully. Mohan takes good care of Shankul and the conflict of both the subplots gets resolved. The ending gives relief to the reader and also suggests the reader to have faith when life gives troubles.

The story begins with a metaphor of returning home empty handed, without toffees for kids. It is ironical that the one who used to bring hope and toffees to the kids who thronged around him is hopeless and helpless today. The opening of the story describes how layoff shakes a person completely, more so, when the person has been more than dedicated and sincere in his services. Here I'm reminded of Dr APJ Abdul Kalam's quote: "Love your job but don't love your company, because you may not know when your company stops loving you."

The story holds significance during the COVID crisis when many employees are being laid off. Crises like losing a job, a shelter or a partner paralyze the world of the sufferer and nothing seems to make sense.

In such cases end of something seems like end of everything. But there is always a reason why things happen the way they do. This is what Dr Rajan Kaushal's story is all about.

Mohan loses his job, his credibility and his reputation. He is literally dragging his feet while returning home. His anguish, despair and guilt weigh heavy on him so much so that he hesitates to face his wife and children. He is devastated. Unlike Saul Bellow's Tommy Wilhelm (who loses his job as he fails as a salesman and an actor) and also unlike J.M. Coetzee's David Lurie who is forced to resign due to his misconduct, Mohan has lost his job despite his right intentions and efforts. Mohan tells a truth about the company's financial position which evokes the anger of the employee union which ends up calling him a traitor and the owner's minion. How his own fellow workers blame him and turn against him without knowing the truth reminds me of Gurmeet

Bedi's "The Terror" which Prof. Meenakshi F. Paul has translated. In both the cases people become polarized in their opinion and blame the innocent, without knowing the truth. They suffer due to what psychologists label as mob behavior.

Mohan is suffering despite his right intentions, honesty and diligence. Whenever someone gets sufferings in life, a train of unanswered whys keep disturbing the sufferer. Here in the story even the reader feels Mohan's pain and fails to understand why bad things happen to good people. It's been two months since he has lost his job. Now he is running out of funds and has responsibilities to shoulder. He is unable to find a new job. He feels lost.

It is rightly said that when all doors get shut a small window opens up. For Mohan this window opens up in the form of his guru's words, why fear when I'm here. Then begins the search for Mr Krishna Awasthi, Mohan's distant relative, who could help him find a job.

We see technology and social media playing a great role in the story. Krishna Awasthi is searched through Facebook. E-mail, messenger, CCTV cameras-all provide the necessary communication set up. The new technology and social media that we all fear is estranging people from one another is seen as a medium to connect. Their speed and economy help Mohan and his family sail through their troubled phase.

Mohan's hard work, sincerity and efficiency are appreciated by Mr Awasthi and his team. His karmas ultimately bring him the desired *prarabdha* and then his entrepreneurial journey begins. In this way the author establishes the reader's faith in Mohan's virtues and skills. This is how the story becomes inspirational.

Success does not come to him easy and overnight. He possesses the entrepreneurial skill set which enables him to succeed. Besides financial skills, knowledge of international market, crisis management skills, he possesses good communication and leadership skills. He also has good customer service skills, analytical and problem-solving skills, strategic thinking and planning skills. He communicates effectively with his employees, sales executives and wholesalers.

Speeches of leaders carry huge influence. His speech as a new leader infuses confidence amongst his team. He introduces an open-door policy so that anyone could meet him. He gives his employees a conducive environment to work in and a work culture that encourages

them to work to their full potential. As a result of which productivity increases. It all happens because Mohan has the capacity to translate his vision into reality. His leadership steers the company into a profitable position.

Mr Awasthi is impressed with the results that Mohan has brought forth. When we meet Mr Awasthi for the first time in the story, we visualize him as a mighty, established businessman but when the story unfolds, we get to know how he is suffering and has limited time left. He is worried about his son who is struggling too. He fell a prey to drugs and then to depression. After his stay at a rehabilitation centre, he needs to be taken care of.

Here the author successfully drives home the point that all of us have our own struggles. The grass looks greener on the other side but we fail to realize that life has a different question paper for all of us. We all have our phases.

Mohan's tough phase is over now. His virtues are rewarded. He becomes the CEO of the company he was fired from.

Here I am reminded of Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple who was fired from his own company. In 2005, Jobs was reported to say: getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. Then he founded his second company NEXT which was ultimately acquired by Apple and Jobs became its CEO.

The story becomes didactic when Mohan is tempted with money, wine and women but the integrity of his character wins him good fortune. There is also a moral statement in the story that the whole story rests upon, "Keep your intention correct I will take care of the rest."

In Dr. Rajan Kaushal's story we find that Mohan and Mr Awasthi get connected through magical words of their guru 'Why fear when I'm here'. These words resonate with Aamir Khan's famous dictum from the movie 'Three Idiots': Aaaal ij well/ All is well. Faith is all about trusting something you cannot prove. It may include fooling oneself into believing that everything's going to be fine. This is why, I believe, carrying lucky charms or wearing lucky dresses work because they make you believe that everything is going to be all right.

It's true that faith does not solve all the problems of life, but neither does logic nor science. Mohan's prayers and Mr Awasthi's meditation reinforce the Power of Prayer elaborated by Dr APJ Abdul Kalam.

So, here we have a powerful story that gives hope to one and all, especially during the testing Corona crisis. I congratulate Dr Rajan Kaushal for writing such an inspirational story and I am thankful to ETF for giving me the opportunity to review this beautiful story.



Audience's Live Response

Vandna Kumari: Rajan sir, amazing story which revolves around few words but with a great vision.

Girija Sharma: An absorbing story Rajan... was glued to the screen throughout... congratulations!

Anupama Singh: Very interesting story Rajan Sir which is replete with a positive note of faith and uprightness.

Abhyudita: Rajan sir, the story envisions today's scenario. Congratulations!

Shikha Kapur: Rajan sir, you are an amazing storyteller!

17

बिल्लियां

रेखा

झाड़ंगरूम में आते हुए बाबूजी आदतन नज़रें झुका लेते हैं। ऐसा नहीं कि वे खाने से पहले “या देवी सर्वभूतेषु क्षुधारूपेण...” जप रहे होते हैं। वे तो बस दरवाज़े के सामने वाली दीवार से आंखें बचा रहे होते हैं। जैसे ही वह दीवार पीठ पीछे चली जाती है, वे आश्वस्त होकर अपनी तयशुदा कुर्सी पर बैठ जाते हैं। अब जो दीवार सामने है उससे आमना-सामना होने में कोई भय नहीं, कोई खतरा भी नहीं। वह तो केवल दीवार है। लेकिन जिस दीवार से वह नज़रें बचा रहे होते हैं एक वही दीवार ऐसी है जो केवल पत्थर-गारे की चिनाई नहीं है। वह धीरे-धीरे सांसें लेती है। दम साधे खड़ी रहती है। बाबूजी से आंखें मिलते ही अंधेरे में बिल्ली की आंखों की तरह कौंधती है और किसी अपशकुन की तरह रास्ता काट लेती है। फिर खाना तो क्या दिन भर का चैन चौपट हो जाता है।

कभी-कभी बाबूजी अपने इस बेपेंदे डर से परेशान भी हो जाते हैं। आखिर ऐसा भी क्या है? क्यों नज़रों में नज़रें डालकर नहीं देख लेते एक बार? अपने बूते, अपने हाथों एक-एक ईंट चिनवाई है इस घर की। सब दीवारें उन्हें अभयदान देती हुई दृढ़ता से खड़ी हैं। सिर्फ यही एक दीवार नज़रें पड़ते ही काली बिल्ली बनकर गुर्र-गुर्र करने लगती है। बाबूजी अपने भय के समर्थन में कई तर्क जुटाने लगते हैं, जैसे कि नैपोलियन जैसा व्यक्ति भी बिल्ली से बहुत डरता था। या कि जैसे कई लोग चूहे को देखते ही संतुलन खो बैठते हैं या कौकरोच देखकर छलांगें लगाने लगते हैं... आदि-आदि।

कल जब किटी छोटा-सा बलूंगड़ा (बिल्ली का बच्चा) उठाए रसोई के दरवाज़े पर खड़ी होकर सासु मां से कटोरी भर दूध मांग रही थी तो बाबूजी झट से अपनी लाइब्रेरी से बाहर आ गए थे। किटी बिल्ली की नरम पीठ पर हाथ फेरते हुए कह रही थी... “हाऊ क्यूट-हाऊ क्यूट” और तभी बाबूजी किसी अनिष्ट की आशंका से अवश होकर किटी के हाथ पर झपट पड़े थे। बलूंगड़ा किटी के हाथ से नीचे लुढ़क गया और म्याऊं-म्याऊं करता हुआ कहीं सरक लिया था। किटी कह रही थी... “मैं इसे पालूंगी” और बाबूजी उसे इस तरह देख रहे थे जैसे वह धर्म बदल लेने का सार्वजनिक एलान कर रही हो।

वे धीरे-धीरे अपने कमरे में लौट आए थे और कुछ हैरान से थे कि उनका हाथ ऐसा बेकाबू कैसे हो गया। बहू के सामने मर्यादा का उल्लंघन कैसे कर बैठा उनका अपना अनुशासित हाथ।

किटी पांव कुछ अधिक ज़ोर से पटकती हुई अपने बैडरूम में घुस गई। खीझकर गहरी सांसें लेती हुई कि कैसे पूर्वाग्रह ग्रसित लोगों के बीच आ फंसी है उसकी जिन्दगी। ससुर के सामने क्यों चीखकर नहीं कहा उसने— “मुझे अपने शौक पूरा करने का पूरा हक है।” कैसे सह लिया उसने वह मूक प्रहार।

ब्याह के पहले बरस पति के साथ रहते हुए उस बीहड़ प्रान्त में किटी के पास लम्बा खाली समय रहता। पति सुबह ही काम पर निकल जाते और लौटने तक शाम ढल जाती। कॉलेज और साथी-संगियों का साथ छूटे अभी अधिक समय नहीं बीता था। गृहस्थी के दायित्वों की जकड़न भी कसी नहीं थी। बहुत अलसाये हुए से दिन थे। ऊँघते-जागते। धीरे धीरे अपने नए किरदार को समझने और उसमें उतरने की छोटी-छोटी कोशिशें कर रही थी किटी। ऐसी ही एक कोशिश के तहत उसने जूट के एक टुकड़े पर कुछ कसीदा करने की बात सोची। हो सकता है अब भी कहीं मन में मासी के वे शब्द कुन-मुन करते हों जो उसने अपने घर की बैठक में अपनी होने वाली सास के सामने सिर झुकाए हुए सुने थे — “इतना पढ़ने-लिखने के बावजूद घर के कामों में बहुत रुचि रखती है किटी। सिलाई-कढ़ाई-बुनाई सबमें निपुण है।”

गर्मियों की सूनी, लम्बी दुपहरी में घड़ी टिक-टिकाती रहती और किटी नहाई-धोई, डियोडोरेंट की सुवास में डूबी-डूबी जूट के रेशों में काले डोरे घुमाती रहती। कुछ ही दिनों में जूट के उस टुकड़े पर से दो काली बिल्लियां अपनी नीली-हरी-आंखों से टुकुर-टुकुर झांकने लगीं। ऐसे सीधे बेबाक देखती हुई कि मानों आंखें मिलते ही गुर्र-गुर्र करने लगेंगीं। गर्मियों की छुट्टियों की उपलब्धि स्वरूप बिल्लियां लौटीं। किटी ने लकड़ी के सुन्दर चौखटे में मढ़वाकर उन्हें सजा दिया। न जाने क्या सोचकर उसने डाइनिंग रूम की इस दीवार को ही सर्वाधिक उपयुक्त पाया।

बाबूजी ‘या देवी सर्वभूतेषु...’ कहते हुए जैसे ही डाइनिंग रूम में घुसे, उनकी पहली नज़र जैसे बिल्लियों ने बांध ली। काली डोरी से उकेरी गई वे बिल्लियां कुछ ऐसी जीवंत लगें कि बाबूजी को आभास हुआ मानों वे अभी कह देंगीं... ‘म्याऊँ!’ उस दिन वे खाना नहीं खा पाए। लगा जैसे बिल्लियां उन्हें नज़र से बांधे उनके हर निवाले को भूखी आंखों से ताक रही हैं।

उन्हें पता था यह किटी की कलाकृति है। उसे आहत किए बिना इन्हें इस कमरे से नहीं हटाया जा सकता। “ये मनहूस बिल्लियां यहां से हटाआँ—” पत्नी से यह कहना जितना आसान था बहू से यही कहना उतना ही कठिन। बहू पढ़ी-लिखी आधुनिक लड़की थी। कुलीन थी। कला अभिरुचियों से बखूबी परिचित। उसके आने से घर की साज-सज्जा, रख-रखाव में कई परिवर्तन आए थे। बाबूजी देखते थे कि उन्हें कुछ अनुकूल, कुछ प्रतिकूल भले ही लगे, बाकी

सभी सगे-सम्बंधी, मित्र-बंधु बहू की अकूत प्रशंसा किया करते। सौंदर्य बोध का एक नया आयाम उसने इस मध्यवर्गीय पारिवारिक परिवेश में जोड़ा था।

बाबूजी जब भी कभी पत्नी से अपनी पसंद या नापसंद की बात करते वह हर बार यही कहकर बात टाल देती— “कर लेने दो जी। जो जी में आए करे। हमारे दिन तो अब लद गए। इनका ज़माना है। इनका घर-बार है। कहते हैं ना — जेड़ा ध्याड़ा, तेड़ा बरतार।— यानि समय के अनुकूल बर्ताव।”

बाबूजी को पत्नी की इस प्रवृत्ति पर कभी तो आश्चर्य होता है, कभी क्रोध आता है। वही पत्नी जो उनकी पसंद के साथ कभी आसानी से सहमत नहीं हो पाती थी, जो अपनी बात से कभी टस से मस नहीं हुई, वही बहू और बेटे की अनुकूलता के साथ कितनी आसानी से ढल जाती है। कहां से आता है यह लचीलापन? सहनशीलता, उदारता, स्वीकार या फिर स्त्रीसुलभ व्यावहारिकता? कभी-कभी तो वे भीतर ही भीतर तमतमा कर रह जाते। उन्हें लगता यह एक तरह की चालाकी है। सत्तापक्ष से समझौता कर लेना... पर फिर वे रुक जाते। तो क्या वे भी यह मान रहे हैं कि घर में भी सत्ता का हस्तांतरण हो चुका है? रिटायरमेंट के साथ ही उनके सिंहासन पर बेटे-बहू का राज्याभिषेक कब और कैसे हुआ, उन्हें तो पता ही नहीं चला। हां, केन्द्र में बदली हुई सरकार का आभास उन्हें घर की बदल रही नीतियों और कार्यक्रमों में जब-तब होने लगा था। कभी हनुमानजी के कैलेंडर की जगह पवन वेग से दौड़ते हुए घोड़ों ने ले ली। कभी तानपूरे पर झुकी मग्न मीरा के स्थान पर कोई मांसल सांथाली आ विराजी। गेंदे और चम्पा की क्यारियों में कैकटस विलसने लगे। गौरी गैय्या का गऊग्रास पालतू कुत्तों में बंटने लगा। कुछ फर्नीचर नौकरों के कमरों को शोभायमान करने लगा और कुछ बरसों की जानी-पहचानी अपनी सी चीजों ने अपने अस्तित्व की रक्षा के लिए बैकयार्ड में शरण ली। बाबूजी ने हर परिवर्तन की फाइल पर अपनी अच्छी या बुरी टिप्पणी दर्ज की और हर फाइल मुंह पर फीता बांधे चुप लगा गई।”

बाबूजी देखते और कभी कभी बनियान उतारते हुए या कमीज के बटन बंद करते हुए बुदबुदा देते— “वसक वतकमत बीदहमजी...”। वे उन दिनों पहुंच जाते जब शैली की ‘वैस्टविंड’ पढ़ते हुए उन्हें भी अपने भीतर सर्वध्वंसकारिणी एक प्रचण्ड आंधी की पदचाप सुनाई देती थी। फिर वे स्वयं ही उसके आवेग से थककर शिथिल और त्रस्त होकर बैठ जाते और एक लाचार सा अर्थानुभव उनके हाथों में कांतिहीन पत्थर की तरह चुभता रहता — परिवर्तन कर पाना और परिवर्तित हो जाना — इन दो स्थितियों के बीच का अंतर ही यौवन और जरा का अंतर है। तर्क को कुछ और आगे ले जाते तो लगता पत्नी ने तो सर्वथा हार मान ली है क्योंकि औरतें जल्दी बूढ़ी हो जाती हैं। लेकिन वे स्वयं? वे अभी हार नहीं मानेंगे। सामना करेंगे आखिरी दम तक।

दूसरे दिन किटी ने देखा बिल्लियों को डाइनिंग रूम की दीवार से पदच्युत करके बाहर गैलरी में स्थान दिया गया है। जूतों वाले रैक के कुछ ऊपर। यह भी कोई जगह हुई? दरवाजा खुले और स्वागत में जुड़े हाथों की जगह बिल्लियों

के पंजे नजर आए। आव देखा न ताव उसने उन्हें वहां से भी उतारा और प्रतिकार स्वरूप बाबूजी के बैडरूम के दरवाजे से कुछ हटकर टांग दिया।

बाबूजी वहां से गुजरे तो 'बाबूजी पाय लागू' की तर्ज पर कोई जैसे आते-जाते कहने लगा, "बाबूजी, म्यांऊ-म्यांऊ!"

बाबूजी उसी दिन बाजार से एक लोकप्रिय, लोक मनभावन पेंटिंग का प्रिंट लेकर आए और डाइनिंग रूम की खाली पड़ी दीवार पर टांग दिया। हल्की क्रीम रंग की दीवार पर फूलों का गुलदस्ता महक उठा। बाबूजी को कुछ सार्थक सा कर पाने का संतोष हुआ। डिनर के समय किटी की नजर पड़ी। स्वतः नाक सिकुड़ गई... "हाऊ कॉमन।" दूसरे दिन वह प्रिंट बाथरूम में पहुंच गया।

बैडरूम की तरफ आते हुए बाबूजी अभ्यासवश जपते हुए आते... "या देवी सर्वभूतेषु निद्रा रूपेण संस्थिता..." और दोनों काली बिल्लियां उनकी नींद पर झपट्टा मार कर गुर्र-गुर्र करने लगती।

बिल्लियां उन्हें सदा से संस्कारवश अशुभ और अमंगलकारी लगती हैं। मक्कार, धूर्त, चालाक, लिंबड़ी और लालची। बचपन में मां कभी-कभी छोटी बहिन को 'लिंबड़ी बिल्ली' कहकर डांट लगाती थी क्योंकि वह खाने की चीजों के इर्द-गिर्द डोलती रहती थी। किसी भी निरीह प्राणी पर कैसे तो झपटती है बिल्ली। चोरटी कहीं की। चोरों की तरह दबे पांव चलना। घात लगाकर हमला करना। उनके ताऊजी से सुना था उन्होंने... "बिल्ली आंखों वाली औरत का भरोसा नहीं होता। चंचल, लुभावनी परन्तु दगाबाज़।" पता नहीं क्यों सभी उनकी मां की चाल की तुलना बिल्ली की चाल से करते हैं। इतनी धीमी, सुकुमार कि चले तो आहट तक न हो- बिल्ली की तरह। वे चाहते हैं सारे उपमान बदलकर रख दें। अपनी दिवंगता मां की किसी भी स्मृति के साथ बिल्ली जैसी कुलच्छणी को न जोड़ें।

जब इंटर में पढ़ रहे थे, उन्हीं दिनों एक फिल्म देखी थी। उसमें काला जादू करने वाले जादूगर की मेज़ पर बैठी हरी आंखों वाली बिल्ली आज भी जब याद आती है तो पल भर के लिए सांस रुक जाती है। कहां तो कहा जाता था कि खाना परदे में खाना चाहिए। भली-बुरी नजरों से बचाकर और कहां अब डाइनिंग रूम में सम्मानित पुरखों की जगह डटी हुई हैं ये कलूटी बिल्लियां।

बाबूजी ने हठात निश्चय किया कि बिल्लियां इस जगह से हटेंगी नहीं तो वे सबके साथ मेज़ पर बैठकर खाना छोड़ देंगे। पत्नी के सामने यह घोषणा की तो वह उल्टे उन्हीं पर बरसने लगी - "इसे ही कहते हैं सठिया जाना। बिल्कुल बच्चों जैसा स्वभाव हो गया है आपका। बालहठ करने लगे हैं इस उम्र में आकर। छोटी-सी तस्वीर इतने प्यार से बहू ने बनाई है। तारीफ करना तो दूर, घर में कुहराम मचा रखा है इसे लेकर। खबरदार जो और कोई बावेला मचाया। जहां है, वहीं रहने दें इसे... क्या फर्क पड़ता है... बड़ा वही जो मन मारे।" कोई कुछ भी कहे, अपनी नींद और भूख में ऐसी घुसपैठ वह कैसे सहें? घर में इतनी अवहेलना हो तो व्यक्ति की अस्मिता बचेगी कैसे? बाबूजी ने दूसरे दिन बिल्लियां

हटाई और बच्चों के कमरे में टांग आए। इस बार तो पत्नी सरेआम बहू के खेमे में शामिल हो गई।

“बच्चों के कमरे में काली बिल्लियां? मति मारी गई है क्या आपकी? कहीं रात को डर जाएं तो?”

एक बारगी मन में आया, पत्नी के हाथ पकड़कर गिड़गिड़ाएं “अरे तुम भी नहीं समझोगी? मैं भी बिल्लियों से डर जाता हूँ... अंधेरे में ही नहीं, उजाले में भी।” यह भी मन में आया कि बिना किसी से कुछ भी कहे चुपचाप इसे उतारें और लकड़ियों वाले कमरे में छुपा कर रख दें। आखिर यह रामायण, महाभारत, गीता, कुरान या जपुजी साहब जैसी कोई पवित्र कृति तो है नहीं जिसे महाप्रलय से बचाना ज़रूरी हो या राजा रवि वर्मा का कोई पुश्तैनी चित्र जिसे धरोहर की तरह सुरक्षित रखा जाना ज़रूरी है। फिर एक दूसरा भाव आया कि कला को नष्ट करना अपराध ही नहीं वहशीपन और कायरता भी है।

बाबूजी कुछ शर्तों पर अपनी बात रखना चाहते हैं। मान लें कि डाइनिंग रूम में फूलों के गुलदस्ते का चित्र फूहड़ अभिरुचि दर्शाता है और यदि वहां जानवर ही सजाए जाने हैं तो गाय और हिरण जैसे भोले और वात्सल्यमय पशु क्यों नहीं? बाबूजी धीरे-धीरे समझने लगे हैं कि ये सब अब फैशन में नहीं है। विश्वास और भोलेपन की जगह संशय और चालाकी ने ले ली है। शायद इसीलिए फैशन में हैं बिल्लियां।

बाबूजी बहुत कुछ कहना-सुनना चाहते हैं परन्तु गृहस्वामी की मर्यादा आड़े आती है और वे चुप लगा लेते हैं।

फिलहाल बिल्लियां बच्चों के कमरे से भी हटा ली गई हैं और अब लाइब्रेरी की शोभा बढ़ा रही हैं। अब बाबूजी डाइनिंग रूम के लिए फलों का चित्र ले आए हैं ताकि बहू का घायल मन कुछ तो शांत हो। बहू ने देखा तो फिर टिप्पणी की – “यह घर है या कुंजड़े की दुकान।” बाबूजी चुप रहे। बहू-बेटियों से खुल्लम-खुल्ला विवाद करना शोभा नहीं देता।

वाक्युद्ध की जगह शीतयुद्ध चल रहा है। बिल्लियां सचमुच कपट चाल चल रही हैं। बिल्ली का वैभव हमारी संस्कृति का पराभव है। यह हमारी अभिरुचियों में पाश्चात्य हस्तक्षेप का द्योतक है। बाबूजी इस धर्मयुद्ध में अर्जुन की तरह विषाद मग्न खड़े हैं। किस पर शस्त्र उठाएं? शत्रुपक्ष में उनके अपने ही बाल-बच्चे हैं। लाइब्रेरी जो उनका अभयारण्य थी आज जब सुबह ‘सर्वमंगल मांगल्ये...’ जपते हुए वहां घुसे तो सन्न रह गए। नारायणी भगवती सरस्वती की जगह वही कुलटा बिल्लियां मूछें निपोर रही थीं। उनका चेहरा निष्प्रभ हो गया। घायल सन्नाटे से घिरा हुआ वह चेहरा, घुटी हुई चीखों से विकृत वह चेहरा... नहीं, अब और नहीं... बाबू जी के हाथों से गाण्डीव छूट कर गिर पड़ा।

कौन जीता, कौन हारा? यह बताने वाला कोई शेष नहीं। बिल्लियां अपनी जगह लौट आई हैं शाश्वत सत्य की तरह घूरती हुई – भयहीन। बाबूजी उनकी ओर पीठ किए चुपचाप खाना खा रहे हैं।

Kitty Alias Baloongda: The Many Lives of Cats in Rekha Vashisht's "Billiaan"

ANU JAIDEV

This review will begin with addressing aspects of formal composition in the short story "Billiaan" to illustrate how they relate to the complex trooping of cats in the story. It will offer an analysis of Babuji, the beleaguered father figure in terms his mental monologues and conversations (or the lack thereof). It will also address the positioning of women in the narrative space, the unnamed wife, and the daughter-in-law, Kitty. It will deliberate upon the central crisis on which the story hinges: Kitty's act of defiance of weaving cats into a screen, and the brilliant intertextual referencing of another set of felines in a different screen. The review will then focus on the reconfiguration of domestic space in terms of the almost postmodern assemblage and re-assemblage of artifacts, pictures and other household objects. The consequent discussion will focus on the joys of patriarchy and the rather elusive discourse of power. It will examine the articulations regarding gender, authority, intergenerational power struggles, fears and the whole build-up around the inarticulable: all in the space where potentially anything/ everything may be said.

'Billiaan' by Rekha Vashisht is a neat narrative triumph. In terms of composition, the story is clean and elegant. It is beautifully structured: almost Austenian in its brevity, unforced and unpretentious, inviting the reader into a simple immersion in the textual space. For a story so endearingly simple its achievements are rather tremendous. It reveals its treasures one bit at a time, in terms of carefully ordered details and observations. For instance, Babuji's reluctant admission of his fear of cats drops into the text, one innocuous detail at a time. From a psychoanalytical perspective, his fear, bordering on phobia would not be about cats per se, it would be about what the cats represent to him. The build-up is as compulsive as it is reluctant. The narrative utilizes a judicious mix of aggregated memories, assessment of the self, reasons and rationalizations through interplay of flashbacks and flash forwards. What emerges is a deliciously detailed composition hinging on the

concretized image of unexpected/ unsuspecting stray kitten, the 'baloonгда'. Babuji's unlikely nemesis actually gets him to act out of character when he literally pushes the little kitten out of Kitty's arms: and he is painfully aware of it. The stray kitten (that later morphs into the screen woven with cats) is rejected in this initial moment as at once unworthy of note and also unreasonably terrifying (clearly capable of inducing a completely knee-jerk phobic response). The articulation of Babuji's turmoil comes through the closely aligned narratorial voice: the only plausible strategic machination for articulating the inarticulable.

Cats are troped in the story as culturally loaded metaphors with a complex self-referentiality as they erupt into the textual frame and then linger about. The cats are positioned within the two intergenerational, different cultural orientations that collide and culminate into the central crisis. Cats, or rather the different ideas of cats, have an organic, contextual reference point within the story. Cats inspire very different kinds of emotions in the two contenders. The stray is a furry pet for Kitty-- "how cute, cute, cute'. For Babuji, it is a tad repellent, inane, inferior and beneath contempt. Miniature feline, at once domesticable, and potentially wild, vile and ominous. To be fair, cats are rather belated entrants in the domestic space in this provincial part of the subcontinent. Naturally for him, Kitty's adoration of the kitten as "how cute" smacks of a much more serious breach. In the narrator's description, it is akin to almost the cardinal transgression of religious conversion.

Babuji catalogues several negative stereotypes associated with cats: vile strays, tricksters, clever dissemblers, surreptitious predators...and cat-eyed-unfaithful- women. And bit by bit he divulges his own fear and disgust of them. The memory of a green-eyed black cat in a film he saw as a young boy that still sends shivers down his spine. His mother's reprimanding of his kid sister as a greedy, gluttonous kitten, forever loitering about eatables. And finally, his uncle's comparison of his mother's walk with the walk of a cat; perhaps the most insidious and problematic of all his memories, fueling his need to be rid of cats. He needs to cleanse his mother's memory from any stain of anything cat-like, but he can't. At best he can repress it, only to have it come alive in walls breathing cats. Incidentally, all the cat traits he catalogues are also subliminally suggestive of his unsayable assessment of the daughter-in-law monikered Kitty.

In an adept illustration of inter-generational, gender dynamic the story presents Babuji, the supposed formidable father figure, at a

complete loss when he is dealing with his daughter-in-law. It is by definition an uneasy relationship, based entirely on discretion, consideration and the ability to hold one's tongue. His almost visceral revulsion towards the kitten is his communication. Kitty's belated response is in terms of the end product of her talent and aesthetic judgement: her woven cat-screen, which she gifts to the household. She installs her cats right where she wants them without saying anything to him. Whether her choice of subject for this artistic maneuver is incidental or deliberate, is beside the point. Essentially, she is right on target. Given that she is the daughter-in-law, the domestic space and its arrangement is supposed to fall in her purview and it is his intrusions vis-à-vis the positioning of the cat-screen that are regarded as completely unwarranted.

Kitty weaving cats into her screen is reminiscent of another weaving literary predecessor. The intertextual reference to Aunt Jennifer weaving tigers into hers is quite unmissable (See Adrienne Rich's "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers"). But Kitty isn't Aunt Jennifer yet, and the kittens have a little growing up to do. Moreover, cats seem relatively harmless, or do they? A tiger burning bright on a screen would be a declaration of fierce assertion, but it probably wouldn't be as creepy as a cat waiting to pounce, and of course the metaphor would be lost. Or maybe, Kitty is aware that she can accomplish so much more with cats than her predecessor could with tigers. With this single stroke, she over-rides Babuji's authority without confronting him. A fine instruction in stealth-strike for Aunt Jennifer!

The story skillfully engages with this almost postmodern assemblage and re-assemblage of artifacts, pictures and other household objects: moving/removing; placement/replacement/substitution of the screen from the dining room to the entrance wall, to the library, to the kids' room, and back to the dining room. The screen, pictures, artifacts are tokens through which power is negotiated here. The constant changes in domestic art illustrate the unquiet currents underlying them. Most of the changes are innocuous: too ordinary to be taken up and yet the chipping away at authority is unmistakable. The calendars, flowers, paintings, even routine practices of everyday piety are in a kind of transition. The '*gau gras*' for instance, is replaced by scraps for cats and dogs. Kitty's aesthetic decisions render the established-order-of-things in the household completely redundant. But then, the order of things is about so much more than just how things are ordered. The modification of space and images after all has significance beyond what is said and

acknowledged. These are gestures and maneuvers which happen in lieu of the conversation that can't happen. There's a new lesson for Babuji in the new, altered order of things in his universe. Power is not necessarily vested in any person who seemingly dispenses it: it is dialectical and discursive, and its accents change over time. Old order changeth. Indeed. In his traumatized isolation, Babuji alone sees what the deliberate fixtures of the screen are capable of doing. Alas, he can't say anything: not even to his wife.

The story thus, makes a fine illustration of the joys of patriarchy. Patriarchy, which privileges a certain class of men for a major part of their lives, ultimately renders them incapable of adequate personal or even domestic articulations. The *noblesse oblige* code does demand that one doesn't complain and doesn't explain. After all, how does the master of the house say that he is so terrified of the cats, he can barely breathe? How does the lion ever acknowledge feeling completely upstaged by a cat? The story, thus, brilliantly illustrates the plight of paternalist inflexibility versus feminine adaptability and inventiveness. His wife adapts, siding with the children (in an almost cat-like betrayal?) Kitty works around his disapproval of her intended pet. The cats find a way. He alone stands disempowered.

In his interview with Derek Attridge titled "This Strange Institution Called Literature", Derrida talks of the literary space as the space where potentially anything/everything may be said. The narrator breaches the silence around the unsayable dilemma here, hence the story. The true triumph of the story however, is in its effective verbalisation of the nature of the unsayable and the impossibility of articulation: authority trapped in its own sense of consequence cannot articulate its vulnerability. The most important conversation, which goes round and round in circles in Babuji's head, can never actually be had: even if it means that he may barely breathe while he swallows his food, potentially for the rest of his life. That is his *fait accompli* and his tragedy.



Audience's Live Response

Vivek Negi: Narration with a difference. Experience is definitely matchless. *Bahut aadar Ma'am apko.*

Sangeeta Singh: Amazing intertextuality.

Pankaj Singh: What a beautiful narration of complexity of human emotions and sensitive and often difficult family relations!

Kulbhushan Sharma: Beautiful narration of the story Rekha ma'am. Human relations are complex and this assertive complexity brings in originality and multiplicity of it. Your story portrays life and its diverse facets. In-depth analysis Anu Ma'am.

Girija Sharma: A masterly analysis of a deeply symbolic story. Not only the story... you too articulated the inarticulable so lucidly...

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NIRVANA

SANGEETA SINGH

Jay could hear the voice say “Go north.” He couldn’t help it. He knew if he didn’t obey the voice all his sanity would be ripped off of him. He packed a bag for himself, stuffing all kinds of essentials he could find. After having an early dinner, he went to bed. Waking up early, he took a quick hot shower and caught the bus that went north. He waited anxiously for guidance from the voice.

Jay was among the very few people of the world who could hear this voice. It was called the white voice. He had found out about this voice a few months ago. He had help from another man, who, like him could hear this voice. It would’ve been overwhelming for any ordinary person but he was unfazed by it. He had thought that this was just a dream. However, after hearing his guide’s story he started trusting the voice. He believed it was real.

The concept of the white voice was hard to explain. It didn’t really have an exact meaning however, one thing was clear, it could only be heard by someone who was about to attain enlightenment. Buddha saw his previous lives flash in front of him because he had summoned the white voice. It was this very voice that guided him to nirvana. Jay was about to get enlightened.

Unlike Buddha, he hadn’t summoned the white voice. It just appeared to him. He didn’t meditate, didn’t practice any rituals and yet he achieved what millions only dream of. It was simply because he had continued the cycle of life and he had suffered for all his sins. All his actions had had reactions and his life had come to a still place. He wasn’t moving forward or backward; he simply existed. It was time to relieve him from this endless cycle. It sounded impossible.

He could still feel human emotions. The main difference was, most of his emotions were stirred neither by him nor the world outside but by

the white voice. He was going to be part of the bigger power soon. He obeyed the white voice because it was true.

Jay had been waiting for another order from the voice. He had to keep going North till then. Maybe he would end up in the mountains. He didn't care much. The bus stopped at a station for some time. He got out for some fresh air. He stretched his hands and entered the convenience store nearby. He sipped the canned coffee he had bought from a vending machine. He stuffed some other snacks he had bought in his bag. The journey may just be long.

It was late at night. Everything was dark outside. There were only three people in the bus, including Jay. The bus moved on an empty road. It was very silent. He was about to fall asleep when he heard the voice again. "Stop!"

All sleep vanished from his eyes. He sat upright on the seat and patiently waited for the bus to stop. When it finally reached the station, Jay got out and waited for further directions. The voice whispered in his mind "Find Sita Mane, daughter of the carpenter."

Jay looked around. He wanted someone's help to navigate through this unfamiliar little town. An old drunk man was sitting on a bench at the station. "Sir?" Jay asked.

"What do you want?" The man replied.

"Sita mane, the daughter of the carpenter." Jay said, mimicking the monotonous white voice.

"Yeah. She lives nearby." The old man took a swig of liquor and gave Jay the directions. Without wasting any time, he went to the carpenter's place. It was a warm and cozy looking house. Jay knocked at the door. A young beautiful woman stood in front of him.

"I am here for Sita Mane." He said. The woman was hesitant to entertain this stranger who arrived at such ungodly hour.

"Yes. That would be me." She managed to say.

"I wanted to talk to you about the dreams you are having these days. They are true." As soon as he finished the sentence Sita froze. Her eyes were wide open, she wasn't blinking. She was completely stunned. She tried to say something but Jay beat her to it.

“Let me explain this. The voice that tells you that it is approaching is truly approaching. It tells you of everything you did in this life and you cannot resist it. Does it scare you?”

“Yes. It doesn’t feel normal.” Sita mumbled. “Please come in.” She added as he followed her inside. They sat in the well-lit living room to discuss things further.

“The voice doesn’t feel normal because it isn’t any ordinary voice in your head. It is very supreme. We call it the white voice. I hear it too. It speaks to me even when I am awake. It has given me a task. I have to tell you about this white voice. If I don’t do this you will resist it. It’s human nature. We are just not ready to face something that powerful. I resisted it too. My guide helped me embrace this voice. It is actually very gentle. I am aware of everything that has happened to me in the past. I also know of things that will happen in the future. It is very simple.”

Sita nodded. She was not sure if all this was true but something about Jay made her feel that he was the most honest man in the universe. Jay’s simple and calm aura soothed her and she knew she could trust him.

“I will tell you everything. Then you can be with your thoughts, the white voice will guide you further. You will attain peace.” Jay stated. It was already late. He decided to stop talking. Sita sensed his wish and agreed to let him stay at her house that night. He slept in the living room.

They both were awake early next day. Sita made breakfast which they ate in silence.

“Let me continue from where we left. The white voice will completely take control of your thoughts gradually. It will tell you about your current life first. Everything you did, every decision you made, everyone you met, every emotion you felt will be displayed to you with perfect details. You will start to understand how your mind works.”

Sita listened to him in awe. She was completely focused on every word that comes out of his mouth. This flash of memories would be scary, he told her but she felt that she could get through this step.

“Not only your current life, the voice will tell you about all your previous lives too. You will know who you were before you became Sita Mane. We all have an energy inside us, which keeps us alive. It is our truest self. The voice will show you the journey of this energy. You will

get to know all the places this energy has been. You will be fully aware of everything. The voice will then take control.”

Sita kept nodding. She couldn't believe she was going to experience all this. After her father's death she was left alone. Her mother had passed away when she was very young. Sita started practicing meditation to get peace. This was what she wanted: to get rid of the cycle of birth and death. Whenever she meditated, she was in a peaceful place. She wanted to be there forever. It was almost time to get fruit for her labor.

“You have to complete one task before you finally get enlightened.” Jay spoke, pulling her back into reality.

“What task?” she asked.

“You, like me and many others, have to guide the next person who is about to get enlightened. Like I explained, many people resist the voice. It hinders the process. It is sad that in the modern age people are so engrossed in all the illusions, bound by possessions and relations that they fail to see the truth even if it approaches them. That has created a need for guides like us. We have to carry out this task of teaching others otherwise; everyone will be stuck in this world forever.”

“Why not teach everyone about this? Everyone wants to get rid of this suffering after all.”

“Many people have tried. I am afraid I won't be able to teach anyone about summoning the voice because I never did that. The voice itself approached me. Even if I told everyone about how the voice works, would they believe me? In the end, it is about faith. Someday all your sins and deeds would be balanced. You will reach this point that day. That's all I can say. Not everyone needs to be taught. Some things should be experienced at the right time.” Jay answered.

She seemed to be satisfied with the answer and stayed silent. There was nothing more to it. He had completed his task. He was waiting for the white voice to stop all his thoughts. It was better if he left. He soon announced his wish of going back home. Sita did not protest.

Jay attained enlightenment. The voice emptied his thoughts and replaced them with the final truth. He was at peace. Soon his being became connected to the supreme power. His physical body glowed before its energy left it. He was free from everything.

“Nirvana”: A Review

SUBHASH VERMA

The great Indian Yogi, spiritualist, and teacher Paramahansa Yogananda has said, “Before embarking on important undertakings, sit quietly, calm your senses and thoughts and meditate deeply. You will then be guided by the great creative power of spirit”. ‘Nirvana’ focuses on the universal themes of enlightenment, self realization, spiritualism and intuitive experiences of common person that lead people to be directed or guided by, in Paramahansa’s sense, ‘the creative power of spirit’. The author brings the Buddhist philosophy back to life in her own way in this gripping story about Jay, the central character, who is on the threshold of getting enlightenment. As Jay is about to get enlightened, he can see the state of the world and life with clarity but to complete the cycle he has to explain the nature of the white voice to someone else, who is trying to resist it and fails to comprehend its stance. Having awakened, he realizes his duty to help other people find freedom from suffering. He himself is guided by someone to embrace this voice and now he has surrendered himself to it. It is the same white voice which was summoned by Lord Buddha and it ‘guided him to Nirvana’. It can ‘only be heard by someone who was about to attain enlightenment’.

Jay’s journey to attain enlightenment commences with the instructions of the white voice, initially to ‘Go North’ and later to ‘find Sita Mane, daughter of the carpenter’. Like Jay, Sita is also a pure soul that’s why the voice itself approached them. Jay finally succeeds in completing the enlightenment cycle after explaining the true nature of the voice to Sita. Now the inner tumult of Sita is pacified but before getting enlightenment she has to ‘guide the next person who is about to get enlightened’. At the end of the story Jay attains ‘Nirvana’ where his mind is at complete peace and his soul is merged with the universe.

The title ‘Nirvana’ fits the story it is meant for. This is because the concept of Nirvana is discussed throughout the story and at the end the protagonist is in a state of consciousness beyond emotions, positive or negative. His desires and sufferings all go away and he is ‘free from everything’.

The story explores the roles of metamorphosis that impact human lives at various places. Metamorphosis as a personified presence in the story seems to be regulating and governing all life, dissolving the line between the past and the present. In 'Nirvana' metamorphosis is a pivotal concept and the author has used it as the unifying theme to bring out the reality of life. Perhaps, it would be relevant to call metamorphosis, in the modern times, an alternative perspective of reality, a subtle governing principle of life. Jay and Sita's evolution from human beings to enlightened individuals is caused by metamorphosis which leads to growth. Metamorphosis as a doer in the story plays two roles in Jay's life: as perspectives, bringing psychological and emotional change and as transcendence, bringing spiritual change. After being physically and emotionally or intellectually transformed, the final step of life is self-realisation or 'Nirvana', a philosophical term for spiritual transformation and at the end of the story both the characters are completely metamorphosed.

The theme of intuition leads the readers to meditate or cogitate on the total immersion of the soul into the universality of life where everything is connected. It appears that when someone acts positively by heart and soul, she/he reaches closest to the universal force. This thematic conception of the story appears reflecting the fact that our life stories, world's history of the present and future are written by the same metaphysical hand. Reference of Lord Buddha regarding the 'Nirvana' or 'Enlightenment' is given but Jay doesn't go through any sort of meditation on the basis of that we can declare him enlightened. But Jay's attitude can be analysed in context to the Buddhist principle expecting that Jay would not have any unfulfilled desire of material things and he has no attachments with the external or physical things around him and he has reached the neutrality about the martial world. So, he might have had that level of developing intuitions in him that turns to be the 'white voice' and draws him towards other similar but unfamiliar fellow Sita in the North. There is another probability that can be observed through modern psychological or neurological tools where such persons are usually kept under treatment declaring them mentally ill. But this probability itself gets faded when another character Sita is convinced with Jay's journey to her home accepting the fact that she was passing through the same dilemma or thought processing which has been clearly discussed by Jay with her.

The story is beautifully structured where the plot and setting take place in an unknown place where journey of the protagonist is guided by

the white voice, 'Go North'. Jay takes bus from unknown place and the reference of the 'empty road' and 'only three people in the bus' provides the hint to anticipate the setting of place as rustic or hilly. The reference of the journey to the end of the 'mountain' again offers hint that the protagonist is journeying from plain or semi-plain to mountains. However, the thematic weight of the story overlaps the events of the plot as well as the setting. Characterization is woven with unique human beings guided by the mysterious metaphysical force. The story carries the readers to the spiritualistic journey of Jay whom we come to know what the 'voice' is really about. No extra information about the main character is given and the readers are compelled to believe in the events happen to occur with the intuitive experiences of Jay and the other female character Sita. The characterization reflects the spiritual magnetism among the characters affirming the universal idea that each character in this world serves a particular purpose determined by the supreme power. The point of view is third person omniscient where narrator casts light on the analogy of the flow of self realization in two chief characters. The narration moves forward directly as per the direction of the metaphysical 'voice'. The soul of the chief character Jay is about to be liberated from the sin of the world and the character appears more ripen in context of 'self realization' while the character of Sita is walking on the similar track. Jay hands over the spiritual flame of 'self realization' to Sita who can feel its eternal power and does not ask even a single question from the unknown person, Jay, about his uncalled and uninvited arrival at her home. Through its cardinal characters the story delineates two-fold moral message that one must make the knowledge comprehensible for dissemination and goodness is redeemable. The narrative indicates the intuitive mind and self realization of a person who can pursue, listen or feel the voice of God.

The story can also be analysed through the post-modernistic lenses. Many people believe in the 'voice' of supreme power and intuition and take them as guidelines to instruct their lives. They even think that dreams in form of intuitions are the "Language of the World" that liberates people from the cycle of birth and death. Jay's journey to 'Go North' as per the direction of 'white voice' is postmodern stance of "hyper-reality" that proves truthful when another character Sita unquestionably accepts what Jay articulates to her.

The story can be judged by the sharpness of its preception, which stirs our feelings and thoughts into motion. Carrying deep philosophical meaning, the story is multi-layered and enigmatic. It is written in simple

but powerful words and hence it is precise and meaningful. The story opens up the research and dialogues regarding the theme, conception and dimensions of spiritual principles of human life. Is Nirvana the only way to liberate oneself from the unnecessary suffering that most of us inflict upon ourselves by resisting various attributes of reality or calling them wrong? Is there something like a transcendent metaphysical space one in some sense occupies once fully liberated? These questions are intentionally left unanswered by the author and the readers are impelled to ponder over them.



19

BALANCE

SHIVANI CHAUDHARY

Shanaya used to be a feminist but now she is not.

Born to the parents who believe educating girls is as important as educating boys, she grows up into a confident working woman. Her parents and Sangharsh's parents decide to have a meeting. She meets Sangharsh, the horoscopes match and the families slate the date for their wedding. Shanaya and Sangharsh get married. She is glad no one has a problem with her working as a teacher after marriage. That's the only concern. She just wants to pursue her career in teaching and she believes everything else can be adjusted to. She believes love begets love and respect begets respect. So, she is not worried. She knows if she cares enough and manages things well, it's not difficult to make a place for herself in the new family and have a life of her choice. All the literary discourses that she reads and teaches to her students turn her into a feminist. Her dad's words keep echoing in her mind, "You are not only going to make rotis and do the laundry, you'll have a life too." She is a woman of opinion and wants to raise her voice for equality but little does she realize that her perception is not all that would govern her life.

Sangharsh is more than what Shanaya could ever ask for. A thorough gentleman -- caring, understanding, adaptive and well-behaved. His professional prowess coupled with benevolence could win any heart. He endears everyone with his enchanting smile. Shanaya is so fortunate to have him and so is he to have her as all he wants from her is adjustment and he has understood that she is capable of doing it. He had lost his mother in his early childhood and has been brought up by a step-mother and father to whom he owes everything. He is indebted to them and wants to keep them happy in every case because they have brought up a motherless boy, they have educated him. They are everything for him.

Shanaya understands his concerns and leaves no stone unturned to please them. Gradually she learns to place her in-laws' preferences and choices before hers. She is so inspired by Sangharsh's personality that she feels blessed to bring happiness to this guy's life who has struggled all his life through after losing his mom. His aura is magnificent and he spreads positive vibes wherever he goes. He gets along with everyone and always helps the needy. He treats all human beings equally irrespective of status, gender, caste or religion. He could easily be friends with rickshaw-walas, drivers, his subordinates, seniors and higher authorities, MLAs, entrepreneurs or anyone. Shanaya learns life lessons through his conduct. His life journey had only polished and refined him. He does not have bitterness for anyone.

Shanaya is amazed at the possibility of existence of such a man. "I must thank my lucky stars. He is so broad minded...does not believe in gender defined roles...does not try to dominate me...feels happy if I take decisions and he wants me to celebrate life. He never tries to change me. He adores me the way I am. Such men only exist in movies or in fairy tales. I must have done some good karma. All my life through I have not come across someone like him... someone with so much of basic goodness, compassion and generosity." He definitely deserves the best life and Shanaya is all set to give him one.

Pretty soon Shanaya realizes the dictum that she had forgotten '*Har kisi ko mukammal Jahan nahi milta, kisi ko zameen toh kisiko asmaan nahin milta.*' (It's not possible for everyone to get everything.) She has got a perfect husband and a perfect job but her frequencies don't match with her in-laws. They have different value and belief systems. They view 'the new bahu' (the newly wed daughter-in-law) as someone who would rob their son of his money. They believe she will take their son away and will break their home. They have set norms for bahu of the house. They say the elder bahu has taken away their son as they moved out of town for their jobs. Now they just have the younger son. He must obey them and so must his wife. They have all terms and conditions ready and Shanaya is just expected to adhere to them. They tell her how much they have done for her husband and it's now his and her duty to obey them and look after them. They make it clear to Shanaya that whatever they have belongs to their daughter (who happens to be step-mother's daughter) and whatever she wants, she should get from her parents. They have no love or respect for the new bahu; they only have conditions and expectations.

Every now and then they tell Shanaya how short and ugly she is as compared to their tall and handsome son. They often pass comments stating that her parents didn't give enough in marriage though there were other alliances from richer parties for their son. They make fun of her parents too which becomes unbearable for Shanaya. Her parents are valuable for her. They have raised her without selfish motives. Through her thick and thin, they have been with her. For her, all elders deserve respect but her in-laws believe that boys' parents are superior and they can take liberty to comment on her and her parents. She sees all feminism that she has read collapsing in front of her eyes. She is helpless and speechless.

Shanaya should only listen to. She should never raise her voice otherwise they would tell Sangharsh that all that they have done for him has gone waste because she does not respect them. They want respect from the bahu whom they despise and ill treat all the time. They have a license to mock at her, to be angry at her for nothing and to complain about her but she being a bahu is not expected to react. They support Sangharsh in whatever he does but oppose Shanaya for everything she does. Shanaya understands the ploy; it is a strategy that they use to please him and to gain financial benefits from him. They boast of being rich but it is only Sangharsh and Shanaya who plan and finance everything. In-laws have hoarded the liquid assets for their daughter and want Sangharsh to construct a house. He does not mind because they have already done enough for him. They have financed his education and wedding. They have done it for a motherless boy.

Shanaya could easily draw a parallel between Sangharsh and the protagonist of the movie 'Beta'. In her favourite TV series, 'Ashoka' Sangharsh is akin to Bindusar who is so blinded by the honey-coated words of step-mother Helena that he respected her as his own mother whereas she wanted him to die so that her son becomes the king. Sangharsh's father had lost his first wife to suicide so he never opposed his second.

In-laws keep a vigil over Shanaya and they ensure that she does not have any time left to enjoy. They keep her engaged in chores and other activities. They convey to her that watching TV and indulging in hobbies suit unmarried women. They get furious at the very idea of her wanting to go for a movie with her friends. 'There is enough work at home and you want to go for a movie. Going to theatres is nothing but wasting time and money.' They would say with a grave tone. Shanaya's conduct

is under constant scrutiny so much so that whether she does something or she does not, she is always held guilty. Her action or inaction, her words or her quietness, her involvement or detachment – everything offends her in-laws. She feels choked and unwanted. It becomes almost impossible for her to bear the brunt all the time. Shanaya keeps adjusting. Women around her have strict in-laws and hubbies who are not supportive. At least, he doesn't say anything to her or to them. He is a great manager and he knows how to strike a balance.

She has only two major faults -- one she comes from another home and second, she is their 'bahu'. Had she been a neighbour or a family member, they would have sung praises of her management skills. Being an early bird, she goes to a nearby temple daily to seek the blessings which give her strength to carry out her hectic routine. Then cooks breakfast and packs lunch, gets her son ready for school and drops him to school. Meanwhile she does the laundry, arranges things, cleans the house and quickly glances at the grocery requirements she should get while on the way back home from her college. She makes sure that all meals, snacks and tea are prepared and served well in time. She takes care of her son Dhruv's requirements and homework. She takes her in-laws out for buying essentials that they need.

Since she is not a perfect driver, she doesn't mind the comments she regularly gets from her in-laws for her driving. Even her parents would have probably felt the same way but they wouldn't demean her every now and then. "It's not fair to compare your parents with your in-laws. Your parents love you for who you are. Their love doesn't lessen with your mistakes. In-laws can't love you. They are only trying to accommodate you." Shanaya consoles herself. Fulfilling her responsibilities towards the family motivates her and makes her happy but there are untangling snafus since her in-laws are not happy with her and they are constantly poisoning Sangharsh against her. "Girls break families. Their parents' interference can break homes too. Keep them at one arm's distance. She is now our bahu. She must only think about us." Shanaya could clearly perceive how boys' parents' interference could break homes too but saying it would hurt Sangharsh and she wants him to be happy at any cost. "Let them say and do whatever pleases them. Let them complain", she tells herself.

They hate it when he takes her out for shopping. They don't have any problem when he goes for parties or short trips with his friends but they cannot stand it if he goes out with her. At home they never like it

when he gives her time or even takes her name. They don't want him to take her to their relatives either. Encompassed by patriarchal and orthodox set up, Shanaya feels suffocated. She has no choice but to adjust without complaining. She feels like spending time with her parents but she is not allowed to visit them often. It is only Sangharsh who manages to take her to her parents' place on a few weekends when his parents are at their village. Had he not been so supportive, Shanaya would have given up. She doesn't have the grit to face it all alone. She is not quiet because she is weak but she values Sangharsh more than being right so she just keeps adjusting.

Sangharsh is aware of her plight but he is feigning ignorance because he does not want to hurt his parents by speaking in her favour. Shanaya tells herself, "Had it been a female-dominating society, Sangharsh would have come to stay with her parents. What if they found faults with him? What if they despised him? What if they kept passing on comments to him? Would she have spoken up? Probably, she would have been in a similar fix. She too wouldn't have courage to oppose her parents. She too would have tried to make a balance. So, it's not a question of being a boy or a girl. It's a question of balancing the two opposite poles, two types of people who will never like each other." So, she can't blame Sangharsh, it's the lop-sided system that has to be blamed. His parents' insecurity is to be blamed. The system does not provide security to aged people. So, like most of the parents, Sangharsh's parents want him to be their support in old age, and after all, that is why they brought him up! Why should they waste their time and energy to think about Shanaya's happiness?

She has her solid support system. Besides her husband and son, her parents and siblings adore her. She grows in teaching and research at a professional college. Her students and their queries keep her engaged. She is blessed to have wonderful colleagues, mentors and friends. She has passion for two things – English and Teaching. She is living a life of her choice. At her workplace she loves to read and write. She is fond of writing poetry and listening to talk shows and interviews. What she enjoys the most is engaging her students in activities like group discussions, mock interviews and extempore. She feels victorious when she witnesses their stage fear vanishing. She gets rewarded when her students improve their pronunciation after attending her accent learning modules. She feels immense proud when her students send her messages thanking her after being placed or selected for a job. Grooming her

students and seeing them evolve add to her self-esteem. When she counts on the number of blessings, she feels highly grateful.

At home, everything is fine but her in-laws keep complaining. Sangharsh does not pay a heed. He is a busy professional and a socialite. He just wants his space. He is doing great community service and social welfare activities. Such petty issues do not matter to him. He is capable of earning name and fame. He has told Shanaya his heart. He has told her “I am not someone who is satiated after a 9 to 4 job. I like socializing. I have my goals. I have my circle. I want to enjoy my life.” Shanaya does not mind giving him space because he has noble thoughts. He adores her. He is someone who has taught her the meaning of celebrating every moment. He has given her wings. He supports her in living her dreams. He plans weekend parties and outings for Shanaya whenever his parents go to their village on weekends. So, there is no one to say things. He wants peace and he does not want to annoy his parents. At the same time, he wants his wife to enjoy her life too. He is a good son and a good son never prioritizes his wife and children over his parents, although he had tried to intervene once when he saw Shanaya getting choked because of his step-mother’s remark. What his dad said in response to Sangharsh's initiative shocked Shanaya even more, “*Tere saahi na sadka ch rulde. Iha tu chakki ne kursiya par bathalya.*” (Motherless boys like you stray on the roads. She picked you up and helped you become a professional.”)

Shanaya is all praises for Sangharsh. He has been through a lot but never gives way to negativity. He is a devoted son, a loving father, an excellent professional, a helpful friend and an adorable husband. He has struggled a lot after losing his mom to suicide. As a sensitive child, he diverts his attention to others' pain and develops a notion that it is his duty to resolve people’s problems to whatever extent he can. He grows up into an empathetic intellectual whom everybody adores. He is an expert in his field. All his seniors, juniors and friends are in awe of his wonderful behavior and management skills. He undertakes counselling of sad, depressed and lonely people at his personal level. He has rejuvenated many lives. He is adept at doing chores, extremely fond of cooking. He wants to help Shanaya whenever he gets time out of his busy schedule but is shamed by his parents that he being a boy can’t do women’s jobs. Ironical! He had learnt the chores since childhood as he used to help his step-mother.

It has been a decade since Sangharsh and Shanaya have been saving money to build a house of their dreams. Rented accommodations have their limitations. After a great search they could find a suitable flat under construction. Sangharsh pays the advance and books it in Shanaya's name. "Why my name?" she enquires disbelievingly. "You are the backbone, you deserve it" says he. "But won't your parents be annoyed?" "No," assured he. To their surprise, his father also helps them in paying the advance amount for the house. His father's paternal property is disputed and he is getting old. So, he wants to live with his son. He wants Sangharsh to be his support and Sangharsh is honoured to be so.

Everything seems to be fine but for the attitude of his parents towards his wife. His parents' constant poisoning and interference has now started having an adverse effect on Shanaya and Sangharsh's relationship. He wants to be the best son and she wants to be the best wife but the balance falters.

He succumbs to the increasing pressure, increases his intake of drinks and starts smoking. She opposes all this. He dislikes her for opposing him. She could see his deteriorating health so she urges him to reduce his drinking and smoking but he stops listening to her. He starts avoiding her. She is unable to make sense of this stupor but she is trying and praying for things to improve.

Nothing works. One day she returns from her college to find him dead.

Unbelievable! What a shock! A shock for everyone! What a mysterious demise!

"Was he hypertensive? He probably got a heart-attack."

"Was something wrong with him? Did he succumb to some pressure?"

"Was he depressed?"

No clear-cut closure but one thing is clear that he is not going to come back. Shanaya wants to die too. She would never know what he took in mind. She is in utter doldrums. She has lost all faith. How could her God let him go? Was no one in the universe powerful enough to stop the disaster from happening – the sun, the moon and the gods she worshipped? She realizes, "Life's mathematics is a little different. If one goes out of two, nothing remains." Life has lost meaning for her but she

can't quit. She needs to live for her son, her fatherless son who needs to be taken care of. A life full of challenges awaits them.

His parents are shattered too. They probably failed to realize that things are to be used and people are to be loved. After his demise they buy the house which Sangharsh wanted to. Now it belongs to the step-mother and her daughter. Now in-laws don't have a problem to send Shanaya to her parents' place. She moves out with her son.

She often says to her son Dhruv, "I wish he could have stayed and I would have gone." One day Dhruv comes to her and goes like, "Never say that again mom. Maybe the world needed him more than you but I need you more than anybody else. I'll stay strong, if you stay fit. Mom, please don't lose your balance... look at me... I am just nine. I want to live my life happily. See what all I have gone through. After losing dad I can't afford to lose you. Look at me and you will have several reasons to live. Look at nana nani (maternal grandparents) and all those people who love you. They can't see you depressed. Unfortunately, dad is gone but we are still here. We are here to live not to ruin our lives. Dress up the way you used to. Do what makes you happy. Dad is in our hearts and one day, everyone will go. Let's live till then." The same wisdom that Sangharsh possessed has suddenly dawned upon naïve Dhruv. Losing a loved one is the most painful experience but who can challenge the cosmos or God, if there is any? Who can challenge the laws of universe? Who has got an answer for why someone dies? But we have to pick up the pieces and stand up again till our time comes. Though it is true that a comeback needs to be much stronger than the setback.

"Did he take pressure for something? ...He probably got a heart attack or maybe it was some kind of a mistake. Issues were there in his life since his childhood but what could have broken such a strong man? He never complained, never misbehaved. He got enough recognition and love. Could he give up? No! He was extremely strong. Who does not have issues in life? Could anything break such a fighter? No! Impossible! But... Remember 'The Titanic!' The unsinkable sank! It did. All of us are vulnerable. Who knows what's coming up next? ... He can't ruin our lives. He knew he meant the world to us. He loved Dhruv too...but who knows when death would knock at the door?"

Men are mentally less strong than women. They express less. They believe in escape strategy to overcome their stressful situations. Just like women, men have their pressures too. They have a pressure to earn and a pressure to pay debts to their parents. All their lives they can't do enough

for their parents even if they do everything possible for them. They have to maintain a balance between professional and personal lives. They have a constant pressure to maintain a balance between their parents and wife. Some men face false allegations by women. Some are made victims. They are doubted more; they can be easily conspired against. In many homes they are not taught basic life skills believing that their mothers, wives and sisters would be doing everything for them. Men are so dependent on women. They have competition from women in almost all domains. Men have to deal with property issues. They compete and fight with their own siblings for property and other issues. They face peer pressure too. Parents, friends and relatives are constantly comparing them with more successful people. As a result, they have to handle professional jealousy too. Men talk about peace treaties and world affairs but they don't know where their own lives are heading. They have a pressure to know the latest happenings. They have pressures of various kinds. Shanaya has seen the constant pressure that men face, even the very strong ones. So, her notions of feminism collapse. "No, it's not about a man or a woman; it's about striking a balance."

Narrated by Praveen Kumar

Review of “Balance”

HEM RAJ BANSAL

The story “Balance” by Shivani Chaudhary is very touching as it dwells on the sensitive topic of suicide/death and sensitizes us about the importance of viewing each individual as a unique human being, having her/his personal space and limitations and it is something which is above the purview of gender. It revolves around the life of the protagonist Shanaya who deems herself lucky for having been born in a family that gives equal space to both male and female children. Shanaya learns a lot from her mother who does not only manage her professional life efficiently but also performs household chores really well. The accommodative and liberal ambience of the home can be seen in the fact that Shanaya’s father is a vocal critic of gender dictated roles. He wants his daughter to excel in life-enhancing skills and competitive ambience rather than just push her for the drudging life of a family cook. Be it the playing of the games that boys do or anything else, she feels proud of her father for being so affectionate and liberal towards her.

Though the stories of discrimination against females in families where daughters are considered a burden, a liability to be raised up, educated and married off, makes Shanaya simmer with indignation, her father’s showering of profuse affection on her encourages her to face challenges in life boldly. As an avid reader, she knows about women oppression through the feminist discourse too. It is one of the reasons that like the second wave feminists, the protagonist believes in financial independence of women which does not only make them self-dependent but also self-confident. So, the narrator grows up to be a feminist and by offering lessons to her students, she develops feminist sensibility in the early years of her career.

The author shows that marriage is not at all an institution of oppression (as is often said) if the partner gets well with a professional woman. Shanaya’s eventual marriage with Sangharsh is such a tale of happiness in the early years of marriage where she does not only find him adorable, caring, and sensitive but also respectful of her teaching career. The author projects the husband figure in a highly idealized way. From being a philanthropist to a dutiful son, he transcends all the

barriers of class/caste/religion which can be seen in his befriending the people from various classes of life. As for Shanaya, she feels really blessed to have Sangharsh as a husband whose heart brims with love for all and he makes her believe that life is something to be celebrated than lamented.

However, her in-laws had different expectations from her. She sees things go awry for her. For her parents-in-laws, a daughter-in-law implies one who does not only rob the husband of his money but also causes separation/conflicts between the son and his parents. For them, a *bahu* is synonymous with someone who like a witch exercises a bad influence on her husband. The author speaks against such stereotypes about a newly-wed woman wherein she is viewed just as a beast of burden and at the same time not as a maker but a breaker of home. Moreover, the bahu, (Shanaya) is not seen as a daughter but simply as someone who can never be a loyal member of the house despite her utmost devotion to the family. The author also exposes the problem of dowry in the story as Shanaya and her parents are constantly subjected to humiliation and jeering remarks for having given her little dowry. It is this emotional abuse which proves too much for the innocent and sacrificing Shanaya.

The author shows how Sangharsh feels indebted to his step-mother and father who raised them when he lost his biological mother at a tender age. She equates him to the hero of the movie *Beta* and Bindusar of the TV Series *Ashoka* who love their mothers, not realizing the fact that the same mothers in the stories wish their son dead. Though the step-mother does not wish Sangharsh to be dead in the story, he is misused for his sacrificial nature.

A woman who has enjoyed independence at her parents' home and has nourished dreams of a better life with a bright professional career with her husband, too many restrictions from her in-laws stifle her very womanhood and individuality. Despite serving her parents-in-laws with full dedication, Shanaya does not receive any love from them. As a teacher she does perform her duties well and as a bahu she takes care of the needs of all. Apart from it, she takes care of her son and his studies. Yet her conservative parents-in-laws object to her every move of finding out time and space for her or going for movies or looking for other means of steaming out her pent-up emotions. It is what makes her life, existence unbearable. However, she goes on bearing everything silently as she believes that at least her husband does not ever speak a word against her and manages things really well. She rues the fact that her in-laws

believe in their son's contentment at the cost of their daughter-in-law's happiness. It pains her to learn that her parents resent their son's giving time/space to her or taking her for shopping or so. Though Sangharsh tries to strike a balance between the two extremes, his spirits ultimately begin to dampen.

Sangharsh, indeed, does a lot of *sangharsh*, that is, struggle. His struggle begins since the death of his mother and continues unabated. Working for the poor and the destitute, managing the parents who are demanding, showering love on his wife, who feels otherwise reduced to a zilth in her house, shows how he tries to balance things in life. However, at the same time, he is governed more by a sense of gratitude to his parents as he does not want to offend them. He is also conscious of the ever-worsening situation of his wife, yet with the passage of time, things prove too disastrous for him to handle. Besides, a decade long blessed marital life, the too much parental interference begins to weigh heavily on the psyche of Sangharsh and eventually leads in his taking refuge in alcohol and ultimately suicide, an act of self-destruction and at the same time of all those who are left behind, especially the wife and the son. It does not only shatter Shanaya but also makes her question the existence of gods whom she worshipped every morning and evening.

Interestingly, the author does not bear any grudges against the social set-up, patriarchy, or gender roles. Despite her story's central character being a victim of gender stereotypes, she does not like the label of being a feminist. What she puts forth through her story is empathy. An empathetic eye and a sympathetic heart to view the pressure that men cope with when confronted with two diametrically divergent situations. Through the sad plight of Shanaya and the tragic suicide of Sangharsh, Shivani Chaudhary also makes a case for men who have constant pressures from many ends to bear with. She gives more importance to individuals than to men or women. The author pleads for a genderless society and a genderless society does not mean a sexless society. The moment we try to view everything from male or female gendered perspective or identities, the problem rises from there. The author makes a sort of plea to strike a balance between the gendered spaces as she also makes us think of the insurmountable pressures that men undergo. Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957) in her essay "Are Women Human?" also highlights the same concerns of treating an individual as a human being first than a man or woman.

Audience's Live Response

Deepti Vaidya: Beautiful narration of complex human relations!

Jyoti Mishra: Absolutely spellbound by Shivani's heart-rending story & more so by Praveen Sir's lucid presentation...

Prajya Mishra: Sensitizes us about the position of men in matrimony...nine-year old son seems to have a grey head on young shoulders. Shivani thanks for giving us a slice of life.

Irene Rattan: Gripping narrative

Anjali Parmar: Very emotional, wonderfully narrated sir.

20

THE MAD MYSTIC IN HEAVEN

SOM P. RANCHAN

Gods and Goddesses were sitting in a rectangular hall with gold and silver pillars, hundreds of them. The hall was silvery white inside, but the outer walls were opalescent. There were many gates to the hall. One gate was for small time deities to whom the lesser mortals prayed for the health of their cattle and children, and for giving them reprieve from distress and mundane pressures. The middle gate of the Cornelia was for the middle echelon deities for praying to for radical improvement of fortune and for knowledge and expertise in a given field laced with a bit of superior, ineffectuating insight. The high arched gate was for the entry of gods and goddesses who were a notch or two below the principal gods, The Big Three with their be-decked spouses. Thy Big Three did not enter through any gate. Being transcendent they parachuted down from an occult aperture in the roof of the hall. No other deity had seen the *lapis lazuli* roof, though one could see the high ramparts of ruby.

It was a custom with this divine club to hold an annual meeting in mid heaven, wherein they invited a mortal from the earth-plane, together with an entourage, to check the rise and fall of their numinosity in the world down below.

But this time a lone mystic was invited. It was not clear if he was to be quizzed about his identity. Chitragupta did not have his card in the reference file. An undercurrent of excitement ran through the august assemblage. Even the Big Three with their consorts wore expressions of puzzlement, though they did their best to cloak it because their reputation among the thousands of gods was that they were know-all. They were omniscient.

In came a non-decrepit looking frail mystic in his *dhoti*, with no upper garments. He had a trance-idiot look though the cut of his face was Germanic. He broke into a dance, clapping his hands like he was

elongating tortillas. Suddenly the dance stopped and he stood stock still with no sway to his body, as if he were in a psychotic state.

The august audience was stunned. They had never seen anything like this before. In the earlier conferences, the earthlings had come and read their reports on virtues and vices prevailing and fighting it out on the earth-plane. So many secretaries and secretaries of the high echelon deities stenoed the gist of the reports for the lesser gods and the gist of the gists for the big Three, who stashed away the files. It was more of a charade than for real because the earth-plane continues in its eonic stasis.

Suddenly the stock-still figure came into awareness. In the twinkling of an eye, he grew in size, his chest enlarged preternaturally and heaved: “O Gods and Goddesses, small and large and the Sovereign Three! It is time you left mid heaven and deigned to come down and mingle with the earthlings. The membrane between the earthlings and you is now translucent if not transparent. Mingle with them in work and play.”

“Hey Tasuki! son of Vasuki, who is around Shiva’s neck, who rolls in the creeks like water, and as a prince in festivities and parties, seducing old maids and bonny lasses, just for the heck, because you have a fluent libido. But it’s time you loved. I don’t mean fidelity or loyalty. No, no, no Tasuki, you are free. But love from the feeling centers.”

This was a bombshell. Tasuki sitting close to Shiva felt hit by the dart of truth. His fickleness was lanced. All the deities squirmed as the mystic spoke with authority. Putting an inch or two more to his size and widening his affectionate grin, he swept Vishnu and Lakshmi with his gaze and spoke with a boom. His voice had become baritone: “Forget the Avtar routine. The paradigm is an old hat. No more trips and no more laying through vaunted scriptures. Humans now are gods, some active, majority in latency, many in varying stages of fluency, a few dormant. But the new age has unfolded an existential practicality and its numinosity. Vishnu, there is no need for your *dues ex machine* interventions. You are cashiered. You may as well go to *Vaikuntha*. If Lakshmi wants to go with you, fine! Though being *rajasik*, she would like to be down there, giving beauty, elegance, exquisiteness on the run to the high born and the lowly, though the categories pertain to the range, scope and quality of consciousness, not to wealth, status, privilege and prestige.”

The impulsive Lakshmi got up, materialized into an owl and started flying from pillar to pillar, raining down the buff brown feathers. The gods and the goddesses stood up and broke into a stampede to collect the Golden Fleece.

By now the mystic took on the miens of a Lord and resumed: “Now you have Lakshmi’s talisman, a feathery piece, I bid you to dance.”

Began the dance. In the ensuing, they forgot their rank. For a few moments their hierarchy was gone. Democracy ruled. Strange, they sat down wherever they were. Now they were comingled. They felt a new ease that they had never experienced for ages and eons.

The sage stopped suddenly. Went into a trance. From its depth he spoke with a whispery resonance: “Saraswati! Come down with me and emanate. Brahma too can follow with a *syn pados* smidgeon. Down below we have to give to the world and the teeming humans and unfold the lotus of the psyche winged with executive imagination. Good bye gods! It was a privilege being with you. Prior to it I had experienced you in meditation and muse and in *Bhava Samadhi*.”

After he disappeared, the gods and goddesses continued sitting for a while. A thought flashed through the bee hive – they had been like sleeping for ages to the world, and for eons, being high and happy, indifferent to the world below, merely intervening spasmodically to keep the keel from sinking into the oroborus of the sea.

Narrated by Janesh Kapoor

Disrupting the Divine, 'Opalescent,' and Mid-Heavenly Realm: A Review of Som P. Ranchan's "The Mad Mystic in Heaven"

ROSHAN LAL SHARMA

The story, "The Mad Mystic in Heaven" by Som P. Ranchan, has been compiled in the book titled *All My Boys and Other Stories* published in 2005. Viewed simply, the story is about a "mad", "lone", and "non-decrepit looking frail" mystic with "a trance idiot look" and a face with a "Germanic" cut. With a dhoti and unclad upper body, the mystic bears unusual demeanor in contrast to the august gathering of Gods, Goddesses and middle- and lower-rung deities to ascertain the degrees of their "numinosity"/divine influence in the human world. The mad mystic, in fact, represents the mortals in the meeting, but proves to be far wiser, sharper and wittier not only compared to earthlings but also the divine, complacent beings. He ends up offering them correctives of diverse sorts. Interestingly, Ranchan does not view Gods, Goddesses, deities and wisdom figures as abstract, unapproachable entities; he rather engages them as tangible/ veritable presences in human life as their importance lies in the profound impact that they have on the human heart and mind through (verbal/non-verbal) interaction, psycho-spiritual and alchemical transformations.

The modernist curve of Ranchan's creative idiom (both in poetry and fiction) is well-known and so is his uncanny ability to lend contemporary flavor to mythological stories, tales, themes and motifs. "The Mad Mystic in Heaven" evidences narrative experimentation not only at the level of narration but treatment of content as well. The mad mystic is a disruptive as well as a levelling narrative device that Ranchan employs to first disrupt the hierarchical splendor of mid-heaven "august assemblage" and then to ensure non-hierarchical, equal and democratic commingling of the Gods, Goddesses and lesser-/lower-level deities. Being wont to hierarchies symbolized by different entry gates to the rectangular and spectacular meeting hall for Gods, Goddesses and "small time deities" hailing from different categories, the august gathering could never think in terms of breaking the hierarchic norm. "The big three", "principal gods" have been delineated in the story in a

reverse order as Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. Intriguingly, Shiva's spouse has not even been referred to even in passing whereas the "bedecked spouses" of Vishnu and Brahma have been duly acknowledged but assigned special roles concerning weal and welfare of humanity. The big three Gods are privileged enough just to parachute down at will — a power that the gods and goddesses at the second rung did not enjoy alongside "small time deities".

Ranchan introduces the "lone mystic" rather dramatically. Chitragupta's reference file missing the mystic's card containing his personal information, mystifies the latter's identity even further. It causes bewilderment even to the principal gods who try their best to camouflage it behind their so-called "omniscience". Upon entering the hall (a sacrosanct "rectangular" space not meant for the ordinary human folks), the mystic (an official invitee to the mid-heaven meeting) suddenly starts dancing in a weird, psychotic fashion clapping his hands as if "elongating tortillas", and then abruptly stands "stock still" in front of the astounded divine audience. The mystic, besides defying the past protocol for earthlings, also baffles the "big three" who find it hard to take the entire spectacle for real, simply because it appears more of a charade than actual.

As the mad mystic regains consciousness and becomes aware of his surroundings, he grows into an enormous being. With his preternatural physical proportions, the mystic exhorts "Gods and Goddesses, small and large and the Sovereign Three" to mingle with the denizens of the earth. He has a piece of advice for Tasuki, son of Vasuki who adorns Shiva's neck that despite his "fluent libido", he should love from the "feeling centres", which implies that libido, or eros loses sense if there is *bhavashunyata*, i. e. lack of genuine 'feeling-register' (an expression that Ranchan would use so frequently in day-to-day interaction) that emanates from relational principle in life. Owing to such authority and confidence in an idiom hitherto unheard in mid-heavenly realm, each one of the participants in the conference becomes nervous and thus squirms as the mystic comments on fundamental *Vritti* signifying an integral, body-mind-soul behavioural mode that regulates/governs us.

It is worth mentioning that the writer has focussed on Tasuki rather than Shiva and his spouse, Parvati, who is not mentioned even once in the entire story, compared to the bedecked Lakshi and Saraswati, the spouses of Vishnu and Brahma respectively. The mystic then increases his size and grins a little more, and tells Vishnu and Lakshmi that they should shed the old and dated "Avatar" paradigm. He denounces the

“vaunted” scriptures indulging in pointless adulations of Gods and Goddesses and thereby declares that nowadays “[h]umans . . . *are* gods”—some active, fluent and “majority in latency” (italics mine). Almost like Jungian Wise Old Man, the mystic sounds rather prescriptive as well as emphatic as he spells out the new age norm wherein “existential practicality” is viewed in numinous terms. He suggests it to Vishnu that he may go to Vaikuntha along with Lakshmi in case she so wishes; else, according to the mystic, she could go down to the human world wherein she can bless folks with “beauty, elegance and exquisiteness” based on “range, scope and quality of their consciousness” rather than their status or birth. The mystic’s language thus is unconventional, deconstructive as well as challenging as it impels the reader to think afresh about the human world as well as the divine beings who need to be humanized so that their relevance to the common folks could be ascertained without of course compromising the core symbology associated with them.

As if taking a cue from the mystic, Lakshmi gets up, materializes an owl (her vehicle which mythologically signifies intelligence, wisdom, and prosperity), flies from one end to the other and rains down “buff-brown feathers”. The whole gathering becomes frenzied to catch hold of the “golden fleece”, that is the auspicious feathers of the owl which the mystic terms as Lakshmi’s “talisman” strategically. The talisman is undoubtedly magical as the mystic’s *leela*/ play persists all the more overwhelmingly. Taking on the “mien of a Lord”, he invites the gathering “to dance”, which, in fact, is a ploy to dissolve hierarchies, break boundaries and commingle all the divine beings non-hierarchically and non-discriminately with a view to make democracy prevail. As if under a spell, they do his bidding, and experience an unprecedented lightness and “a new ease” in their celestial selves after “eons”.

Slipping into a trance even at this juncture, the mystic-sage tells Saraswati with “whispery resonance” to come down as “an emanate” along with Brahma who is allowed just a miniscule space. In fact, Saraswati has a major role to play down there through “unfolding the lotus of the psyche winged with executive imagination” in a world with “teeming humans”. It implies connecting human beings with their souls and creative imagination, which has been lying in latency.

On that note, the mystic bids them adieu and thereby reveals before them how before this meeting, he had experienced them in “meditation and muse and in Bhava Samadhi”. The mystic, at this point gets rooted to the ground where he meditates, engages with his creativity and also

experiences Bhava Samadhi—a state of ecstatic consciousness upon realization of one’s *Ishta* (god/deity/object of worship) through constant devotional practices. It may outwardly appear *sahaja* (effortless) but requires intense devoutness and devotion that can trigger inner transformation through attaining oneness with the *Ishta*. To put it simply, it is a merger of one’s *bhava* with his *Ishta* which endows him with the depth as well as the expansion of consciousness. He disappears thereafter leaving them dumbfounded with a thought that flashed through the “beehive” (signifying the co-operative, divine society) that all the divine beings have been lying in deep slumber in the sense of being indifferent to the world down there for a long while, and would intervene only at the time of crisis and to “keep the keel not sinking into the ouroboros of the sea”. The need of the hour thus is that their numinosity/divinity, rather than “spasmodically” remaining available to all the mortals, is available incessantly irrespective of their hierarchal position/ status.

The mystic’s lesson to the divine beings has profound political implications as well. In fact, this story may also be viewed as political allegory. A highly stratified and hierarchized world unfolds before us right from the very beginning. We have divine beings representing various classes/ categories such as the “Sovereign Three” Gods, Goddesses, lower-and middle-rung deities along with the lesser mortals. The heaven is a space which is deeply complacent but ironically conscious enough to ascertain annually whether their numinosity is still acceptable/ influential in the human realm or not. It implies that Gods and Goddesses want to ensure that the power equation between the divine and human kingdoms should remain as it has been all through without ever bothering to do anything extra for the lesser mortals. The same situation has been prevailing year after year, and the divine gathering would quite curiously listen to reports from the human world with all its problems.

This time around, however, something dramatic happens as the notes taken down by the secretaries are stashed away by the “big three” due to the arrival of a puzzling presence called the mad mystic, who emerges as an unconventional forced mythifying and demystifying the mid-heaven divine hypocrisy that gets exhibited/showcased every year. Ranchan has employed him as a disruptive narrative device to set aside the “big three” via disallowing them relatively lesser narrative space and preferring instead to engage with the Lakshmi and Saraswati instead because of their meaningful presence and role in the human world that has gone awry and totally off-center. Thus, the mystic as a

demythologizer enables the divine figures to engage with/ awaken to the human world and its problems. In his poetic universe of dialogue epics, Ranchan engages with Wisdom Figures (such as Christ, Mother Sharda, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Lord Krishna, Manjushri and Baha'u'llah) symbolising finer essences that imbue man's being with an immortal, changeless aspect. That is precisely the reason why man in his mortal aspect keeps looking up to them and thus seeking guidance to grapple with problems in day-to-day existence.

Structurally, the story has a well-thought-out narrative frame which in no way seems congealed/coagulated. We, in fact, come across narrative fluidity in the form of frames of diverse sorts. Firstly, there is the basic frame in the form of a deeply hierarchized divine assembly taking place in an opalescent hall; secondly, there is the mystic's frame which counteracts on the basic frame and disrupts it by creating other semantic frames such as Tasuki-Vasuki frame, Lakshmi-Vishnu frame and Saraswati-Brahma frame, which have been deconstructed in a way that they could be disentangled from their loaded, conventional and mythological significations. The mystic offers a counter-discourse, a counter narrative not only to neutralize numinosity/divinity around the "Sovereign Three" but also to point toward its finitude/limitation via embedding them within existential, human world/ context. Tasuki lacks *bhava* register, which is a must; Lakshmi's "beauty, elegance and exquisiteness" would be more useful and meaningful for earthlings irrespective of their status or class; Saraswati too needs a non-incestuous space [devoid of Brahma] to be herself and thus ennoble and enlighten the human world with a wisdom that puts all classes/hierarchies in a perspective. The postmodernist curve of the story thus becomes evident as the grand narrative concerning the "big three" overarching gods (Brahma-Vishnu-Mahesh) has been layered with several mini narratives that have been carefully lent prominence. Abrupt disappearance of the mystic towards the end is both dramatic as well as unconventional. A hint has been dropped through a potent thought that flashes through the "beehive", a metaphor for 'rank-less', 'status-less', classless and non-hierarchal, divine democratic presences, that they need to awaken to the fact called human existence, and thus 'repurpose' their role in making it better.



Audience's Live Response

Anu Jaidev: A very nuanced and sensitive reading. Thank you, Dr. Roshan.

Anupama Singh: Marvellously deliberated upon the story, Roshan Sir.

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BIMLA “PAAGAL”

SUNEELA SHARMA

‘In-mate of Nari Niketan passes away due to multiple organ failure.’

The news, along with the photograph of the deceased, silently screamed out my failure in my face from the tiny column of the page five of the newspaper where it was inconspicuously squeezed in. I perched my magnifying glass over the column to read it again.

This was Bimla Paagal – my Bimla, whose death they had reported. The news said that Bimla had died, due to multiple organ failure within a week of being sent to the Nari Niketan at Shimla. As I sat still in the glazed balcony of my flat, the symphony of a busy early morning routine, composed of cooing of the birds, calls of garbage boys, newspaper boys, milk walas, morning bhajans, coupled with the cacophony of monkeys romping from one rooftop to the other played around me in its usual melody. In the middle of all this, I suddenly felt a numb inside, the first symptom of a shock perhaps, I thought, even as I managed to pretend to go through the rest of the newspaper with my morning cup of tea. Screams and a commotion from outside withdrew me out from my trance. As I stood up, I saw a petrified little school boy standing on the tiny winding road below the four-storied building where I lived. He was wiping away tears of terror from his face with one hand, a school bag on his back as he clutched a lunch box tightly in his other trembling hand. Two huge monkeys, their eyes glued onto the lunchbox, were moving slowly towards him. Out of nowhere, shouting and running from the opposite direction, friends of this boy pounced upon the monkeys. Moments later, the tables had turned, with the boys now chasing the monkeys away instead. I stood there, admiring the brave boys, and their unity that gave them the strength to chase the dangerous monkeys away. A gust of cool breeze drew my attention to the dark, towering, thick grove of giant pine trees dotting the famous Jakhu hill of

Shimla behind our building. One couldn't help but admire the majesty and strength that resulted from their collective number, due to which perhaps, they had survived the axe of modern multi-storied concrete jungle of Shimla. Single trees are slaughtered everyday.... like the lonely Bimla. I lamented aloud to myself, realizing that *we*, Bimla and myself had finally lost our struggle within and outside.

"Oh, why couldn't we all be strong? Why couldn't we fight it all together?"

As I sat there looking at the blue canvassed sky with patterns and shapes of clouds chasing each other, I remembered *Bimla "Paagal"*. She too was a lonely tree, who got slaughtered.

I still remembered the day I met Bimla for the first time, as if it was only yesterday. She and I, both were about the same age then... I was thirty-one years old and it was 27th April, 1998, my first day as a teacher in school and my second one in Rampur, the quaint little hometown of my husband. Located at about a hundred and twenty kilometers from Shimla, with a resident population of only a few thousands and an equal number of floating populations, this town is the biggest supply base for civilians as well as the armed forces, beyond the capital city of Himachal Pradesh up to the borders of China and Tibet. After my father in law's death, we had decided to return home from Mumbai.

This particular morning was an important one in my life; I had to make it to my new job at the school before the eight o'clock prayer time, as was stipulated in my appointment letter. A family servant well versed with the labyrinth alleys of the old town market was deputed to guide me to my destination. Engrossed in my own thoughts as I turned around a sharp corner, I collided into her—and she fell in a heap, literally knocked down by my momentum. The next moment I was pulling her up but to my surprise she was a heavy and lifeless bundle. As I struggled to pull her upright and pleaded to her to get up, my attention was arrested by two huge black eyes that stared into mine from a dark, mud-stained pudgy face, while ringlets of short curly hair spilled all over and dark swollen lips said to me in a dead monotone -- "I'm hungry, give me food, they tore all my clothes, give me your clothes". Dazed and unable to unlock my eyes from those captivating ones, I groped for my lunchbox inside my bag, and shoved the two paranthas that I had cooked for myself towards her, got back on my feet and rushed to join my new job. Memory of a young naked body, barely covered with a tattered blanket, kept haunting me even as I went through my day. Those big dark eyes

kept challenging me. My new colleagues interacted with me during the lunch break and provided me the opportunity of narrating my curious encounter of the morning to them. I was told that she was -- Bimla Paagal, and one must change one's path if one came across her as she was an inauspicious jinx. On further inquiry a colleague informed me that Bimla belonged to a village nearby. A few years ago, she fell in love with a truck driver and eloped with him from her home. He turned out to be an agent supplying girls to transporters for their needs on the road. Ever since then, she became the play doll of these highway transporters, often used and thrown by them and therefore abandoned and disowned by her own family, when she turned towards them for protection. With this knowledge about her, my eyes searched for Bimla as I walked back from the school that day but she was nowhere to be found. That evening, over a cup of tea, I mentioned her name to my mother in law. Peering at me from behind her favorite magazine, she gave me a quizzical look through her spectacles and asked how I knew about her. After my recount of the incident, a stern -- "she is the shame of our town and should be avoided" made it obvious that no further discussion on the topic was going to be entertained in the house and my curiosity was left to itself.

Life thereafter moved at an automated pace in the months that followed as all of our family got busy settling down. Bimla was by now a part of my life in Rampur. I would often run into her, in the alleys of the town market, at bus stand, on the road or at the Chaudhary adda, where goods were loaded and unloaded from trucks on the road. I would quickly turn my face away as soon as her big black accusing and my guilty, helpless eyes would meet. Sometimes *She* would be in tatters and at other times her torn clothes were replaced by new ones. By now, it was easy to guess that her new clothes would remain new only till the time she was 'picked up', and the tatters on her body meant the inevitable had happened again on the road in the dark of night -- a grim and sad reminder of the façade of a safe, secure and cultured society that we all pretended to live in. Over the years, to me, Bimla became a silent symbol of this naked truth of our civilized society. And my muffled protest against her suffering was limited to my own limited status of a modest bahu amidst a social system where traditions worship a woman as a Devi but persecute her as a stigma, a scum as soon as she tries to put a step beyond the boundaries of the stereotyped role set for her -- her Lakshman Rekha. Braving it out I tried sharing my concerns for Bimla amongst my peers at times but this drew a helpless submission to the

inevitable, given the fact that Bimla had been abandoned by her family who had no doors to take her back.

In the following year I began teaching at the government college of the town which was a couple of kilometers away. We often heard that Bimla had lost her mental equilibrium, which did not surprise anyone as she had been noticed eating garbage and even the hospital waste. Then we heard stories of Bimla delivering and killing her own new born babies twice, even throwing stones at anyone who ventured near her. One day I found her near the gate of our college, amidst a crowd of students, her naked body tangled with strips of torn clothes around it. We had to procure clothes and food from the college hostel for her. This time she was different. She lay there, refusing to respond and move. We were forced to leave her but next morning she was gone. A few days later she was located in another place again in *torn clothes*....

Years rolled by and Bimla Paagal's life and identity merged with the highway transport life of Rampur. The small town too underwent the changes of digital world, the wonders of electronic media and people including me flowed with its pace. She was often seen lurking in the town's alleys, scavenging for food in the gutters, garbage bins, wedding parties and as for her tale of new and torn clothes, it lost the race with the new life that moved at a pace faster than the story of Bimla. Her story was told to the young girls of the town as a moral lesson of the dire consequences if a girl decided to leave her home, and for their mothers ... a metaphor of our own muffled identities.

Many years passed and now I was posted at a college in Shimla. One Saturday evening, an old friend from Rampur, called me. Our friendship dated back to the times of our own struggle for identity. Nowadays she was running an NGO for differently abled children at Rampur. Her mention of Bimla's name brought so many memories flooding back. She announced on the phone that she had finally filed a petition to the court for Bimla's protection and healthcare. As a result, the court had ordered her treatment at the state hospital at Shimla. She requested me to ensure that Bimla should not be declared mentally fit at the hospital and sent back by the medical authorities, as was done with patients in police custody under legal directions.

As I read Bimla's medical report that was mailed by my friend to me, to my dismay I discovered that Bimla had lost her health completely due to prolonged sexual abuse and neglect of physical hygiene. She was heading on for multiple organ failure and could be HIV positive. I felt a

pang of guilt and shame for having forgotten her. Her black eyes haunted me in my sleep that night, pleading for justice and by the morning I had decided, I had to do something. I called another friend who runs a nursing college in the city and together, we went to welcome Bimla on her arrival at the city hospital. The moment our eyes met, I looked straight into them. A catheter was attached to her for the ablutions she couldn't render herself. It was clear at the first look that she was now too weak and needed an attendant but the doctor on duty almost threw me out demanding me to prove that I was related to Bimla. I was able to click a few pictures of Bimla though, and shared them on facebook to seek help. We received no less than two hundred likes but no hand came to hold hers'. I spent a sleepless night as the stipulated period of police custody was to lapse the next day and she would be sent back to Rampur. Now was the time that an honest medical report stating her pathetic mental and physical state would be required for her salvation and directions from the court for sending her to a mental re-habilitation centre.

Next morning, I met the head of the department where Bimla was under treatment. The doctor seemed more concerned with his position in question rather than the situation of the poor victim. When I told him Bimla's saga of loss of innocence, physical, mental and emotional torture, her social boycott, my association with her, I sensed a shadow of sympathy cross the stoic face of the doctor. He requested me to put my signatures at the base of two blank sheets, promising to do all he could to help save Bimla's life. Confident that Bimla would be shifted to the mental rehabilitation centre for further treatment the next day, I thought of spending some time with her before leaving the hospital. As I went near her bed, she looked up at me like a fresh lily flower. The nursing students from my friend's college had washed and scrubbed her. She looked so pretty wearing a bottle green kurta and black slacks with her hair neatly combed into a plait.... The girls were really pampering her and she seemed to have won the hearts of all the patients in her ward. Someone had even kept a small bunch of roses near her bed. I asked her what she wished to eat and with a strange glint in those dark eyes, she raised her arms spreading them wide like a little child and demanded lots of oranges and chocolates which we procured for her. Had I known that that night when I left Bimla, it was to be forever, I would have tried to fulfill all the rest of her wishes too. The next day Bimla was sent to a home for Destitute women with a medical report that declared her mentally, physically and medically fit and a witness, Suneela Sharma,

had certified that she was never sexually assaulted nor was she found indulging in any activities indicative of mental illness .Bimla, declared medically fit, was sent by the court to a Nari Niketan where she passed away after a week, coincidentally on the International Day for women. Bimla was released from the body prison of a woman while the whole world celebrated freedom for women.

The frantic ringing of the doorbell brought me back to the present and I realized that I was surely late for my 10:00 am lecture. I rushed to the door to let in Renu, an orphan girl who had lost her father during the construction of our building fifteen years ago, and since then she had been adopted by the families of our neighbourhood. She was just fifteen then when she started helping us all in our house chores, now a mother of two daughters herself. As Renu stared at me with a perplexed look in her eyes, I gave her a tight hug, made a silent promise to Renu and took her inside.

Review of “Bimla ‘Paagal’”

ABHYUDITA GAUTAM

Bimla Paagal is a tragic and pathetic tale of a woman, who had fallen in love and eloped with her partner only to be betrayed, abused and discarded like a scrap. The sanctity of her marriage was ruptured, her chastity torn down, her dignity shattered and mutilated just like the clothes on her body that barely managed to cover up her wounds. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that this tale is about a woman who fell victim to circumstances and is unable to overcome the emotional trauma that led to repeated physical assaults on her body ultimately resulting in her mental retardation and imbalance.

The story is about the failure of the society to protect her and provide Bimla the basic necessities of life like food, clothing and shelter that every individual has a right to. Her succumbing to her wounds and illness was a tragedy that the writer and her fellow workers regret in the story as they tried to rehabilitate her but could not succeed in their noble mission.

Suneela Sharma has narrated the story beautifully in an autobiographical manner with a lot of sensitivity, adopting the stream of consciousness technique by chronologically depicting the events in her own life as well as that in Bimla’s life giving it a structure of a parallel narrative. There is pathos in the story as one feels pity and sympathetic for the protagonist.

The present day is when she hears about Bimla’s death as the morning routine sounds of the milkman, newspaper boy, morning hymns, garbage boys and the monkeys jumping on the rooftops reverberated in the background. The four stages of the writer’s life which are the significant turning points in her life also narrate the four different phases of Bimla’s life.

The first instance is her first day to her school where she had joined as a teacher when on the way she bumps into a hungry and nude Bimla on the road, second one was when she was settling down her family business in her hometown when she observes Bimla wandering around like a lunatic who had evidently been sexually exploited. By the time the

writer joined her services of college cadre, Bimla's condition had deteriorated to such an extent that she had transformed into a scavenger feeding on garbage and leftover food and had even started pelting stones at people who came near her, as a natural defense instinct against the men who had assaulted her. Suneela Sharma shifted to Shimla when she was told that a petition for Bimla's protection and welfare was filed in the court.

The writer's own struggle to find an identity for her been narrated simultaneously with Bimla's story who was the same age as the writer. Both the women's lives run parallel in the narrative.

Bimla, the name, means pious and pure, but ironically, she was subjected to very heinous atrocities in her life that devastated her chastity.

The writer has symbolically represented the retaliation in her story when she narrates the incidence of the struggle of the school boys with the aggressive monkeys trying to snatch away their lunch boxes. The need to be united and gather ourselves to fight against the challenges of life is portrayed, which the writer and her fellow social workers failed to do.

There is also a comparison between the cutting and felling of the trees with the sexual exploitation of Bimla. This theory of Eco Criticism is evident through the reference of trees in the story and we are reminded of *The Flowering Tree* by AK Ramanujam where a woman's body is disfigured by the human hands that pluck the twigs of the tree violently.

Labeling of Bimla as 'Paagal' or a jinx is the issue of witch-hunting that the authoress has brought in. We can make a reference to *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Gilbert and Gubar as Bimla has been isolated and alienated in the society that thought of her as an outcaste or a monster.

Bimla's roaming around without clothes, becoming a subject of ridicule and loathing is a stark contrast to the worshipping of the Goddesses in our country. Sustaining on garbage and wasted food by Bimla is an indication of malnutrition that the women of the Asian countries suffer, which has been elaborated upon by Amartya Sen in *A Hundred Million Women are Missing*.

The issue of personal hygiene of women is also another aspect to ponder over, which is the basic right that every woman is entitled to, and

that Bimla could not access as she was not provided the personal and secure space even during her menstrual cycle.

Bimla's toothless smile shows her hope to overcome the adversity of life even though she was unarmed and unguarded to face this cruel world. Teeth may symbolically be taken as natural defense tools that she had shed making herself vulnerable to the wolves of the society.

The story ends tragically when Bimla, a probable case of HIV positive dies due to multiple organ failure, much to the utter dismay of the writer and her fellow social workers.

However, the story ends with another ray of hope for the writer who opens up her door to a new domestic helper called Renu, in whom she sees an opportunity to compensate for what she could not accomplish for Bimla.

The story of Bimla "Paagal" seems to have come a full circle.



Audience's Live Response

Irene Rattan: Suneela ma'am, your words carry the pain of your heart.

Priyanka Koundal: Such a beautiful and heart touching story.... Ma'am, I want to read it again, so can you tell me please from where I get this? Any soft copy?

Leena Vaidya: Suneela Ma'am we had a somewhat similar case over here in Bhunter, Kullu. I just informed the authorities and now feel sorry that I never followed it after she was shifted to Shimla.

Namrata Pathania: There is a Bimla Paagal in every nook and corner of our society. What is lacking is empathy and action.

Savita J.B. Singh: Suneela Ma'am...you have touched on a very sensitive topic... Heart rending... the plight of women!

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नंगा आदमी

योगेश्वर शर्मा

साँझ होते ही अँधेरा उतर आता है पटरियों पर। फिर आग-धुएँ से सिसकते हुए, इंजन के पैर छुक-छुक, छुक-छुक सरकने लगते हैं – धीरे-धीरे, तेज, फिर बहुत तेज।

सन्नाटे के पिंजरे से शब्दबेधी एक लम्बी सीटी टकराती है चीत्कार की तरह। कुछ पंछी मर जाते हैं। कुछ उड़ जाते हैं। कुछ बेदम हो जाते हैं।

जो मर जाते हैं वे 'आप मरे, जग परलय' निजात पा जाते हैं रोज-रोज के 'परपंच' से, डर-भय से। जो उड़ जाते हैं, वे अँधेरे में पंख फड़फड़ाते रहते हैं। जो बेदम हो जाते हैं, वे दूसरी चीत्कार का 'धड़का' स के लिए खुद को तैयार से करने लगते हैं।

सीटू को बेला-कुबेला यह रेल की सीटी बहुत बुरी लगती है – डायन, मनहूस। हर वक्त जान साँसत में रहे। भरम लगा रहता है कि यह कहीं 'टुंडी राक्षस' की तरह फड़फड़ाकर उसके टपरे को न लपक ले...पटरियों से उतरकर।

निगोड़ी नींद उचट जाती है अधराते।

फिर आज तो नींद यूँ भी उखड़कर आ रही थी।

सुखनी – उसकी बीवी, बड़ी-बड़ी आँखों में पुतलियाँ-सी नचाती फिरती है, न जाने किस करमजले के पल्ले बाँध दिया उमर भर को। न कभी प्यार की बात करे...। उनींदी रात को भड़भड़ाकर उठा देगा, 'सुखनी री, देख तो घड़े में आटा है बचा हुआ? कल का जुगाड़ हो जाये तो एक दिन छुट्टी करूँ। जिस्म दुःख रहा है सारा। ठंड लग गयी है शायद।

सीटू को अपने नाम से चिढ़ है। सुखनी को अपने नाम से।

और यह गाड़ी भी ऐन गला खंखार-खंखारकर गुजरती है यहाँ से – आधी रात को। न कोई सुर, न कोई ताल। इसके बेढंगे डरावने रिरियाने पर कौन ताली पीटने बैठ जाये, कौन गाने नाचने लग जाये।

सीटू जब पैदा हुआ था तो इसी धड़धड़ाती गाड़ी की लम्बी सीटी बजी थी, उसके बापू कहते थे। अन्दर माँ को जोरों के दरद थे – हाल-बेहाल। उधर

गाड़ी की सीटी बजी और इधर लालटेन की काँपती-झाँपती लौ में बूढ़ी दाई ने चट खुशखबरी फेंक दी ठीक आँगन में, 'राजा बेटा हुआ है रे तेरे, मंगतराम।'

अँजुलि भर बतासे बचाकर रखे थे आड़े दिनों के लिए। मंगतू ने सारे के सारे लुटा दिये।

फिर वह मन ही मन गुनने लगा – बेटा हुआ है, अच्छी बात है, लेकिन राजा बेटा! है न बेढंगी बात! वह घंटों हँसता रहा और उदास होता रहा।

लेकिन एक काम कर दिया उसने फटाफट। बेटे का नाम रख दिया सीटू।

सीटू को आज अपने दिवंगत बाप की याद आ गयी है बहुत बुरी तरह से। रात के साढ़े बारह बजे हैं। पीला-पीला चांद चमकता है – ऊपर, बहुत ऊपर आकाश में। सामने के ऊँचे-ऊँचे पहाड़ ज्यों के त्यों खड़े हैं चौकन्ने। गाड़ी का चीखना सुनकर उनींदे से सकपकाकर उठ बैठे हैं जैसे। अजाने बोल की परछाइयाँ-सी फेंक रहे हैं रस्सी की मानिंद-ठीक सीटू के सामने ...

'कुछ बोल सीटू, रात कट जाये।'

अब सीटू क्या बोले? माघ महीने की कड़कड़ाती ठंड! दाँत बज रहे हैं ठकाठक। गूदड़ को फेंक-वेंककर आँगन में उकड़ूँ बैठ गया है सीटू। बीड़ी का सुट्टा लगा रहा है भकाभक।

ससुरी नींद उचट गयी है। उचटी कहाँ? नींद आयी कब है आज? सोचता है – जो हुआ बुरा हुआ।

बापू ने मरती बार कहा था –

'सुन बेटे, तेते पाँव पसारियो, जेती लांबी सौर। हमारे 'बंस' में यह मुहावरा बहुत पुराना है। सम्पत्ति, जायदाद, घर, जमीन... यह सब बसीयत करने की 'परथा' हमारे खानदान में कभी नहीं रही। हम अपने सपूत बेटों को अपनी पिलपिली पसलियों, खुरदुरे हाथ, बिवाई पड़ी एड़ियों, बोझ से बौने हुए सिर, छिले हुए कन्धे भर दिखा देते हैं। हमारे बेटे बड़े सयाने हैं। जिस्म पर टाँकी हुई इस पथरीली भाषा को खुद समझ लेते हैं। कोई शिकायत नहीं करते। ...देख बेटे, तेते पाँव पसारियो जेती लांबी सौर। चादर छोटी पड जाये तो उकड़ूँ हो जाना। फिर भी कम पडे तो पेट, टाँगों को छील-तराशकर छोटा-छोटा कर लेना। कपड़ा बित्ता भर भी रह जाये, कोशिश करना वह अंगुलि भर कपड़ा तुम्हें पूरा ढक ले। नंगा मत हो जाना! हम अनपढ़, गँवार, गरीब, मजदूर लोग हैं। नंगा होना शोभा नहीं देता हमें।

'अब समझा सीटू कि उसके दिल में 'होल' सी क्यों मची है इतनी? ठीक-ठीक नींद क्यों नहीं आ रही है? सीटू खुद हैरान कि बापू क्यों याद आ रहे हैं आज इतने जोरों से?

शायद आज वह नंगा हो गया है पूरा का पूरा। किसी ने देखा या नहीं, उसने देख लिया है अपने आपको।

वह दबे पाँव सुखनी के सिरहाने बैठ गया। 'हौले' से उसके माथे को छूकर देखा — 'सुखनी री, आटा....?' लेकिन रुक गया बोलता-बोलता। बात कुछ और करनी थी। मुँह से निकल गयी कुछ और।

सुखनी ने 'ऊँह' करके करवट बदली।

अजीब औरत है! न ढंग का पहने। न ढंग का खाये। न ढंग की बात करे। न ढंग से सोये।

लेकिन यह दोष किसका है? क्या सुख दिया है सुखनी को उसने अब तक?

सीटू सोचते-सोचते रुक गया। पहले ही काफी बोझ है सिर पर। अब और क्या-क्या सोचे सीटू?

पिछली गर्मी में सुखनी बोलती थी, 'अबकी जाड़ों में हाड़ खड़-खड़ करेंगे, देख लेना। गुदड़ सारे फट गये हैं। देखते नहीं कपड़े सारे उधाड़ी-उधाड़ी हो रहे हैं। तू तो मर्द है, नंगा रह लेगा। मैं औरत जात हूँ। सुई से जिस्म में कहाँ-कहाँ बखिये लगाती फिरूँगी।

सीटू को बस गुस्सा ही आ गया, 'कैसे कहती हैं तू कि मैं नंगा रह लूँगा। बापू ने कहा था... खैर, रहने दे। आगे से ऐसी बात मत करना। कहे देता हूँ।'

बुड़बुड़ाता रहा सीटू यूँ ही। बीड़ी का सुट्टा खींचता रहा गहरे, बहुत गहरे। धुएँ के घने काले कोहरे में उसने अपनी सारी जिन्दगी की परिक्रमा कर ली। गोल-गोल छोटा-सा दायरा है। कितनी देर लगती है घूम-घुमाकर वापस अपनी जगह आने में। लेकिन उस दायरे में 'घुमाव' बहुत है। सारा रास्ता काँटों और नुकीले पत्थरों से अटा हुआ है। पीछे देखता है तो ठोकर लगती है। आगे देखता है तो अँधेरा दिखायी देता है, घटाटोप।

बड़े-बड़े सपने उसने कभी नहीं देखें।... अब तो बस एक साध रह गयी है। उसकी झोंपड़ी के किवाड़ लग जाँ, बस। बाकी जो है, ठीक है। दो तीन-साल से सोच रहा है। पैसों का 'बेसगी' जुगाड़ नहीं बैठता। साध ज्यों की त्यों धरी-धराई पड़ी है।

बिन ब्याहा था तो ठीक था। लेकिन जब से सुखनी को ब्याह कर लाया है, किवाड़ की चिन्ता खाये जा रही है रात-दिन। दिन भी खैर निकल जाता है। रात का डर लगा रहता है। चोर-डाकू, गुंडे-उचक्के... शहर की आबोहवा गाँव को डस रही है धीरे-धीरे। खटका लगा रहता है हमेशा-हमेशा कि कोई कोठरी के भीतर झाँक रहा है। खैर, चुराने लायक चीज तो कोई नहीं है घर में। जो है वह सुखनी है। जवान-जहान उसकी बीवी। गऊ जैसी सीधी। लेकिन दुनिया की नजरें तो सीधी नहीं हैं। कभी-कभी घर लौटने में देर हो जाती है तो सुखनी के साथ-साथ किवाड़ का ध्यान आ जाता है झट से। 'धड़ाका'-सा उठता है कलेजे में। घर में पक्के किवाड़ नहीं हैं तो घर पूरा नंगा-नंगा लगता है। सुखनी बैठी है सामने। सुखनी नहा-धो रही है। सुखनी बतिया रही है।

सुखनी खिड़-खिड़ हँस रही है। सुखनी सो रही है।... सुखनी सीटू की ओर देखती है और खुद को ढीला छोड़ देती है। 'सरम' लगती है कोई और देख ले तो! ...

जब से जंगल का काम लगा है, लकड़ी का गोदाम यहाँ बना है। आरे की मशीन लगी है, शहर से लोग यहाँ आये हैं। देहात के कच्चे-पक्के घरों में किवाड़ों और तालों की जरूरत पड़ गयी है।

गुंडे-उचक्के पक्की सड़क छोड़कर पगडंडी पर इधर-उधर मँडराने लगे हैं। कुछेक पगडंडियों तो खुद बना लेते हैं ये। ताकते रहते हैं अगल-बगल जीभ चिपचिपाते हुए। लकड़ी के गोदाम के कारिन्दे, जंगल के ठेकेदार, सरकारी आदमी उसके टपरे के सामने से इकले-दुकले टहलते, खंखारते, भद्दी हरकतें करते रहते हैं। किसी दिन उन्होंने देख लिया कि घर में किवाड़ नहीं हैं तो! सीटू का दिल बैठ जाता है। कभी-कभी दिहाड़ी का काम छोड़कर वह पहरा देने बैठ गया है घर पर खुद दहलीज पर बैठ जायेगा और सुखनी को ओट में कर लेगा। लेकिन जब घड़े में आटा चुक जाता है तो सुखनी जबरदस्ती धकेल देती है उसे काम पर।

कभी-कभी ऐसा भी हुआ है कि इधर गाड़ी की सीटी बजी, उधर सीटू झटपट उठकर अंधेरे में अपनी बीवी को टटोलने लग जाता है। बगल में सोयी है चैन से। ठीक है। सुखनी कभी-कभार जागी होती है गुपचुप। सोचती है सीटू रोम-रोम में रसी-बसी अँगड़ाई ले लेगा अभी-अभी और सुखनी को जगा देगा झकझोरकर। लेकिन मन की जब ऐसी हालत होती है तो सीटू उसे जगाता नहीं। उल्टे खुद जागकर उसे थपथपी देकर सुला देता है।... थोड़ी-थोड़ी कोशिश करती है सुखनी सीटू की बात समझने की।...

सीटू बस सोचता जा रहा है। एक नजर बाहर, एक नजर भीतर। एक ख्याल यहाँ, एक ख्याल वहाँ।

मिसिरजी आये थे इलाके में। कैसा भाषण दिया था। दो कोस दूर तक आवाज बुलन्द थी। खादी के कपड़े झकाझक। गले में 'डोलरे' के फूलों के हार। सारा इलाका टूट पड़ा था भाषण सुनने के लिए। मिसिरजी कभी हँस जायें। कभी चुप हो जायें। बस देखते-सुनते बनता था। एक-दो बार तो भाषण देते-देते रो पड़े। खूब याद है। अभी की बात है - हुए होंगे सात-आठ महीने। जंगल के ठेकेदार, कारिन्दे सब अगल-बगल में चहक रहे थे। भाई-भतीजे थे उनके या अपने खास आदमी। दौड़-भागकर पूरा इन्तजाम किया था उन्होंने। शहतीरों का ऊँचा चबूतरा बनाया था, जहाँ से मिसिरजी भाषण दे रहे थे। मालिक लोगों ने कहा था, 'सीटू, नेताजी का भाषण खत्म हो जाये तो शहतीर उठाकर वापस 'टाल' में रख देना। भीखू, भाद्रू, मोहन, लच्छू सबको कह दिया है। समझे! हर शहतीर का ध्यान रखना।'

सीटू इसलिए अगली लाइन में बैठ गया था, ठीक चबूतरे के पास। कभी नेताजी को देखता, कभी शहतीरों को। भाषण की कोई-कोई बात समझ में आ

जाती, बाकी राम जाने। लोग ताली बजाते थे। वह बीड़ी मुंह में खोंसे पहले इर्द-गिर्द लोगों को देखता। फिर चट्ट से दोनों हाथों को एक-दूसरे से मिला देता।

परताप है नेताजी का। बोलो, नेताजी जी जय!

मिसिरजी की आँखों में आँसू थे। जाने क्यों? ठीक सामने बैठे सीटू की ओर उन्होंने देखा। सीटू को समझ नहीं आया कि वह ताली बजाये या रोये। फटाफट बीड़ी बुझाकर कान में खोंस ली।

मिसिरजी चबूतरे से उतरे। बड़े प्यार से सीटू के कन्धे पर हाथ रखा। बाँह से पकड़कर उसे चबूतरे पर ले चले। खड़ा कर दिया सबके सामने उसे पलक झपकते सब कुछ हो गया। सीटू बुत बना सब देखता रहा। भीड़ में से दो-चार आवाजें भी आयीं, 'मंगतू का छोरा है, सीटू।' कुछ लोग हँसे भी। लेकिन मिजिरजी की आँखें गीली थीं—

'देखो, इस गरीब मजदूर की हालत देखो। हद है। आजादी के बाद क्या मिला है इसको? यह भी इन्सान है। भाई है यह हमारा। गांधीजी ने कहा था 'अंत्योदय'...। मैं कसम खाकर कहता हूँ कि यदि मैं चुनाव जीत गया तो सबसे पहले इस भाई की हालत सुधारूँगा।'

तालियाँ! ...

सीटू को कुछ वक्त लगा इस 'सदमे' से उबरने में। लेकिन वह पूरी तरह गद्गद् हो गया। 'साक्षात्' नारायण है मिसिरजी। इतने आदमियों के बीच तड़ाक से बोल गये, 'यह भाई है मेरा'। धन्न हो महाराज! कहाँ राजा भोज, कहाँ गंगू तेली।

साथी मजदूरों ने टहोका दिया, 'अब तेरी चांदी है, सीटू।'

बड़ी रात तक, उस दिन सीटू शहतीर उठा-उठाकर 'टाल' तक पहुँचाता रहा। लकड़ी के टेकेदार, बाबू सब उसकी पीठ ठोंक रहे थे, 'मिसिरजी खुश होकर गये हैं, सीटू।'

थोड़ी-सी दारू, विलायती, पिला दी उन्होंने। पी गया गटागट सीटू। मिसिरजी की जूठन थी। परसाद समझकर पी गया।

घर आकर सुखनी पर रौब झाड़ने लगा, 'तू क्या समझती है मैं दो टके का आदमी हूँ? जानती है, मिसिरजी ने आज सबके सामने सीटूराम के कैसे-कैसे बखान किये?'

सुखनी ने आँखें मटकायीं। दारू का सारा नशा गायब?

'सुखनी री, अब काम हो गया समझ। चबूतरे पर हाथ पकड़कर ले गये मुझे। मेरे कन्धे पर हाथ रख दिया यूँ। बोले, यह भाई है मेरा यूँ रखा हाथ।' सुखनी को गुदगुदी हो आयी।... एक बीड़ी और सुलगा ली सीटू ने।... मिसिरजी जीत गये। 'मन्तरी' बन गये।

सीटू ने दारू पी ली 'खुशी' में। अबकी विलायती नहीं थी। पल्ले से खरीदी-सस्ती देशी। 'पव्वा' भर चढ़ा लिया। बस सिर को चढ़ गयी। गिरता, पड़ता, लड़खड़ाता, हँसता, गाता, नाचता रहा सीटू। घर आकर बीवी से झगड़ा कर दिया।

'दारू पीकर अपनी घरवाली से झगड़ता है तू। लड़नी है तो कोई बड़ी लड़ाई लड़।'

यह बड़ी लड़ाई क्या होती है? भूषण बाबू यूनिजन के जलसे में बोलते थे, 'अपने हक की लड़ाई लड़ो।'

अब यह 'हक' क्या होता है? एक टंटिया हो तो समझे सीटू! ...

मिसिरजी 'मन्तरी' बनने के बाद इलाके के दौरे पर आये तो रंगत ही दूसरी थी। जीप, कार सब अगल-बगल में। जमघटा लोगों का। सब एक सुर में बोले, 'मन्तरीजी जिन्दावाद!' रंग-बिरंगे फूलों के हार। मन्तरीजी दोनों हाथों से 'परनाम' करें सबको।...यह अगला जन्म, पिछला जन्म कुछ नहीं है। जो है, बस इसी जन्म का खेल है। प्रताप है महाराज का। जिसको है, उसको है। जिसको नहीं है, उसको नहीं है।... सीटू सोच रहा है।

'धन्न हो मन्तरीजी। माटी 'पवित्तर' हो गयी।'

'धार परोली' के मेले में भी ऐसी चहल-पहल नहीं देखी।

भाषण के वक्त इस बार फिर सीटू चबूतरे के ऐन बगल में बैठा था। परन्तु मन्तरीजी अबकी आसमान को देख रहे थे और धरती के जीवों को 'उपदेश' दे रहे थे।

डाक बँगले में भी बड़ी धक्कमपेल थी। बाहर कुर्सी लगाकर बैठे थे मिसिरजी। फ़ैसले पर फ़ैसला सुना रहे थे। जिस तरंग में सीटू उनके करीब दौड़ा, उसी धक्के में सन्तरी ने पीछे धकेल दिया, 'लाइन में आओ।'

'क्यों आये जी लाइन में? मिसिरजी भाई हैं हमारे।'

मिसिरजी ने हल्ला सुन लिया। उधर देखा। सीटू ने धड़ल्ले से दोनों हाथ जोड़कर 'परनाम' कर दी। 'सायत देखा नहीं मिसिरजी ने।' इधर उधर घूम-फिरकर जब भी मिसिरजी की नजर सीटू पड़ती, वह तड़ से परनाम कर देता-पूरा दुहरा होकर। एक बार, दो बार... पाँच-सात बार ऐसा हो गया। 'पहचाना नहीं सायद।'

अगल-बगल जंगल के ठेकेदार, मन्तरीजी के अपने खास आदमी, अफसर, साहब लोग, पंचायत के परधान, सरपंच... बड़े-बड़े लोग बैठे थे।

सीटू को कसक रह गयी कि परनाम का जवाब नहीं मिला ठीक से। मैनाराम सरपंच की नजर उठी कोई दो घंटे बाद।

'क्या चाहता है, सीटू तू? मन्तरीजी से कोई फरियाद करनी है। क्या?'

अब देखा मिसिरजी ने साफ-साफ।

‘कौन है यह आदमी?’

सीटू को लगा जैसे जोगनी के ‘ढाँख’ से किसी ने उसे धक्का दे दिया। लेकिन संभल गया एकदम। हो सकता है उसके सफेद पाजामे और लट्टे की कमीज से न पहचान पा रहे हों। ‘सादी’ के टैम का सूट है। खास-खास मौके पर पहनता है सीटू।

‘मैं सीटू हूँ, जी। पिछली बार...।’ जंगल के ठेकेदार लोगों ने घूरती हुई नजर से देखा उसे। वह डर गया। उन्हें डर अपना था कि कहीं वह दिहाड़ी, मजदूरी... जुल्म, जबरदस्ती का बखेड़ा न छेड़ दे यहाँ।

सरपंच ने कहा—‘इसका नाम सीटू है जी, जनाब।’

मन्तरीजी हँसे। पान की पीक थोड़ी-थोड़ी होंठों से बाहर निकल आयी।

सरपंच ने सीटू को टहोका दिया—‘जल्दी बोल सीटू, क्या तकलीफ है तेरी? मन्तरीजी को टैम नहीं है। बहुत से काम हैं करने को।’

‘जी...।’

सूझा नहीं ऐन वक्त पर कि क्या बोले? भाई वाली बात तो गयी। अब नये सिरे से बात शुरू करनी थी। लेकिन फँस गया। अब बोलना जरूरी था कुछ। उसके मुँह से निकल गया —

‘जी, मेरे घर में बिजली नहीं आयी आज तक।’

सभी हँस पड़े जोर लगाकर। मन्तरीजी ने मुँह टेढ़ा किया, ‘तेरे घर में बिजली नहीं आयी आज तक? बाहर तो सारे झकाझक हैं...घर में बिजली लगवाने का ठेका सरकार का नहीं है।’

‘हैं! कहाँ गलती हुई सीटू से?’ उसने दूसरी बात पकड़ ली ‘झट्ट’ से —

‘जी, जी मेरे घर का दरवाजा करीब चार साल पहले टूट गया था। दीमक ने चट्ट कर दिया था पूरा का पूरा। बाप-दादा के टैम की लकड़ी थी।... अब किवाड़ नहीं है।... सरम लगती है।’

मन्तरीजी ठहाका लगाकर हँसे। उनके साथ सभी हँसे जोर-जोर से। दूर खड़ा सन्तरी भी सारी बातें साफ सुन रहा था। कन्धे पर बन्दूक रखे सीधा-सपाट खड़ा था। लेकिन हँसी से कमर में लचक आ गयी।

हँसने वाली बात करता है सीटू।

पता नहीं यह क्या हो गया। अब कुशल इसी में थी कि सीटू भी जोर लगाकर हंस दे, बस।

मन्तरीजी अभी पिछली बात पर गौर कर रहे थे, ‘सरम काहे की, रे? तू नंगा रहता है अपने घर में क्या?’

सीटू हँसता—हँसता एकदम चुप हो गया। कैसी बात कर दी मिसिरजी ने? वह सब कुछ सुन सकता है, लेकिन मजाल कि ऐसी बात कोई बोल जाये। सुखनी नहीं बोल सकती उसके सामने।

बस, भाग आया वहाँ से बुड़बुड़ाता हुआ।...पहचाना नहीं। कोई बात नहीं... लेकिन नंगा क्यों बोला मुझे?

दिमाग छोटा है उसका वरना सबका हिसाब बता देता साफ—साफ।

औकात नहीं है वैसी वरना सारी बात साफ—साफ कह देता।

थोड़ी—बहुत दारू जब खोपड़ी में चढ़ती है तो पैर काबू में रहें या न रहें, दिमाग में चीजें जरूर साफ दिखायी देती हैं। पूरी तसवीर खिंच जाती है लकीर लकीर। डर भी नहीं व्यापता।

बड़ी—बड़ी गालियाँ हलक से बाहर उमड़ने को आती हैं। खून पीते हैं आदमखोर।...सतवादी हरिचन्द्रर बने हैं। नंगे हैं खुद पूरे। सीटू को गाली देते हैं।... सबकी साँठ—गाँठ है। मिलीभगत है। हिस्सा—पत्ती है बंधी हुई सबकी। जंगल का ठेकेदार, खास—खास कारिन्दे, सरकार के आदमी...मन्तरी, सन्तरी... सब। बापू कहता था—सारा देस नंगा हो गया। तू मत नंगा हो जाना, सीटू।... बुद्धा मरती बखत दो टके की सीख दे गया मुझे! बिलकुल हिजड़ा बना गया मुझे!

किसी ने आवाज दी। शायद भीखू था।

‘इतनी मत पी, सीटू। जा, तेरी घरवाली देख रही होगी तुझे।’ सुखनी की याद बड़ी देर से नहीं आयी थी। गुस्सा उतर गया। लेकिन ‘फिकिर’ चढ़ गया एकदम।

‘किवाड़ नहीं है टपरे में।... ये मुए लुच्चे—लफंगे, गुण्डे दुनिया भर के। इनका क्या दीन—ईमान! माँ—बहन, कोई नहीं है सायद इनकी! इन्होंने धरती की सरम नंगी कर दी है। पेड़ को तने से टटोल—टटोलकर जमीन पर बिछा देते हैं लम्बा काट—मसलकर जंगल के जंगल साफ कर दिये हैं। बेसरम! बेहया! जंगल के सारे कपड़े चिथ—चिथकर उघाड़ी कर दिये हैं इन्होंने।’...

धक्क से सोचता है सीटू। डाक बँगले में जो औरत फरियाद लेकर खड़ी थी, शुक्र है वह सुखनी नहीं थी। लेकिन कोई तो थी बेचारी!

भीखू उसका दोस्त, दूसरे दिन डाक बँगले से विलायती दारू की खाली बोतलें ले आया बोरी भरकर! उस सुबह इलाके में बहुत कम मुर्गों ने बांग दी।

‘चोर हैं सारे एक नम्बर के सारे देस को खा गये। पेट नहीं भरा भुक्खड़ों का।’

क्या हुआ अगर सीटू भी छोटी—सी चोरी कर ले तो। ...

लकड़ी के बड़े-बड़े गोदाम हैं। शहतीर के बड़े-बड़े 'टाल' हैं। सारी उम्र उसका बाप शहतीर को कन्धा लगाता रहा है। सीटू भी वही काम कर रहा है लड़कपन से। दिहाड़ी मजदूरी जो भी है, वही है। 'पुगाव' कैसे हो? इधर वे एक रात दारू, दावत... जाने किस-किस में हजारों खर्च कर दें बैठे-ठाले। कोई हिसाब माँगे इनसे!

बहुत बार सीटू को ऐसा लगा है कि वह अकेला है। दिल के भीतर जो है, उसे सहारे की जरूरत है। इकट्ठे हों सब। मिलकर कुछ ठीक-ठीक बात की जाये। ठीक-ठीक बात सोची जाये।... दो-चार कभी इस लाइन पर सोचते हैं तो मालिक लोग चट्ट से दाना फेंक देते हैं उनके आगे और ये भाई चाटने लगते हैं थूथन से।

दाना उसे भी फेंका था।

'तेरी तरक्की कर देंगे हम, सीटू। तेरी घरवाली...।'

सीटू का मुँह एकदम अंगारा। मुट्टियाँ भिच गयीं।

'तुमने देख कैसे लिया मेरी घरवाली को?'

थर-थर काँपता है सीटू।... शहतीर कन्धे पर लादे हुए एकदम दिमाग सुखनी की ओर मुड़ जाता है। सीधी-सादी औरत है। बैठी होगी इस समय चूल्हा फूँकने। प्याज का छौंक लगाकर आलू की सब्जी बना रही होगी और अनजाने में बाहर भी देख लेती होगी इधर-उधर। कहाँ तक आँखें मूंदे! दरवाजे के 'पल्ले' नहीं हैं इसलिए खुँखार भेड़िये दिन को भी चबेनी ढूँढते रहते हैं...खौल रहा है सीटू। हड़बड़ा गया है।

'सीटू, वजन सम्माल। शहतीर डोल रही है।' दूसरी ओर से शहतीर को कन्धा दिये हुए भीखू ने चेतावनी दी।

सीटू मन ही मन सोचने लगा, 'अच्छा! सम्मालता हूँ वजन। करता हूँ कुछ जुगत।'

चोरों के घर में संध लगाने की बात उसने बहुत दिनों से सोची थी। लेकिन हिम्मत नहीं पड़ रही थी। 'धड़ाका' लगता है बड़ा! मालूम नहीं ये इतनी बड़ी-बड़ी चोरियाँ कैसे कर लेते हैं और खुशी-खुशी झेल लेते हैं। डोलते रहते हैं खूब, रौबदाब से। इनकी औकात भी ठीक, जात भी ठीक। सिरताज, धरमराज बने रहते हैं। सीटू को रास्ते में पड़ा हुआ दस पैसे का सिक्का उठाने में भी अपनी पूरी रूह से लड़ना पड़ रहा था इतने जोरों से!

शहतीर के 'टाल' और आरे की मशीन में चिरे हुए कुछ 'फट्टे' उसकी नजर में थे बहुत सारे। उसने केवल दो 'फट्टों' पर नजर गड़ा ली। मौका पाकर 'टाल' के खूब नीचे छिपा दिया उन 'पल्लों' को सारे हालात को, समझना, परखना जरूरी था पहले! आठ-दस दिन तक 'पल्लों' की किसी को फिकर नहीं हुई। सीटू ने दुबारा मौका सम्माला और 'पल्ले' उठाकर थोड़ी दूर ले गया। झाड़ी में छिपा दिये एक जगह...।

थोड़ा-थोड़ा सफर तय किया नाप-तोलकर। महीना भर के बाद दो 'पल्ले' घर तक पहुँचे। उसने घर के पिछवाड़े छिपा दिये करील की झाड़ी में। बिना किवाड़ के एक कमरे में चोरी का बित्ता-भर सामान छिपाने की गुंजाइश नहीं थी।

सुखनी उस 'टैम' पानी का घड़ा भरने गयी थी।... यूँही सवाल-जवाब करेगी। उसके पेट में बात पचती कहाँ है? भक्क से बोल देगी किसी से।

दूसरे दिन दिहाड़ी पर नहीं गया सीटू। सारा दिन सुखनी को ओट में लिए बैठा रहा दहलीज पर। सोचता रहा गुपचुप। बस, सोचता रहा। सुखनी ने पूछा। कुछ नहीं बोला। सुखनी डरी। शायद 'भूत-परेत' की छाया पड़ गयी हो। पूछना जरूरी था। सीटू ने झिड़क दिया बुरी तरह। खाना भी नहीं खाया। सांझ हो गयी। सुखनी रोते-धोते सो गयी। सीटू जागता रहा।

बस, यही बात है कि सीटू आज रात माघ की ठंड खा रहा है-आधी रात को। वैसे रोज गाड़ी की सीटी उसका इन्तजार करती थी। आज उसने पहल की है इन्तजार करने की।

बापू याद आ रहे हैं इतने कि पूछो मत। दोनों ओर संकट है। किवाड़ खुले रहते हैं तो सुखनी और किवाड़ बन्द हो जायें तो सीटू। नंगा होना दोनों में से एक की किस्मत में लिखा जरूर है!

बीड़ी के धुएँ में वह जिन्दगी की पटरी पर बेतहाशा दौड़ रहा है-हाँफता-काँपता। छोटी-सी पटरी है। मुड़-मुड़कर वहीं से चक्कर काटती है बार-बार। सीटी की कर्कश आवाज आती है कानों में।

लौट जाये सीटू क्या?

क्या जवाब देगा लोगों को... वही लकड़ी है। मोहर लगी है। देख।

क्या कहेगा लोगों को। 'एकाएक किवाड़ कैसे लग गये? तेरी औकात क्या है?'

एक दरवाजे के 'पल्ले' भर लगाने की औकात न हो आदमी पास तो लानत है ऐसी जिन्दगी पर!

'टाल' के कारिन्दे, जंगल के ठेकेदार वहशी, खूँखार आँखों से घुड़कियाँ देते फिरेंगे उसे। उसके टपरे को देखकर मुँह से अजीब-अजीब सी लार टपकाते फिरेंगे - 'वाह बच्चू, हमारी ही लकड़ी और हमसे ही परदा!' तोड़कर रख देंगे वे किवाड़ को। सुखनी नजर में गड़ जायेगी ठीक सामने। ऐसी हालत में बोल भी क्या पायेगा वह? सिर नीचा किये अपनी चोरी माननी पड़ेगी उसे। लाख दलीलें दे ले वह झूठ बोला नहीं जायेगा। अक्ल कम है। दांव-पेच नहीं जानता। फिर दुनिया बड़ी समझदार है! जानती है किसकी बात का विश्वास करना है और किसका नहीं।

जिनके पास वसीला है, वे सौ-सौ खटके सम्भाल लेते हैं बिना खरोंच खाये। यहाँ छोटी-सी बात नहीं सम्भल पा रही है। लगता है जिस्म में साही के काँटे चुभ गये हों। सिर के सारे बाल जैसे मुंडिया गये हों एक रात में। ठंड है बहुत, लेकिन आज की ठंड ज्यादा भारी पड़ रही है सीटू को।

एक तरकीब सूझी है उसे कि इन 'पल्लों' को वापिस पहुँचा दे अभी इसी 'टैम' मशीन और 'टाल' के पास। साफ कह देगा कि गलती से ले गया था। वापस पहुँचा रहा हूँ... लेकिन गोरखा चौकीदार सौ-सौ सवाल करेगा। शिकायत करेगा मालिकों तक। फिर अपनी नेकनियती को साबित करने के लिए उसे जाने क्या-क्या करना पड़े?... ऐसे मौके होते हैं जब उसे अपने साथी, उसकी बात को वजन देने वाले बहुत कम दिखायी देते हैं। वह अकेला पड़ जाता है सबका अपमान सहने के लिए।...

रात के लगभग साढ़े तीन बज गये इसी सोच में। हट-फिरकर बात वहीं पहुँचे बार-बार...।

फिर उसने सब कुछ पक्का सोच लिया। वह पिछवाड़े गया। करील की झाड़ी से 'पल्ले' निकाले। लालटेन का तेल छिड़ककर माचिस लगा दी 'भड़ाक' से।

आधी रात में आग की लपटें उठीं पिछवाड़े से। सीटू अपने दोनों हाथ-पैर, दिल-दिमाग... जुदा-जुदा... फिर इकट्ठा तापने लगा उकड़ूँ होकर। पूरी चैन से। जी में तो आया था कि सुखनी को भी उठा दे, 'उठ भागवान, आग ताप ले। देवदार की है।' फिर कुछ सोचकर उसने सुखनी को नहीं उठाया। वह आग अकेले ही तापी उसने।



Narrated by Praveen Kumar

योगेश्वर/नंगा आदमी :

जितना बड़ा व्यक्तित्व : उतना ही श्रेष्ठ रचनाकर्म!

दिनेश धर्मपाल

यह बात मैं बड़ी तसल्ली के साथ योगेश्वर को लेकर कह रहा हूँ। उनकी रचनाएं अपने समय का वह दस्तावेज हैं जिसकी स्याही कभी फीकी नहीं पड़ सकती। वैसे ही नहीं कह रहा हूँ कि उनकी रचनाएं कालजयी रचनाएं हैं, खानापूर्ति के लिए नहीं हैं। हंगामा खड़ा करना उनका काम नहीं है। वे समाज में चल रहे सरोकारों से पूरी तरह से परिचित हैं। किसको क्या मिलता है? किसको क्या नहीं मिलता? इस सबसे परिचित हैं। यह गरीबी, यह दासता का स्वर पराधीनता में जकड़ी आजाद देश की आधी से ज्यादा आबादी का रुदन—सब लेखक की आखों के सामने है। कौन है जो आमजन को शोषण की आग में आगे धकेल रहा है और स्वयं पीछे बैठा तमाशा देख रहा है? योगेश्वर का मानना है कि काम होगा तो विकास तो होगा ही। चकाचौंध करने वाला विकास भी होगा। कुछ के लिए देखने का और कुछ के लिए चांदी बनाने का। मंगतू का बेटा सीटू और सीटू की घरवाली सुखनी विकास की इसी चकाचौंध के शिकार हैं। तभी उनकी जिंदगी में अंधेरा है। शब्दवेधी सन्नाटे के पिंजरे से टकराती चीत्कार पैदा करती सीटी के आवाज से एक दूसरी आवाज अस्तित्व में आती है और वह है सीटू! मंगतू के यहां बेटा आया है। लोगबाग बधाई देते हैं : “राजा बेटा आया है।” बेटे तक तो मंगतू को ठीक लगता है पर राजा बेटा अखरता है। गरीब का बेटा राजा कैसे हो सकता है? बचे हुए कुछ पताशों को ही तो वह खिला पा रहा है जो बधाई देते हैं। उसके पास देने को दूसरा है भी कुछ नहीं। जिंदगी की आखिरी रीत निभाते—निभाते तक मंगतू कुछ भी तो नहीं दे पाता सीटू को, न उपहार रूप में और न सीख रूप में, बस यही एक कथन : ‘देख सीटू, हमारी बसीयत, हमारी जमीन, हमारी जायदाद, हमारे सपने हटफिर कर पिलमिली पसलियों, खुरदरे हाथ, बिबाई पड़ी एडियां, बोझ से बौने हुए सिर, छिले हुए कंधे और पथरीली भाषा के सिवा और कुछ नहीं — भले ही हम अनपढ़, गंवार, मजदूर, हमें बस एक ही बात याद रखनी है : कि हम कभी नंगा न हो! नंगा होना हमें शोभा नहीं देता!’

भले ही माघ महीने की कड़क ठंड। टापर में बजते दांत। गुदड़ को फेंक फेंक कर उकड़ू बनते सीटू और सुखनी, छोटी पड़ती चादर — फिर भी नंगा नहीं होने की बात कर मंगतू नहीं रहा।

सांझ के भयावह दृश्य से शुरू होता नंगा आदमी, पटरियों पर उतरता अंधेरा, सीटी के सन्नाटे से पिंजरे से टकराते चीत्कार पैदा करते, खौफनाक मंजर, परिणाम में कुछ पंछी मर जाते, कुछ उड़ जाते, कुछ बेदम हो जाते, मानो

नियति के तीन मंजर! इसी त्रासदी से गुजर रही मानवता! मरने वालों को तो रोज के प्रपंच से मुक्ति मिल जाती है, बाकियों को यह भी नसीब नहीं। बेदम हुए वे फड़फड़ाते रह जाते हैं। सीटू को यह रेल की पट्टी और उसके चारों ओर मंडराने वाली विषैली सुरलहरियां अच्छी नहीं लगतीं। उसे लगता है हर समय जान सांसत में है। उसे डर है कि कहीं यह डरावनी आवाज टुडी राक्षस की तरह फड़फड़ाकर उसके टापरे को न लपक ले!

अनास्था का यह स्वर सीटू के चारों ओर अहर्निश मंडराता है। और पिता मंगतू का यह बोल भी कि गरीब भले ही क्षण प्रतिक्षण निंगोड़ी रात और उखड़ती नींद के आगोश में मृत्यु का उपहार क्यों न पा ले, पर उसे कदापि नंगा नहीं होना है। नंगा होना गरीब को शोभा नहीं देता!

सीटू को बार बार लगता है : घर में किवाड़ का न होना एक तरह से नंगा होना है। उसके यहां बाबा आदम के जमाने का बना किवाड़ दीमक ने चट कर दिया और तब से लेकर आज तक वहां न तो नया किवाड़ लगा और न ही बचे खुचे किवाड़ की मुरम्मत ही हो पाई। उसकी मनः स्थिति इसे लेकर हर पल दुविधा में रहती है। उसे कई बार लगता है जैसे घर नंगा हो गया है। कई बार लगता है कोई है जो देख रहा है, झांक रहा है। पर किसे क्युं देखना चाहता है कोई? ऐसा क्या धरा है यहां? फिर सहसा स्मरण हो आता है कि सुखनी तो है। उसे अपनी चिंता नहीं, सुखनी की चिंता है, जो अजीब औरत है, जो न तो ढंग का पहन पाती है, न ढंग का खाती है और न ही ढंग की बातें हो पाती है उससे और न ऐसा है कि इतमिनान से वह ढंग से सो पाती हो!

वह सोचता है : इसके सिवा जिंदगी में और है भी क्या? दाल, लून और रोटी और फिर चैन के दो पल और बेफिक्र नींद! बार बार एक उलाहना वह स्वयं ही स्वयं को पारित करता दिखता है : आखिर उसने उसे ऐसा दिया ही क्या है?

फिर जब वह सुखनी की ओर लौटता है तो वह एक प्रायश्चित की मुद्रा में दिखाई देता है। ऐसे जैसे सबके लिए जिम्मेवार वह एक। सुखनी में किसी भी तरह का कोई दोष दिखाई नहीं देता। उल्ट वह तो एक मार्गदर्शक की भूमिका में आ खड़ी दिखाई पड़ती है जो मानों उसे सचेत कर रही हो : “अब के जाड़ों में हाड़ खड़ खड़ करेंगे, देख लेना!” वह उसे स्मरण कराती दिखती है : “गुदड़ सारे फट गए हैं, सारे उघाड़ी उघाड़ी हो गए हैं।”

यहां तक तो ठीक है, पर फिर एक उलाहना भर स्वर : “तू तो मर्द है, नंगा रह लेगा। पर मैं औरत जात हूँ, सूई से जिस्म में कहाँ कहाँ बखिये लगाती फिरुंगी?”

सीटू से न कहते बनता है और न सुनते बनता है। बड़बड़ाता है कि मैं नंगा रह लूंगा। बाप का असर उस पर भी है। बाप भी नहीं चाहता होता कि उसका बेटा और उसकी बहु नंगी रहे। नंगा होना गरीब के लिए अपमानजनक है।

गहन अवसाद में चले जाने के सिवा सीटू के पास बाकि कुछ है नहीं। बीड़ी का गहरा सूटा लगाने के सिवाए शेष कुछ दिखता नहीं। उसे लगता है यही बीड़ी गरीब की अमानत है। वह बीड़ी पीता है, जोर का कस लेता है, गहरा सूटा लगाता है तो उसे यह बात सामने आती दिखाई देती है कि धुंए के घने काले कोहरे में मानो उसने अपनी पूरी जिंदगी की परिक्रमा कर ली हो। इस धुंए में उसे गोल गोल छोटा छोटा दायरा बनता दिखता है। उसे प्रतीत होता है कि उसकी जिंदगी कुछ इस दायरे की भांति ही है— गोल गोल छोटे छोटे दायरे में बंटी हुई। पर उसे सहसा लगता है कि उसके इस दायरे में घुमाव बहुत हैं। सारा रास्ता कांटो नुकीले, पत्थरों से अटा हुआ मानों। आगे कुआ पीछे खाई। ठोकर लगने के पूरे अवसर मौजूद। इससे बचाव नहीं। अंधेरे—घनाटोप अंधेरे में बच कर निकलना उसे असह्य जान पड़ता है। सब रामभरोसे छोड़ देता है।

एक पति होने के नाते सुखनी को लेकर उसकी चिंता जाइज है। सुखनी गरु जैसी सीधी। न कोई छल और न कोई कपट! एक बात उसे भीतर ही भीतर कचोटती है कि जब से वह उसे ब्याह कर लाया है उसने उसे कुछ नहीं दिया। यहां तक कि झोपड़े का किवाड़ तक। उसे जब भी सुखनी का किसी भी बात को लेकर स्मरण आता है तो साथ में किवाड़ का भी स्मरण अनायास आ जाता है। उसे लगता है बिना किवाड़ के घर नंगा है। किवाड़ नहीं तो घर नहीं। दिन तो जैसे तैसे निकल जाता है, सवाल रात का है। यह सवाल और भी भंयकर शकल ले लेता है क्योंकि यहां लकड़ी का गोदाम जो खुल गया है और फिर लकड़ी के गोदाम के कारिंदे, जंगल के ठेकेदार, सरकारी आदमी उसके टपर के सामने इकले उकले, टहलते खंखारते, भद्दी हरकतें करते...

फिर विकास की इस धारा में पंगडंडियों का बनना। नई पंगडंडियों का बनना। योगेश्वर पंगडंडी को गंतव्य तक पहुंचाने का एक जरिया मानते रहे हैं। दो धाराओं को जोड़ने वाला एक जरिया। लेकिन यहां पंगडंडी एक विरोधाभास लेकर उपस्थित होती दिखती है। छोटी छोटी पंगडंडियो तो होती ही हैं, पर नई पंगडंडियों का बनना कुछ और उकेरता है। ऐसे में सीटू को लगता है कि देहात के कच्चे पक्के घरों में किवाड़ों और तालों की जरूरत पड़ गई है। गुंडो उच्चकों द्वारा अपने हिसाब से नई पंगडंडियो को बनाना संकट का सबब है। ऐसे में सीटू ध्याडी का काम छोड़ पहरा न दे तो क्या करे? खुद दहलीज पर और सुखनी को ओट में पड़े रहने को बाध्य न करे तो क्या करे? सीटू सोचता है। बस यही डर खाता और डराता है सीटू को कि कोई देख न ले कि घर में किवाड़ नहीं। जब भी सीटू ऐसा सोचता है तो उसका दिल बैठ जाता है। उसके भीतर एक डर वहम के रूप में बैठ जाता है। गाड़ी की सीटी बजते ही सीटू अंधेरे में टटोलने लग जाता है जबकि वह एक कोने में पसरी पड़ी है।

सुखनी को लेकर उसका सोचना अनायास नहीं। वह एक एक दृश्य को अपनी आंखों के सामने देखता रहता है जैसे कोई कहानी चल रही हो। वह देखता है : सुखनी बैठी है सामने। वह देखता है सुखनी नहा धो रही है। वह देखता है सुखनी बतिया रही है। उसे लगता है सुखनी खिड़ खिड़ हंस रही है।

उसे संतोष होता है कि सुखनी सो रही है और जब सुखनी उसे देखती है तो बस एक ही संवाद : "तुम होते हो तो खुद को ढीला छोड़ देती हूँ। कोई देख न ले : सरम लगती है।"

क्या करे सीटू जबसे विकास की बयार ने यहां दस्तक दी है, लकड़ी का गोदाम, आरे की मशीन, शहर के लोगों का प्रवेश हुआ है, उसने महसूस किया है जैसे सबकुछ गड़बड़ा गया है, ऐसे जैसे खूंखार भेड़िए दिन को भी चबेनी ढूंढते फिरते हैं। थकाहारा सीटू अपने लिए विश्राम के कुछ क्षण चाहता है। उसे लगता है जैसे उम्र हो गई हो विश्राम किए हुए। इसीलिए वह सुखनी से घड़े में आटे होने की बात पूछता है। आटा बचा हो तो ध्याड़ी न करे, विश्राम कर ले! जब समय लगता है वह दबे पांव सुखनी के सिरहाने जा बैठता है। उसके माथे को छूता है और ऐसे में आटे का प्रश्न फिर जिंदा होने लगता है। सीटू की जिंदगी आटे, किवाड़, ध्याड़ी इन सबके बीच फंस कर रह जाती है।

सीटू सोचता है कि वैसे तो इस झोपड़े में ऐसा कुछ नहीं चुराने को। कोई अमानत नहीं अपने पास जिसे कोई चुराना चाहे। पर फिर सहसा यह विचार प्रवेश पाते देर नहीं लगती कि सुखनी तो है उसकी अमानत, उसकी जिंदगी, उसकी जिंदगी का मकसद! जवान जहान जो कुछ भी है सुखनी ही तो है। वह सोचता है कि दुनिया सीधी नहीं है, दुनिया की नजरें सीधी नहीं हैं। वह सोचता है कि घर में किवाड़ नहीं तो घर नंगा नंगा लगता है, खाली खाली! उसे लगता है कि जैसे शहरी मानसिकता ने गांव को डस लिया है। पगडंडी के रहते हुए भी नई पगडंडी का बनाना : आखिर किसलिए? गाड़ी की सीटी का बजना, सीटू का सुखनी को तलाशना। सुखनी को लेकर बैठा यह कैसा डर है जो उसे खाए जा रहा है। वह भीतर ही भीतर सोचता है। क्या यह सब उसकी सलामती के लिए नहीं? वह जोर देकर सोचता है। एक नज़र भीतर, एक नज़र बाहर, एक ख्याल यहां और एक ख्याल वहां! कैसी विचित्र स्थिति? कई बार वह महसूस करने लगता है कि हो न हो पगडंडियां उसके भीतर भी बनने लगी हों। जो मुक्ति को नहीं नग्नता को उकेरती हों।

मिसिरजी का प्रकरण कहानी को नई धार देने के लिए तो है ही, शब्द के अर्थ को गहराई से समझने के लिए एक औजार का काम भी करता है। विकास की बयार बही है। चुनाव इसी विकास को प्रतिबिंबित करता है। मिसिरजी आए हैं। पयादों को पता है कि वे जीतने वाले हैं। उनके लिए शहतीरों का एक चबूतरा बनाया जाता है ताकि वे वहां से एक दमदार भाषण दे सकें। उनका दमदमाता भाषण और उनका दमदमाता व्यक्तित्व यही दो उस दिन की चर्चा के विषय है। सीटू, भीखू, भादरू मोहन, लच्छु, सबको ठेकेदार का आदेश चबूतरा सजाने को और समाप्ति में टाल में रख आने का। डोलरे के फूलों से सजता महकता टमकता गिसिरजी का चेहरा सभी के लिए आकर्षण। दमदमाते भाषण सबके लिए कौतुहल से कम का विषय नहीं, इसके कई कई रूप हैं। इसमें गुस्सा है, इसमें शांति है, इसमें अश्रुओं का नीचे टपकना है। भाषणोपरांत मिसिरजी का चबूतरे से नीचे उतरना और सीटू को गले लगाना और सबके

समक्ष यह घोषण करना कसम खाते हुए : “देखो भाई लोगो, इस आदमी को आजादी से क्या मिला? लाचारी बेबसी यह सब! लेकिन आगे ऐसा नहीं होगा, मैं इस बार जीतूंगा तो ऐसा कुछ नहीं होगा, मैं सबसे पहले इस ध्याड़ीदार मजदूर की गरीबी दूर करूंगा। इसके जिंदगी से अंधेरा हटा दूंगा।”

सीटू मिसिरजी के शब्दों के आगे परास्त। आंखों में आंसू लिए वह सोचता है कि मिसिरजी इन्सान नहीं सीधे नारायण का अवतार हैं! जब सब बधाई देते कहते हैं सीटू तेरी चांदी हो गई है तो वह फूला नहीं समाता। वह मिसिरजी की जूठन की बची शराब पीता है, जब पूरा असर नहीं होता तो खुद के पैसों की देशी पीता है। घर आकर सीधे सुखनी पर धोंस जमाता है। हटफिर कर उसके पास सुखनी ही तो है। सुखनी से सामना हुआ नहीं कि नशा छुमंतर। सुखनी नसीहत रूप में कहती है : “मेरे से क्या लड़ता है? लड़नी है तो कोई बड़ी लड़ाई लड़।” उसे जलसे में भूषणबाबू जी की तकरीर का एक वाक्यात स्मरण हो आता है : “बड़ी लड़ाई : अपने हक की लड़ाई।”

इसी प्रकरण का दूसरा दृश्य बड़ा भयावह है। मिसिरजी जीते ही नहीं, मंत्री भी बन गए हैं। अपने पहले दौर पे हैं। सीटू की खुशी के ठिकाने नहीं। वह उनके समीप पहुंचना चाहता है और उन्हें यह स्मरण दिलाना चाहता है कि तब ऐसा कहा था। लेकिन यह क्या मंत्री के अंगरक्षक तो उसे धक्का मार कर बाहर का रास्ता दिखा रहे हैं। सीटू फरियाद रखता है : “मेरी झोपड़ी में बिजली नहीं।” मंत्री का उत्तर : “बिजली लगाना सरकार का काम नहीं है।” सीटू फिर से फरियाद लगाता है : “मेरे घर में किवाड़ नहीं है।” मंत्री का उत्तर : “अपने घर में काहे का भय?”

सीटू को लगता है जैसे जोगनी के ढांख से किसी ने धक्का दे दिया हो। अब न हंसने को और न रोने को। गुस्सा आ रहा है मंत्री पर : सतवादी हरिश्चंद्र बनते फिरते हैं। उसे फिर से बापू की बात का स्मरण हो आता है : सारा देश नंगा हो गया है। तू मत नंगा होना सीटू। उसे साफ दिखने लगा है : “ये मुए लुच्चे, लफंगे, गुंडे दुनिया भर के, इन्होंने धरती की सरम नंगी कर दी है।” राजनेताओं और उनके अर्दलियों की विवेचना करते करते वह उन पर बरसना शुरू होता है : “जंगल के जंगल साफ कर दिए हरामियों ने, बेसरम बेहया, सब चिथ चिथ उघाड़ी कर दिया इन्होंने।” फिर वह उल्ट कर देखता है और विचार करता है : “डाक बंगले से जो औरत फरियाद लेकर खड़ी थी, शुक्र है वह सुखनी नहीं थी। फिर भी कोई तो थी बेचारी, सारे देश को खा गए, फिर भी पेट नहीं भरा भुक्खड़ों का!”

उसमें भी हल्का सा ऐसा कुछ करने को मन करता है। वह भी चोर के घर में सेंध लगाने बारे सोचता है। लकड़ी का गोदाम, शहतीर के टाल आरे की मशीन में देखे थे उसने, चीरे हुए कुछ फट्टे चार पांच ही तो चाहिए किवाड़ का मुंह ढापने को! पहले वह वहीं छिपाता है, फिर समय देख वहां से कुछ दूर करील की झाड़ी में छिपाता है। बिना किवाड़ के कमरे में तो तिल भर कुछ रखने की जगह नहीं।

वैचारिक द्वंद्व की शुरुआत यहीं से। गरीब चोरी भी नहीं कर सकता। वह कई तरह के सवालों से घिर जाता है : क्या क्या जवाब देता फिरेगा लोगों को, एकाएक किवाड़ कैसे लग गए? मोहर लगी लकड़ी यहां कैसे पहुंच गई? क्या टाल के कादिंदे जंगल के टेकेदार, बहशी खुंखार आंखों से घुड़कियां देते फिरेंगे। उसे बार बार यही बात घेर लेती है कि वह कदाचित झूठ नहीं बोल पाएगा। बार बार बापू की कही यह बात दस्तक देती : नंगा मत होना सीटू, हम गरीब गवार मजदूर, हमें नंगा होना शोभा नहीं देता! फिर भी वह अपने भीतर महसूस करता है कि वह पूरी तरह से नंगा हो गया है। यह बात अलग है कि उसने बड़े सपने नहीं देखे, बस एक ही साध : झोपड़ी के किवाड़ लग जाए, बस। यही डर उसके भीतर समाया है, तभी तो वह भीतर होने पर भी वह उसे बाहर तलाशने लगता है। जवान जहान उसकी बीबी सुखनी! गाड़ी की सीटी का बजना और सीटू का बाहर जा सुखनी का तलाशना।

बहुत सी बातें हैं जो सीटू का परेशान करती हैं—

मंत्री का यह कहना, “सरम काहें की रे, कोई नंगा रहता है अपने घर में कोई क्या?”

फिर अनायास बहते मिसिरजी की आंखों से आंसू।

खादी के कपड़ों, डोलरे के फूलों से सजे गिसिरजी।

माघ महीने की कड़क ठंड, कंपकंपाती ठंड से शुरू हुई कहानी ‘नंगा आदमी’— जब शीर्ष पर पहुंचती है तो भी वही कंपकंपाती ठंड पर आरे की मशीन से चुरा कर लाए चार पांच फटों पर मिट्टी का तेल छिड़क अकेली आग सेंकता सीटू, सारी आग...

शायद ही उसकी इससे जिंदगी भर की कंपन शांत हो।



Audience’s Live Response

Ursem Lata: हल्कू का कम्बल, होरी की गाय, जोखू का पानी, झोपड़ी में किवाड़...

Janesh Kapoor: An iconic story wonderfully narrated.... We are happy and satisfied that we have been able to associate with senior रचनाधर्मी of our state through the medium of Monday Musings'. Kudos to Praveen Sir for executing the idea of short story fest so successfully!

Namrata Pathania: The metaphor of nakedness is beautifully presented in this story of human struggle for existence.

CONTRIBUTORS

Abhyudita Gautam is Associate Professor in English, Government Degree College, Nagrota Bagwan, Dist. Kangra, Himachal Pradesh.

Anil Wilson (1947-2009) taught at the Department of English, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla and various colleges of the state. He also served as Principal of the prestigious St. Stephen's College, Delhi before taking over as Vice Chancellor, HPU, Shimla.

Anu Jaidev is Assistant Professor of English, Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi.

Arun Bharti aka Hemanand Sharma (1952-2017) was an important creative signature from Himachal Pradesh. He belonged to the Dhami area of Shimla.

Baldev Singh Thakur superannuated as Associate Professor of Hindi. He currently lives in District Solan of Himachal Pradesh.

Deepa Chauhan is Assistant Professor of English, Government Degree College, Kaffota, Dist. Sirmaur, Himachal Pradesh.

Devendra Gupta superannuated as Associate Professor of Hindi in the College Cadre, Himachal Pradesh.

Dinesh Dharampal superannuated as Associate Professor of Hindi. He is a foremost creative voice of the state and is currently living in Mandi.

Dipali Sharma Bhandari is Associate Professor of English, Government College Poanta Sahib, Dist. Sirmaur, Himachal Pradesh.

Girija Sharma was Dean of Studies and Professor of English, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla.

Gurmit Bedi is also an important creative signature of contemporary times. He presently lives in Chandigarh.

Hem Raj Bansal is Assistant Professor of English at Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala.

Irene Rattan is Associate Professor of English, Jawahar Lal Nehru College of Fine Arts, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh.

Jaidev (1949-2000) was Professor of English, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla. He remains a highly acclaimed scholar and a much-respected teacher.

Janesh Kapoor is Principal, Government Degree College, Dhama, Dist. Shimla, Himachal Pradesh.

Kamayani Vashisht is Associate Professor of English, Government College Sanjauli, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh.

Kulbhushan Sharma is Associate Professor of English, Government College Seraj at Lambathach, Dist. Mandi, Himachal Pradesh.

Kunwar Dinesh Singh is Associate Professor of English, Government Degree College Arki, Dist. Solan, Himachal Pradesh. He is also the editor of Literary Journal, Hyphen.

Mahi Yogesh is Assistant Professor of English, JLN Government College Haripur, Manali, Dist. Kullu, Himachal Pradesh

Meenakshi F. Paul is Professor of English-cum-Principal, Centre for Evening Studies, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla.

Pankaj K. Singh was Dean, Faculty of Languages and Professor of English, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla.

Prakash Avasthi (1928-2020) taught Political Science in different colleges of Himachal Pradesh and retired as Principal. A recipient of Sangeet Seva Samman by Yashpal Sahitya Parishad, he proved his acumen as an administrator, and left his mark in the fields of literature and music.

Praveen Kumar superannuated as Principal (College Cadre), Himachal Pradesh. He presently lives in Panchkula, Haryana.

Priyanka Vaidya is Associate Professor of English, International Centre for Distance Education and Open Learning, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla.

Rajan Kaushal is Associate Professor of English, Government College Nahan, Dist. Sirmour, Himachal Pradesh.

Rekha Vashisht is a widely acclaimed and well-recognized creative writer of Himachal Pradesh. She lives in Mandi after superannuating as Principal (College Cadre).

Roshan Lal Sharma is Professor of English, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala.

Sangeeta Singh is Associate Professor of English, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Government College, Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh.

Som P. Ranchan (1932-2014) was Professor of English, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla. He had also taught at various Indian and American Universities and was a prolific writer.

Suneela Sharma is Associate professor of English, Rajeev Gandhi Government College, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh.

Subhash Verma is Associate Professor of English, Government College, Sarkaghat, Himachal Pradesh.

Sunaina Jain is Assistant Professor of English, MCM DAV College Chandigarh.

Yogeshwar Sharma is a veteran creative writer of Himachal Pradesh. He lives in Mandi after having taught English in several colleges of the state.



Painting by Neeraj Kapoor